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Opinion

## Reflections from the School of Life

Vivien Shiao , Reflections from the School of Life

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We ask industry professionals to answer some of this year's A-Level General Paper essay questions.

IT'S been a tumultuous week, to say the least. Among the many events that happened, one that took place rather quietly was Tuesday's 'A' Level General Paper (GP) examination. By chance, I came across a Facebook post by Shiao-Yin Kuik, Nominated Member of Parliament, who is also the director of social enterprise The Thought Collective, who asked adults which question they would pick to answer now, with the benefit of hindsight and a fresh perspective.

From that came inspiration for this week's column. In short, BT approached (read: cajoled, arm-twisted, begged) industry professionals to go back to school by briefly answering 'A' Level GP essay questions and how their work experience has changed their thinking. Here's what they said.

Shiao-yin Kuik, Nominated Member of Parliament, co- founder and director of The Thought Collective

12. 'Everyone has an opinion, but not everyone's opinion is of equal value.'

I might have made my whole essay about simplistic day-to-day opinions[WHEN I WAS 1] (back when I was 18). At 39, after witnessing the devastating effect of divisive partisan politics and online echo chambers in different societies, I feel much more strongly about the need to take a stand against dangerous, prejudiced opinions that are based on untruths.

I also see clearly how contempt for opinions outside of your sociopolitical and cultural beliefs has caused whole countries to be shocked by results like Brexit and the US Presidential Elections. I would defend more strongly the need to empathise and see value even in the opinions of those you deeply

disagree with. Once we denigrate other people's deeply felt beliefs as baseless, we not only alienate our fellow citizens, we also run the risk of seeing the world only as we want to be rather than how the world really is.

Healthcare administrator, local hospital

3. 'Longer life expectancy creates more problems than benefits.' Discuss.

My stance from when I was 18 compared to now, after working in the intermediate and long term care (ILTC) sector, has not changed. What has changed is the realisation of the magnitude of suffering.

It's not about just about physical illnesses. In my work, I have seen firsthand the loneliness, fear, and eventual loss of autonomy that the elderly face in their final years. Caring for the elderly can be a tough, thankless job, and caregiver burnout and stress can lead to abuse and elderly abandonment. In a competitive society when it comes down to juggle between caring for their children, their livelihood, or their aged parents, I have seen how some choose to take the easy way out.

The 18-year-old me probably would have argued that boosting the healthcare capabilities of our country would help ease the increased medical demand from our ageing population, but I now know that the problems run far deeper than medicine can cure.

Zhou Lihan, CTO, co-founder, MiRXES Pte Ltd

5. 'Human need, rather than profit, should always be the main concern of scientific research.' Discuss.

At the age of 18, I would have almost certainly taken the stand that human needs, but not profit, should be the main concern of scientific research. In my university days, I have defended the idea that science is noble and should never be economically driven.

My thinking has since evolved. Upon graduation, my friends and I founded a biotech startup. All of us were from academic backgrounds and had no experience in business. We developed a unique technology and turned it into research products that generated a healthy stream of revenue. After covering our operating expenses, the profit enabled us to further our scientific research to develop novel clinical products.

In a competitive biotech industry, one can only survive and generate sustainable profit by tackling critical, unmet medical needs. Thus, my belief is, scientific research can be profit driven, if it keeps a company competitive and innovative to better serve human needs.

Julian Chow, Senior Digital Consultant, Text100 Singapore

7. How far has modern technology made it unnecessary for individuals to possess mathematical skills?

Now, with the benefit of experience, I think that while modern technology has made it easier for humans to solve computational problems, mathematical skills are just as important as ever.

I don't mean the ability to do sums on the fly, but rather, a more in-depth grasp of the concepts and the mindset of a mathematician, such as statistical analysis, logic, the ability to pattern spot, and so forth. Actually, I find that people who are better able to work with data seem to be higher valued in the organisation, because these skills are surprisingly quite scarce. Even though everyone takes maths in school, I guess understanding the principles and doing sums are two different things.

And I see my clients also experiencing the same, as more and more they are asking for help with data analysis to make them look better in their jobs.

Yorelle Kalika, Founder & CEO, Active Global Specialised Caregivers

8. 'People who do the most worthwhile jobs rarely receive the best financial rewards.' To what extent is this true of your society?

I was the first one in my family to go to an elite university and at that point in time, working for a large corporation and having a high paying job was my definition of success.

I revised my view 15 years into the journey, when at age 35 I had reached my earlier goal and was a bit disappointed with it. I wasn't passionate about my job and the various issues that come with large organisations (politics, relatively low impact, lengthy timelines to get anything done), were taking a huge toll on my morale.

In 2012, I started a company to serve the elderly population with professional, affordable home care.

In the past four years, I made roughly 15 times less money than I used to make in my corporate life. However, the satisfaction of building a meaningful business totally outweighs any financial sacrifice I made. Of course, some days can be a struggle, but there is nothing quite like it.

Dylan Ng, CEO and co-founder, SuperSteam Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd

8. 'People who do the most worthwhile jobs rarely receive the best financial rewards.' To what extent is this true of your society?

The 18-year-old me would agree, but I probably would have ranted about how many are poorly paid

for the worthwhile jobs that they do.

The 40-year-old me has a better understanding: Financial rewards are not related to the worthiness of the job you do. Cleaners and rubbish collectors perform a very worthy job that directly impacts the environment we live in, but will earn much less than professional stock traders. But there is less risk and complexity in a cleaner's job and more people are able to do it, even if most people do not necessarily prefer to do it. Financial rewards are more related to the personal risk involved (for business owners) or skill level required (for highly skilled jobs).

But in life, the older I get, the more I feel life is much more than wealth accumulation, such as respect from the community, self-fulfilment in doing the right job, and also self-satisfaction knowing what you did was worthwhile.

Julia Bensily, Associate Director, Prime Structures Engineering Pte Ltd

11. Is competition always desirable?

When I was 18, I was competing with my peers nationwide and my final grade was based on a bell-curve. Competition was a zero-sum game to me at 18. If I'm not better than you, I lose.

In the course of working in an SME (small and medium-sized enterprise), I realised that competition is not a zero-sum game. Competition is desirable if your aim is to become a better version of what you currently are. It is not desirable when your aim is to eliminate competition because there will always be someone better than you or innovations that disrupt the market. It is not about the desirability of competition but that competition is inevitable.

How you deal with competition is what differentiates you from the rest. My rival today can be my partner tomorrow. Teaming up with competitors at the same level to become allies may allow you to provide better value than if you did not face competition.

Suang Wijaya, Associate, Eugene Thuraisingam LLP

12. 'Everyone has an opinion, but not everyone's opinion is of equal value.' What is your view?

If I were a JC student, I would have read "equal value" to mean "equal worth". Insofar as everyone has a right as an autonomous individual to form a view, the value (ie. worth) of the view must be measured by its merits.

Now, I would still agree with the statement, but I probably would recognise that an opinion's value depends not only on its "worth", but also on how much attention is given to it.

Factors entirely divorced from substance and quality may come into play. These may include the identity of the speaker, how eloquently the opinion is expressed, how loudly it is expressed, whether the opinion "feels" right, and, more crucially, whether the person expressing the opinion has the resources to propagate the opinion.

I practise in the legal field, where it is a fact that those with fewer resources are less able to obtain representation and have their interests (and opinions) advanced.

\* Note: Responses were edited for length and clarity.

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