



Money talks, dream walks

The annual application results of the Joint University Programmes Admission Scheme (JUPAS) invariably generate community interest, as many see top students' choices as a reflection of society's prevailing values

NINE candidates obtained the highest 5** grade in seven subjects in the Diploma of Secondary Education Examination this year. They have chosen respectively to further their studies in law, medicine, as well as business and actuarial programmes at the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Why are they picking these disciplines, and what do their choices say about the current values of Hong Kong society? There have been criticisms in recent years that future money-making potential is the prime consideration when students choose university programmes.

Some say this mentality is borne out by the programmes picked by candidates scoring top grades in Hong Kong's last A-Level Examination in 2012. In that year, 15 of the 17 top students decided to study business-related courses, such as business management and finance (see Table 2).

The choices of the top students in 2013 (Table 1) are more diverse. Of the nine top-ranking students, five of them picked professional courses – medicine and law – saying they wanted to use their training to help others.

Table 1: University programmes chosen by students scoring 5** in seven subjects in 2013

Grade	Programme chosen	Grade	Programme chosen
5**	HKU - Medicine	5**	HKU - Actuarial Science
5**	HKU - Medicine	5**	HKU - Business Administration (Law)
5**	HKU - Medicine	5**	HKU - Business Administration (Law)
5**	CU - Global Physician-leadership Stream	5**	HKU - Law
5**		5**	CU - Global Business Studies

Table 2: Programme chosen by top-grade students taking the last HK A-Level Exam in 2012

Grade	Programme chosen	Grade	Programme chosen
6A, 1B	CU - Global Business Studies	5A	CU - Global Business Studies
6A	CU - Global Business Studies	5A	HKU - Business Administration (International Business & Global Management)
6A	CU - Global Business Studies	5A	UST - Business Administration in Global Business
6A	HKU - Business Administration (Law)	5A	HKU - Law
5A	CU - Global Business Studies	5A	UST - Business Administration in Global Business
5A	UST - Quantitative Finance	5A	HKU - Business Administration (International Business & Global Management)
5A	CU - Global Business Studies	5A	HKU - Business Administration (Law)
5A	CU - International Business and Chinese Enterprise	5A	CU - Mathematics
5A	CU - Global Business Studies		

Future earning potential

WHILE subject choices this year appeared to be 'less materialistic', future money-making potential remains the main factor for most local students when they choose the direction of their university education.

Such a 'money-minded' attitude is seen as highly problematic, and some even say that our universities have been downgraded to play only a vocational training role.

Undoubtedly, programmes that lead to high-paying jobs are the favourites of JUPAS applicants, while pure science and arts subjects have been given the cold shoulder. Some call these unpopular courses 'life rings', as they are viewed only as



'fall-back' options for students with less competitive grades.

Civil engineering was a clear example of how the 'money future' has influenced students' decisions. Some years ago when Hong Kong's construction industry was in a trough, no one wanted to enroll in university civil engineering courses. But student interest in the discipline has been rekindled since the government unveiled its 10 mega infrastructural plans in 2007.

The projects boosted demand for civil engineers, and jacked up the career prospects and pay of such graduates. Head of HKU's Civil Engineering Department Albert Kwan Kwok-hung noted a distinctive surge in applicants in the wake of the development.

On the day the HKDSE examination results were announced in July, an organisation interviewed 936 candidates on their university application plans. The survey found that most students would look at the pay and benefits of future jobs before considering the nature of the career or their interest.

To say that Hong Kong students are money-minded is, perhaps, justified.

'Life ring' choices

STUDENTS nowadays have also been criticised for choosing programmes that are easy to get into, instead of those in which they are interested. A student counselling body observed that students scrambled to apply for programmes with lower admission requirements.

An example was Polytechnic University's Broad Discipline of Social Science (社會科學廣泛學科) programme. According to this year's JUPAS application data on the students' top three choices, competition to get into this programme was the most severe, with 194 applicants competing for each place.

Be true to yourself

BUT there are examples of high-achieving students who prefer to chase their dream rather than money. Take Lai Miu-yeung as an example. He recently got 5** in six subjects in the DSE examination. Such grades would almost get him into any university programme he chose. Initially, Lai had put translation and medicine as his JUPAS top choices, but after careful consideration, he decided to apply to the Music Department at the Chinese University, music being the subject he loved most. Some friends told him he was wasting his good grades, but he believed pursuing his interest was more important.



Another similar case is that of Gary Leung Ling-yin, now 26. He obtained As and one B in the 2003 Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. He was admitted by Chinese University to study quantitative finance and had a successful career as a financial analyst at a top accounting firm.

He was promoted to manager after four years, but later quit the well-paying job to pursue his childhood dream to become a bus driver. He discovered that making lots of money was not his goal, and did not mind the drastic cut in pay following his career move.

Key ideas

The prospect of a **lucrative** career, instead of studying something of personal interest, remains the main consideration of Hong Kong students when they are choosing a university programme. This mentality reflects the prevailing materialistic values of society at large, which places making money as the top priority in life. Students should carefully consider whether they want to go with the flow, or insist on pursuing their own aspirations.

Did you know?

There used to be a popular saying back in the 1960s and 1970s in Hong Kong that "three professions get rich" – lawyers, doctors and accountants. At the time, many parents pushed their children to study these subjects at university.

Critical questions

1. If money and the chance of being accepted are students' prime concern in choosing university programmes, what social values does this reflect?
2. What would be your priority in choosing a university programme – career and money-making prospects, or personal interest and aspirations? Why?

References

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