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Simon Ho
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Local universities need to reform admission culture

Simon Ho argues that basing acceptance on a single exam score ignores important aspects of a student's character

When choosing a major in applying for university admission, candidates should consider whether their majors match with their characters, values and interests. Candidates should not just look at the scale and reputation of the institutions, nor should they only consider job prospects after graduation, income and/or expectations of family members and peers.

Most of the top students who had achieved outstanding results in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination or International Baccalaureate examinations in Hong Kong chose the so-called "dream subjects" like medicine or law, they even subscribed to the idea of "those with good grades should become a doctor or lawyer". This phenomenon has been controversial over the years.

Of course, if individuals choose law or medicine out of interest or some social aspirations, they are worth supporting. Nonetheless, in my encounters with many top students, many of them chose to study medicine or law mainly because of their parents' and peers' expectations and/or future career/income considerations.

I always believe that the main purpose of undergraduate education is not for vocational training. It is not just about acquiring professional knowledge and skills in preparation for a good job after graduation. I am deeply convinced that undergraduate education should enhance the overall core competence of young people, cultivate their minds and values, realize their interests and potentials, and guide them to find a sense of meaning and satisfaction in their future work and life. If your major does not match with your true interests and wishes, even if you gain wealth and fame in future, you may not be able to lead the most meaningful or satisfying life.

It is a pity that our utilitarian society advocates the traditional "success" indicators more than the intangible "value". In the admission process, universities still mainly look at candidates' public examination results and neglect their personal attributes, perceiving education as a narrow manpower training tool. University students are often over-keen on some practical or popular disciplines or those leading to better employment, while neglecting other more basic disciplines, or the primary interest of pursuing academic knowledge. Many students choose their majors without good understanding of the discipline, their own aspirations, interests and strengths.

Nevertheless, there are some high-achieving school leavers who dare to resist the current and skeptical eyes of their relatives and friends, and choose majors that they are most interested in such as art, literature, mathematics or physics. For these students who pursue the knowledge they love, and choose not to chase after material, wealth, and fame, they have made a wise choice between interests and getting employed.

To put the ideals of liberal arts education into practice, most North American universities do not offer professional subjects such as law and medicine in their undergraduate curriculum, but were only taught as postgraduate programs. I always have reservations about local institutions offering undergraduate programs

like medicine and law that are too specialized; and leaders of the sector, medical schools and law schools in Hong Kong seem not to have plans to gradually change to mainly admitting graduate students who are more mature intellectually and psychologically.

Hong Kong's higher education institutions still use applicants' one-off examination results as the major admission criterion (be it DSE, IB or GCE A-Level). Although it has the advantages of objectivity and fairness, candidates' other attributes, strengths and experience are neglected. Some local universities' schools and departments would rather admit more non-JUPAS students to avoid lowering of their average DSE score rankings and reputation. In fact, using public examination results as the sole basis for admission is also, in a sense, unfair as different students have different learning orientations and development backgrounds. An examination result-oriented society makes students feel bored and worried, gradually become short-sighted, utilitarian and not willing to innovate, nor to pursue their aspirations proactively. Although some schools/departments require admission interviews, they are generally rudimentary and contribute to only a small percentage of the overall score.

More than 100 key universities in the United States (including members of the Ivy League like Harvard) formed a coalition two years ago, making a public statement to reform their admission system. The coalition advocated to switch to a set of more comprehensive criteria which not only consider results of joint university entrance exams (weighted only 50 percent of the assessment), but also extracurricular activity participation in high schools such as sports achievement, personal character, and other integrative elements. The applicant's personal interests, potentials, positive character, courage, empathy, community service experience will all be taken into consideration to ensure diversity and balance. The university admission officers attach great importance to elements such as the applicant's activity profile, self-introduction essay, interview performance, reference letter, etc. But how to enhance the objectivity and transparency of these elements remains a challenge to some institutions.

Nowadays, the society has changed a lot already. It is difficult for graduates to rely just on their academic achievements in prestigious universities for a bright future. The younger generation in Hong Kong needs to constantly learn, adapt, change, and innovate. The admission system of local higher education institutions also needs to be reformed. Institutions should not admit the most eligible students with an admission system based solely on academic performance. Scoring high marks in a single joint entrance exam is not the only qualifying factor for admission, candidates' other strengths and experiences should also be reviewed.

The widening of university admission criteria will affect the secondary school system and their curriculum design. It will provide secondary school students with a freer and broader learning space. The purpose of university admission is for students' holistic learning and growth, not for university reputation.

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The author is president of *Hang Seng Management College*.

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