

How my top school grades got me into top university courses: Four Hong Kong students explain the pressure to succeed

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After the swotting and the much-anticipated results, the nail-biting battle for secondary school students came to an end last week when all university places in the city were allocated. So what did the perfect scorers of the Diploma of Secondary Education choose to study?

Eight out of the 12 perfect scorers opted for medicine. The others went for business and law, dentistry, social science and politics and law.

Were they blazing a new trail or following the path of other previous top scorers?

A search by the *South China Morning Post* on the top performers from the past decade through news archives found that medical school was the most popular destination for Hong Kong's high scorers, followed by legal studies and business.

There were a total of 65 top performers between 2005 and 2009, and at least 30 of them went on to study medicine.

"Doctors enjoy high social status and high income. It is understandable that most of those who scored well chose this profession," said Ng Shun-wing, head of the Institute of Education's department of education policy and leadership.

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NG SHUN-WING

"But it is not a healthy phenomenon," he added.

Ng said every academic field would need top talents to lead and take the field forward. If only one sector had the cream of the crop, the other sectors which were in more urgent need of talent would suffer in the long term.

“As a scientist I can say you don’t need to have the best academic scores to be a doctor,” said [Open University](#) president Professor Wong Yuk-shan. “The most important thing is you must be really interested in it.”

Wong stressed there were many areas that needed intelligence and creativity such as sciences and the liberal arts.

“The reason why our society has achieved so much today is because we always have scientific breakthroughs,” he said. “We need talents to achieve these breakthroughs.”

Not all top scorers, however, chose the predictable path to success. Louisa Mak Ming-sze, a perfect-scorer in 2009, is now competing in the Miss Hong Kong pageant, after graduating from the [University of Cambridge’s law school](#).

The Post spoke to four top scorers from different years to find out how they are doing. Three are doctors and one is working on her PhD in the United States.

Will Pak Wai-lun, 26



Will Pak is working at United Christian Hospital after graduating from medical school. Photo: May Tse

Unlike Tam and Chung, Pak, a straight-A student in 2006, chose to enter HKU’s medical school because he always dreamed of becoming a doctor.

“I decided when I was in Form 3 that I wanted to be a doctor,” says Pak, who studied at St Joseph’s College.

“I like science, especially biology, and I want to help people.”

Pak says he knew he needed top-notch grades to enter medical school so he placed enormous pressure on himself to excel. He says he took 10 subjects just in case he did not do well in some subjects, but to his surprise, he obtained As in all the subjects.

“My parents respected my choice and my school gave me a lot of support. To me, getting 10 As was like gaining a ticket to pursue my favourite subject. I feel lucky, because not many people can continue to do what they dream to do.”

The 26-year-old is now working at [United Christian Hospital](#) in Kwun Tong and feels satisfied with the job because he is learning different stories from different patients.

His advice to students: follow your dreams instead of striving to excel academically despite what really interests you.

Henry Tam Pan-yiu, 23



Medical student Henry Tam at the University of Hong Kong. Photo: Franke Tsang

Tam decided to take 10 subjects in the Certificate of Education exams in 2009 because he felt he needed to prove himself to his school.

He achieved A in all the 10 subjects – the highest score a student could possibly gain, before the government switched to the Diploma of Secondary Education exam system in 2012.

“I was not a typical good student,” said Tam. “In Chinese people’s mindset, a good student must be very obedient. They don’t like students who think out of the box.”

Tam regards himself as a bit of a maverick and believes his alma mater, St Joseph’s College in Mid-Levels, was not very fond of him. He says the school would rather recommend pupils who had lower academic scores for scholarships or awards instead of him.

“I’m still strongly attached to my alma mater because it taught me for 14 years from kindergarten. The school had many good and passionate teachers, but maybe some teachers at management level couldn’t quite accept those who had their own thoughts and were not robots.”

Tam remembers in 2010, when he was in Form 6, the school library imposed book-borrowing quotas on each class to support the [Education Bureau](#)’s policy of promoting reading. And one day, his teacher told the pupils that his class had not met the quota and asked all of them to borrow books immediately.

“If you force them to borrow books just to meet the quota, it’s really pointless. This is not the way to promote reading,” laments Tam.

A city will not be healthy if it only has people working in one area

STUDENT HENRY TAM

He was the only one in the class who did not go to the library to borrow books. He said all the 30-plus pupils immediately went to return the books they had borrowed after the quota was met.

Instead, he registered his unhappiness to the teacher in charge, leaving her rather displeased.

“No matter whether it is a school or a society, you need people to stand up and voice out in situations like this, or you will never make progress – it is just like burying your head in the sand,” says Tam.

Being a straight-A student, Tam entered the [University of Hong Kong’s medical school](#), even though his favourite subjects were history and philosophy. He thought the medicine, law and business schools had teachers of the best quality because of their popularity and this was what prompted him to opt for medicine. A classmate, who loved music and was highly talented at playing the piano, also chose medicine for the same reason.

“Not everybody is born to be an academic, but if parents, the schools and society do not support students in pursuing their interests, I think it’s a waste of talent.”

Tam says it will be difficult to solve this problem because to many students, being a professional and getting a good salary is nowadays the only way for them to buy a home.

“The government should really think about how it can help young people afford a home and develop their interests. A city will not be healthy if it only has people working in one area. Like there are no shops in

Mong Kok and Tsim Sha Tsui other than luxury outlets, pharmacies and jewellery shops. I feel this is really twisted."

Now in his final year, the 23-year-old says he intends to stay in the profession. He says he is unhappy with the performance of both pro-establishment and pro-democracy lawmakers, and this might prompt him to become a writer or a politician to change society.

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