

The Year Before the Decision

Four doors out of Form 5, and no way to walk through more than one.

6 min read

Before you read

- **provisional** — held for now, open to being changed later
- **opportunity cost** — what you give up by choosing one option over another
- **attrition** — a steady loss of people from a group over time
- **vocational** — training aimed directly at a particular job
- **deferral** — a delay in starting something you have been accepted for



A Form 5 student at a kitchen table in Ipoh, open brochures and a laptop under a ceiling fan

¹ The counsellor had drawn four boxes on the whiteboard and asked us to copy them down. Matriculation. STPM. A-Levels or a foundation programme. Diploma. Then she wrote a fifth thing underneath, not in a box: *whatever you choose, you are choosing against the other three*. Nobody copied that part down. I did, later, at the kitchen table in Ipoh with the fan going and six brochures spread out in front of me, because it turned out to be the only sentence from that session that was actually useful.

² The brochures all made the same promise in slightly different fonts. Each one showed students laughing on a lawn. Each one listed a figure for graduate employability that was impressive and unsourced. None of them mentioned the thing my cousin told me over Raya, which was that she had switched course twice and that the switching, not the studying, was what had cost her two years.

³ So I tried to work out what each door actually was, rather than what it was advertised to be.

⁴ Matriculation is fast and heavily subsidised. One year, sometimes two, and it feeds almost entirely into public universities here. The speed is real and the cost is real. What is also real is that it narrows early: a science stream at matriculation is a commitment made at seventeen by a person who will be twenty-two when the commitment finishes paying out.

⁵ STPM is the opposite trade. It is widely held to be among the more demanding pre-university routes in the country, it takes two years, and its results are recognised abroad as well as at home. The attrition on the way through is significant, and the people who warned me about it were not trying to discourage me. They were trying to tell me that the qualification is cheap in ringgit and expensive in everything else.

⁶ A-Levels and foundation programmes sit in private colleges and cost accordingly. They are flexible, they travel well, and a foundation year is often tied to the university that runs it — which is convenience if you are certain, and a fence if you are not. The fee is the obvious cost. The less obvious one is that paying a large sum up front makes it psychologically much harder to admit, in month seven, that you have chosen wrongly.

⁷ A diploma is the door people are quietest about, which is odd, because it is the only one that is explicitly vocational and the only one that produces something employable at the end of it. You can work after it. You can also, in many cases, enter a degree partway through, which makes it less of a dead end than the brochures of its competitors would like you to assume.

⁸ What I noticed, laying them out, is that every adult who advised me described the decision as though it were a ranking. Best route, second-best route. But a ranking needs a single measuring stick, and there isn't one. Speed, cost, portability, reversibility and prestige are five different sticks, and the four doors each win on a different one. Matriculation wins on speed and price. STPM wins on portability per ringgit. A-Levels win on flexibility if you can pay. A diploma wins on how quickly you stop being dependent on anyone.

⁹ The question is therefore not which is best. It is which stick matters most to the particular person holding the pen — and that is a question about circumstances, not about ability. A student whose family needs an income in three years is not making a lesser decision than one who is optimising for a degree abroad. They are solving a different problem with the same four options.

¹⁰ There is one more thing the brochures never say, and my cousin did. Most of these doors are less final than they look. Transfers happen. Deferrals exist. People restart at twenty and are not ruined. The cost of changing your mind is real, but it is a cost, not a cliff, and treating it as a cliff is what makes seventeen-year-olds freeze in front of a whiteboard with four boxes on it.

¹¹ I have written my answer in pencil at the top of the page. It is provisional, in the proper sense: it is the best decision available with the information I have now, and I have accepted in advance that better information may arrive. That feels less like certainty than I was hoping for. It is, I think, more honest than the brochures.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the answer you think is best.

