

BY INVITATION

Why study?

Students considering a university education should ask themselves whom they want to be, not what they want to be

By Simon Chesterman FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

WITH the release of A-level results earlier this month, students across Singapore - and their parents - are contemplating the next step in their education.

Nearly 30 per cent of the cohort will go to one of Singapore's five autonomous universities, a number set to grow to 40 per cent by 2020. With a further 10 per cent expected to pursue part-time degrees, fully half of Singaporeans could then receive a government-subsidised degree education.

For many, the focus is on "how": How to get admitted, how to get financial aid, how to get ahead.

Given the intense competition in Singapore's education landscape, this is understandable.

But an even more important question to consider is "why".

So why are these thousands of students thinking about going to university?

For some, it may be that their parents told them that they had to. This is good advice: A university degree increases earning potential and offers greater options in the workplace.

Others might never have considered not going to university. This just suggests that their parents and teachers were more subtle.

But when these students - and their parents - do focus on "why" they should go to university, it is often linked to the question of "what you want to be".

This is an important question to ask, but it is misleading because it suggests a single, static answer: "I want to be a lawyer/investment banker/architect/website designer."

A better way of thinking about this is to consider not what you want to do, but whom you want to be.

Most of those going into university now will have more than one career; many will live in more than one country. All will face periods of enormous change.

A generation ago, there was no Internet, air travel was much more limited - the world seemed a much larger place. Today, globalisation has linked people and economies. The world is smaller.

And the ability to cross boundaries has become more important.

That is true in terms of one's ability to communicate, but it is also true in terms of one's ability to think.

To survive, to do well in this globalised world, one needs to be creative, to think laterally, to be passionate about things because they are part of your identity rather than part of your career plan.

Because today's students cannot know what is going to be important to their career.

A good example of this is the late Steve Jobs. In 2005, the founder of Apple gave the commencement address at Stanford University.

Looking back, the man who revolutionised the way we approach technology and design reflected on the most important class that he had ever taken.

It was calligraphy.

At the time, it was just a passion. He loved the beautiful posters on campus and wanted to learn about serif

and san serif typefaces.

He thought it had no hope of any practical application. But 10 years later, when he was designing the first Macintosh computer, it came back to him and he included what we now call fonts. This revolutionised the way we think about computers.

So it will not always be possible to predict what subjects will be important. But if you can find something about which you are passionate, if it is part of your identity, you may find a way to make it important.

Wise up to wisdom

IF PASSION is something that should guide one when choosing a course of study going into university, wisdom is what one should hope to gain coming out.

This is not to suggest that only university-educated people are wise. To the contrary, there is an important distinction to be drawn between being wise and being clever. Universities are good at educating clever people, but wisdom generally comes from within.

An illustration of this can be found in the story of the old woman and the bird.

There are many versions of this story across different cultures. It has no known author, but the version here is similar to the one used by the author Toni Morrison in her 1993 Nobel Lecture.

Once upon a time there was an old woman. She was blind. But she was wise.

Now one could tell a different version about an old man, or maybe it was a young girl. Perhaps the bird was in fact a butterfly. But let us stick with this version for the moment.

An old woman. Blind. Wise.

One day, some clever young people decide to visit her.

They know that they are clever and intend to demonstrate this by proving that the old woman is a fraud.

She may be blind, they think, but she is not wise. And she is not cleverer than they.

So a young man has brought with him a small bird. He holds the bird cupped in his hands.

"Old woman," he says. "In my hands I hold a small bird. Tell me: is it alive or dead?"

The old woman is silent.

He repeats his question: "Is the bird I am holding alive or dead?"

And he smiles. Because if she says it is dead, he will release it - and the flapping of its wings will show her to be a fool. But if she says it is alive, he will crush it to death and drop the carcass in her lap.

Still the old woman says nothing. She is silent for such a long time that some of the young people begin to laugh.

Finally she speaks.

"I don't know," she says. "I don't know if the bird you are holding is alive or dead. The only thing I know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

Responsibility of choice

THE passage to adulthood is marked by the taking of responsibility for one's life choices.

Why study? Of course students preparing for university must consider practicalities, such as the ability to support themselves and their families in the future. They should listen to the advice of their parents and teachers.

Yet such extrinsic motivation - doing things for external rewards or to avoid punishment - can inhibit the growth of intrinsic motivation, where students are driven by enjoyment of the task itself.

My hope is that those who have the luxury of choice will see it as a responsibility to choose well. To identify a path that will sustain them by kindling a passion, and to seize the opportunities available in the hope of developing wisdom.

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