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You can't blame the education system once you've reached university

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Tertiary students have to take ownership of their learning and dump the mindset of intensive coaching and drilling they were brought up in



For many senior secondary students, the holidays ended long before September. For weeks, they have been back at school, having extra lessons in preparation for next year's Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education examination.

The extra lessons, of course, include drills that familiarise students with past exams. It is now typical for senior secondary students to spend their August studying rather than relaxing.

However, those who have just entered university have a different life to look forward to. Wide-ranging electives, lectures delivered by accomplished academics, involvement in student activities and overseas exchanges conjure up exciting journeys that could have lasting influence on anyone's life.

For these students, it is the time to take ownership of their learning and dump the mindset of intensive coaching and drilling they were brought up in. The days of robotic studying for that life-shaping examination and being fed answers to the model are gone forever.

University study means thinking for themselves, a period of exploration. There are no fixed syllabuses to adhere to, and how much they gain from the four-year period is pretty much of their own making. But getting top grades in all subjects does not necessarily translate into a high degree of employability. On the contrary, a well-rounded student could excel in the workplace better than the one who's academically gifted.

Students choose whether to simply idle away the time on campus, indulge in activities at the expense of academic study or, at the other extreme, bury themselves in books without paying regard to what is happening around them.

Being able to strike a balance between study and play or other activities will be advantageous. Once developed, good time management skills will always be of value.

The ability to learn and improve independently is another important aspect of university life. With knowledge at one's fingertips in today's internet world, what makes a university graduate stand out from another is his attitude and capacity for acquiring new skills when the need arises. Research has also indicated that students learn the most when they take ownership of their learning.

Another thing about university life: how well students improve their language skills depends entirely on self-motivation. For the past four years, five publicly funded institutions - Lingnan University, Polytechnic University, City University, Baptist University and the Hong Kong Institute of Education - have joined in a collaborative project to develop interactive, self-access materials specifically designed to help students improve their English.

Proficiency is important since almost all university subjects are taught in English. Various institutions have stepped up support for individual learners by offering language advice or counselling besides a host of learning materials - both online and offline - at language centres.

At Lingnan, an Independent Learning module is incorporated into each of its three common core courses.

Marc LeBane, a language instructor and English learning support service coordinator at Lingnan, noted the improvements some students have made through self-access. They decide on their aims, make plans about what to learn, develop their own methods of learning, assess their own learning, and plan what to learn next. Counselling from teachers helps them overcome any problems they have, one at a time. With a baby-step approach to learning, even the smallest success can be motivating, says LeBane.

"Students have an inherent drive to learn," he says. "However, when it comes to learning English, my opinion is that most Hong Kong students believe their ability is enough to graduate, but they do not realise that it is not sufficient for the real world."

As the new term begins, let's hope it will mark the start of a fruitful journey for the young generation, for whom much awaits to be discovered and achieved. Students on every campus stand to gain much if they are willing to embrace fully the ample opportunities to learn that come their way.

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