

Letter from a Pakistani Homeschooler

I recently received this email from Pakistani homeschooler Fasih Zulfiqar. I advised him to seek out econ professors at the nearest universities, but he'd likely appreciate further advice. Reprinted with his permission.

Hello Prof Bryan, Fasih here. Perhaps Prof Cowen informed you about me, but in case he did not, let me introduce myself.

I'm a student from Pakistan who has self-studied through secondary education. I decided to quit schooling when I was in grade 6, much to the consternation of my relatives. They dinned into me that schooling is the only avenue for success, and that I would certainly fail if I go solo.

There were days when I would come back to home from school - completely exhausted - and ask myself if I truly learned anything. Sure I had friends and all, but school was not serving the purpose it was meant to. Moreover, it wasn't cheap. My father could hardly afford sending me and my sister to school, let alone pay the prohibitive rent. More and more often, I found myself considering whether it was all even worth it. So in the summer of 2012, I decided it was enough and quit school.

My argument for taking this radical decision was the fact that our schooling system does not teach children anything of actual import. Education, here, is a misnomer. What the schools teach here is rote memorization. Basically, the students are encouraged to memorize the notes of former students (or those written by the teachers themselves), and paste those memorized points verbatim on tests. For instance, a student may know that a rise in interest rate leads to an appreciation of the currency, but (s)he would be absolutely clueless as to how this happens.

What could possibly be the value of such education, if it can even be called that. The schools here are merely concerned with grades and credentials. This perspective is so pervasive that it has also infected our youth and even their parents. And why wouldn't it, considering that employees are evaluated here solely on their credentials.

It turns out, rote memorization does ensure that you end up acing your exams; thus, this practice has become so entrenched that people don't even question it anymore. They do not believe there is anything wrong with it. I remember my teacher was once making us memorize the date Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan, and I asked her if she could explain what gave rise to Bangladesh's independence. The "why" behind it. Initially, she ignored me. I asked again; she replied it is relevant. I persisted. She blew her gasket and

expelled me.

We Pakistanis, along with much of South Asia, hold an extremely myopic view of education. It is all about attaining this or that degree. This is not what education is meant to be. We are wasting our youth, which, I firmly believe, has great potential. This needs to change - urgently. I aspire to make that change, but I do not know how. Someday, perhaps, I will, but, as of now, I'm lost myself.

Homeschooling has been an extremely successful endeavor for me. I have achieved an A* in Economics and an A* in Mathematics as well; I recently got an A in Further Mathematics. These are A-level exams (UK system), more or less equivalent to AP in the US. I also ended up being awarded the highest marks in Economics in Pakistan by the British Council, much to the astonishment of my family.

Having achieved all this, I intend to enroll in a decent University in the US. I had love to major in Economics or a combination of Mathematics and Econ. I absolutely do not wish to pursue my undergraduate studies in Pakistan for the very same reasons I quit schooling. The issue is, I will need a substantial amount of aid. My father makes an income of about only \$15k; this certainly qualifies me for aid, but I know that funds are scarce, making my chances of getting aid slim to none.

I recently learned that universities may look down on homeschooled applicants. This makes no sense to me. Considering how much discipline and persistence is required to teach your own self, universities should instead value homeschooling more - much more. Perhaps I'm biased, or perhaps this is not even the case, which is why I'm writing to you.

The crux of the problem is the requirement of letters of recommendation. All the need-blind universities in the US require at least 2. Since I have self-taught myself, I have none. Only my parents know the persistence with which I have worked throughout the last 6 years. Obviously they can not write a letter of recommendation for me: that would be rather biased. What do you think I should do?

I met Prof Cowen yesterday while he was in Karachi. Upon listening to my questions, he mentioned that I should talk to you. He told me you have homeschooled your own children, which came as a shock to me because we Pakistanis consider US schools the epitome of education. Having listened to many podcasts you have been on, and having read many of your posts on Econlib, I do realize that education in the US is not perfect either. Nonetheless, it is far better than in Pakistan. And if I intend to improve my own nation someday, I believe I will ultimately need a decent education.

To recap, I have two questions. First, is there a bias against homeschooled students, and if so, then how much? Second, what should I do about the letters of recommendation?

Thank you for taking the time to read through all this Sir. I look forward to hearing from you.