

SIMON HO SHUN-MAN

Students must pursue learning with joy and meaning

Every year, many Form Six students and parents seek my advice on how to choose majors at university.

I always believe that the aim of undergraduate education is neither vocational training nor just imparting hard knowledge. Instead, it should offer hope for young people and change the way they think and live. It helps them to learn how to pursue the real meaning in life and create true happiness.

Universities worldwide are too concerned with competition for scale, admission results, research achievements, graduate income, rankings and resources. As a result, higher education is becoming increasingly commercialized and utilitarian. Such an attitude has consequences and side effects, such as undergraduates becoming over enthusiastic about disciplines that are practical, popular or promise good job prospects. In other words, students do not choose their majors based on their knowledge of the disciplines, their ideals, interests and strengths. Many also choose a major to meet their parents' and peers' expectations, while others prefer disciplines they perceive as less difficult or boring.

Students, therefore, fail to think independently. They tend to drift along and follow

the crowd. Choosing a major has turned into a process full of contradictions and insincerity.

In the past two decades, business administration, or a BBA degree in, say, accounting, finance or global business has become the top choice of most students regardless of their academic performance or the subjects they studied in high school. At the Chinese University of Hong Kong's School of Accountancy and the School of Business at Hong Kong Baptist University, where I served as director and dean, respectively, BBA has always been among the top three most popular majors with the highest admission requirements.

The local ecology of education is, in fact, unhealthy. In high school, most students are proud of choosing the science stream. Yet many top science students give up science and engineering, except medicine, when they enter university. This goes against Hong Kong's goal of developing innovative technologies. Nevertheless, some students with good academic results are courageous enough to buck the trend and choose majors they are most interested in, like history or physics. But, they are teased by their families and peers. Their determination and confidence in selecting their majors

themselves are shaken. Such a phenomenon is not common in Europe or America where top students always pursue their own dreams.

It has been reported that among the 20 students who scored five or six straight As in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination last year, 90 per cent chose business-related disciplines. They have excellent academic results, but does this mean they all have special knowledge or interest in business? Did they choose those subjects because of their high scores, other people's expectations, good job prospects, or it's just a fashionable trend? There appears to have been no relationship between good academic results and the selection of majors.

According to some surveys conducted by major enterprises, undergraduate majors and academic performance are not the most important factors in the recruitment of fresh graduates. A student's undergraduate major is never the decisive factor in his or her future career and achievements. When recruiting staff, many businesses seek applicants with multiple core competencies, such as language, communication and problem-solving skills, analytical reasoning, interpersonal relationships, teamwork, global vision, self-learning and motivation, leadership potential

and sense of responsibility.

Undergraduate education is a platform for nurturing these core attitudes and skills. University is a place to cultivate one's character and sense of responsibility. In this ever-changing society, it's common for graduates to take up professions that are unrelated to their undergraduate majors. Further, with the incorporation of more general education and free elective requirements into undergraduate program, the major-related courses normally account for no more than half of the curriculum.

In fact, to achieve the ideals of a liberal arts education, many top universities in North America do not include practical or professional disciplines such as business, law and medicine in their undergraduate programs, and only offer them as postgraduate courses. Furthermore, many MBA and graduate law schools welcome applications from graduates of any discipline (some MBA programs even indicate that BBA graduates are not encouraged to apply). Therefore, undergraduates should choose their majors according to their genuine interests. After graduation, they can still apply to sit for an MBA, accounting or law if they really want to. In contrast, if an undergraduate scrambles to get into a business

program and gives up music, which is his or her favourite subject, it will be much harder for him or her to do a Master's degree in music in future.

Apart from pursuing academic results and a degree, prospective business students should ask themselves: Do I have a passion for it? Why do I love this major? Do I have any idea or aspirations of how to improve the business world or reduce greed and disputes?

Nowadays, it's not difficult for a graduate to secure a stable job and a reasonable income. If your priority in selecting a major is to pursue wealth and fame, instead of following your interests or making a contribution to society, I would advise you not to choose it. There's a good chance you may not get what you expect and you will end up disappointed. One day, you might regret not choosing your favourite major. I am not saying that dreams and wealth cannot co-exist, it's just an issue of priorities.

We should encourage students to pursue a learning path along which they can find joy and meaning. With passion and a thirst for knowledge, any student is already halfway to success.

The author is a senior university professor.