1. Which sentence from the counsellor's board does the writer say proved most useful?
 - A The list of the four routes
 - B The note that choosing one means choosing against the others
 - C The employability figures quoted in the brochures
 - D The advice to decide early

2. In paragraph 5, the writer says STPM is "cheap in ringgit and expensive in everything else". This is best read as a comment on:
 - A The registration fee being hidden
 - B The effort, time and risk the route demands
 - C The poor recognition of the qualification abroad
 - D The cost of textbooks and tuition

3. What does the writer identify as the hidden cost of a large up-front fee?
 - A It reduces the money available for living expenses
 - B It makes admitting a wrong choice psychologically harder
 - C It locks the student out of public universities
 - D It delays the start of the programme

4. The central claim of paragraphs 8 and 9 is that:
 - A The four routes cannot be meaningfully compared at all
 - B A diploma is undervalued and should rank first
 - C There is no single criterion by which the routes can be ranked
 - D Adults giving advice are usually acting in bad faith

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences. Refer to the text where you can.

5. The writer says each brochure showed "students laughing on a lawn" and quoted an unsourced figure. What is being criticised, and how does the detail about sourcing sharpen that criticism?

6. Explain the distinction the writer draws in paragraph 9 between a decision about circumstances and a decision about ability.

7. The cousin appears twice, in paragraph 2 and again in paragraph 10. What work does she do in the argument that the brochures cannot?

8. Why does the writer describe a foundation year as "convenience if you are certain, and a fence if you are not"? Explain both halves.

9. The final paragraph calls the decision "provisional" and admits this is less than the writer hoped for. How does ending on that admission affect how far you trust the writer?

Part C

Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Make a claim, then support it.

10. The writer argues the choice depends on which measure matters most to the individual. Choose one of the five measures named in paragraph 8 and argue that it should carry more weight than the others. Address at least one cost of favouring it.

11. "The cost of changing your mind is real, but it is a cost, not a cliff." Do you think the system around a Form 5 student — schools, families, fees — actually behaves as though this is true? Support your view.

12. This passage is written by someone inside the decision rather than by a counsellor outside it. Identify one thing this gains and one thing it loses as a source of guidance.

13. Suppose you had to design the one page that replaces all six brochures. What would be on it, and what would you deliberately leave off? Justify both choices.

14. The writer never tells us which door was chosen. Is withholding that a weakness in the piece or a deliberate strength? Make a case.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — the note about choosing against the others | 2. B — the effort, time and risk demanded | 3. B — it makes admitting a wrong choice harder | 4. C — there is no single ranking criterion

Part B

5. Marketing that is uniform and evidence-free. The point about sourcing matters because an unverifiable statistic has the appearance of evidence without the function of it — it invites trust it has not earned. Accept any answer that identifies the gap between looking factual and being checkable.

6. Circumstances are the conditions a student is deciding within — family income, timelines, dependants. Ability is what they are capable of. The writer's claim is that different routes suit different circumstances, so choosing the faster or cheaper route is not evidence of being a weaker student.

7. She supplies first-hand, unflattering information: the real cost of switching, and later the reassurance that restarting is survivable. Credit answers noting she has no incentive to sell, which is what gives her testimony weight the brochures lack.

8. Convenience: a tied foundation year removes an application step and guarantees progression if you already want that university. Fence: if your preference changes, the tie becomes a restriction, and credits may not transfer freely.

9. Open. Strong answers argue the admission increases trust — a writer who concedes the limits of their own conclusion is less likely to be overselling it — and may contrast this directly with the brochures' unearned certainty. An answer arguing it weakens the piece is acceptable if it reasons from the reader's need for a usable recommendation.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the conclusion.

10. Look for a measure named and defended, plus a genuine cost acknowledged (e.g. speed bought at the price of reversibility). A list of advantages with no trade-off named is a weaker answer.

11. Accept either side. Strong answers cite real pressures — non-refundable fees, intake deadlines, family expectation, the social cost of restarting — rather than asserting that people simply worry too much.

12. Gains: credibility, specific detail, honesty about uncertainty. Loses: breadth, outcome data, and the fact that the writer does not yet know how the decision turned out.

13. Mark the reasoning behind the omissions as much as the inclusions. Leaving off employability percentages, or lawn photography, should be justified rather than merely stated.

14. Either case is markable. Strength: the piece is about how to decide, not what to decide, so naming a door would invite imitation. Weakness: the reader is left without the test of whether the reasoning produced a good outcome.

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