

How tertiary students can prevent a 'lost' academic year

They should look at how to learn better and connect knowledge to other disciplines



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When the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to online learning around April last year, students of all ages had their planned year in education disrupted.

For those in primary and secondary schools and junior colleges, the Ministry of Education ensured that this disruption would be minimal. Students returned to school in June, after circuit breaker measures brought community cases down.

For students in higher education – where campus populations are far larger and capacities for

independent learning are much higher – a pre-Covid-19 return to campus for all would have been some time away.

A PARTIAL RETURN

About three weeks ago, I returned to the National University of Singapore (NUS) campus for the first time in more than 280 days, attending my first face-to-face lesson in what truly felt like years.

For NUS, even with the gradual shift back to in-person learning in this second half of its academic year, space constraints and safety concerns mean that a portion of lessons must remain online – only two of my four modules this semester are taught in person.

Similar arrangements might be faced by my peers in other tertiary institutions, not to mention those studying overseas where the pandemic continues to rage.

At first glance, one might feel that this is much ado about nothing: The curriculum is still being delivered, and all that is really disrupted is the social aspect of education. But education is far more than curriculum delivery, as anyone who has endured a semester where one's classes were held entirely on Zoom will know.

More importantly, the social



The writer hopes students can discover things about themselves as learners that will benefit them when they can fully return to campus. ST FILE PHOTO

aspect of education is a critical ingredient for education itself, and the social authenticity of in-person learning can never be replaced by the screen-bound Zoom class. In the words of the late philosopher and educator John Dewey, "education is essentially a social process".

And thus when something so fundamental to education is suspended for an academic year, even if partially, the risk of a "lost" year in one's education looms.

RISK OF 'LOST' YEAR

Writing in the context of the United States, former provost and senior vice-president of the University of Vermont David Rosovsky noted in a *Forbes* article last October that there was an "unspoken sense of this entire academic year being a write-off, a lost year for universities and their students".

To be sure, the well-controlled nature of the pandemic in Singapore means that students in higher education here will be less affected than their peers

elsewhere, and are thus less susceptible to a "lost" year. But the risk remains nevertheless, for education in the way it was meant to be has still been disrupted.

Facing these complicated disruptions, how can tertiary students stave off the risk of a lost year in education? How can they make the best of this academic year, one which they will never truly get back?

To quote former education minister Ong Ye Kung, "when things get complicated and difficult to understand, we have to revert to the basics".

Much has been written about how students should involve themselves in more projects and initiatives, or take up more online courses to boost their employability. These are important but they do not fully confront the basic process by which education takes place, and what is thus really being affected: learning.

To make the best of a disrupted academic year, students should revert to basics and use this opportunity to review and reinvent their approach to

learning itself.

TWO 'HOW' QUESTIONS

In a year where learning conditions have not been optimal, this might be the best time for students to optimise their journey of learning. They can begin to do so by asking two "how" questions.

First, how can I learn better? In our long race towards the end of formal education, we have been more preoccupied with how to score, rather than how to learn.

This is a sentiment I am familiar with, as a former teaching assistant for an NUS module "Learning to Learn Better".

The course aimed to teach students evidence-based learning strategies to meet the needs of higher education and beyond. At its heart is the idea that learning well does not always come intuitively, but must be picked up deliberately.

Optimal learning strategies include strategically spacing out desired learning material at increasing intervals of time, considering the assumptions behind what you learnt, making connections across concepts and many more tips which students can look up online.

These will stand them in good stead for a lifetime of careers, where success depends on how quickly and effectively one can learn, unlearn and relearn.

Second, how is this connected to other disciplines?

NUS president Tan Eng Chye wrote in *The Straits Times* recently: "Today, more than ever before, students must be taught to make connections that cut across boundaries, such as those carved out artificially for reasons of administrative efficiency and disciplinary politics."

In some sense, asking this question helps students revert to a more fundamental view of knowledge, long before man-made subject boundaries were imposed on it. More important than going back to the past, however, is preparing for the future: The most complex problems waiting to be solved are multidisciplinary ones.

As a student in an existing multidisciplinary major, I can vouch for the benefits of crossing disciplinary boundaries. However,

I have also realised it is not always easy, and requires conscientious effort on the part of the learner.

Higher education will see a transformation in its methods of teaching, but how can students transform their mindset of learning? My advice is a twist on an age-old technique: study groups. Students are used to finding coursemates to study a subject together; now, they should also find friends from different disciplines and discuss common topics on a regular basis in a rigorous manner.

By connecting academically to those from different disciplines conscientiously, students should be more prepared to thrive in interdisciplinary academic and work environments.

While there are more questions students can ask to reinvigorate their learning process, the two above should serve as a good start in helping them position themselves for the future.

More importantly, they should not see better learning strategies and interdisciplinary thinking as standalone skills, but actively integrate these into their current academic lessons – even in a time of disrupted education.

To this end, tertiary institutions can also play a role in facilitating this process of integration on a more micro level. For instance, instructors could get students to record and review their learning strategies across the semester; assignments requiring research into different disciplines could also be considered.

Of course, whether or not this academic year turns out to be lost will ultimately still depend on what students can find. The hope is that they can still discover many things about themselves as learners, things which will benefit them when they can fully return to campus once more.

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We welcome contributions to the Sunday Views column. Write to us at stopinion@sph.com.sg