

» BRINGING UP CHILDREN

Kids, it's your life, so plan for it

By Kai-Alexander Schlevogt
For The Straits Times

OPEN houses showcase not only the host but also his guests. University fairs therefore are a crystal ball on the nation's future.

Two student archetypes dominate: the specialist and the existentialist. Members of the first category know exactly what they want. Without taking note of anything else, these youngsters dash to the business faculty's booth. They ask the delighted officer to admit them to a BBA in accountancy and extra courses in derivatives.

In contrast, the existentialist, clueless about his future, wanders around until some staff member grabs him. To appear less awkward, he mumbles a supposedly intelligent question, such as: "What exactly is business?"

Both approaches to career planning are problematic in view of the national objective to raise innovativeness and job satisfaction. They lead either to premature closure or endless drifting. It is therefore imperative for students to take corrective measures at an early stage. They need to be supported by those who have a stake in their future, including parents, politicians and educators.

Students should start with the end and reason backwards to what needs to be done now. They need to plan their lives, not only their careers.

An effective approach is to write an imaginary newspaper article to be published on their 100th birthday, outlining their legacy. Instead of striving for specific titles ("I want to become prime minister"), they should develop a broad and noble purpose that makes them feel passionate and will outlast them. On their life journey, they need to step back often and assess their progress.

Even with broad aspirations in place, students should strike a balance between specialisation and openness. If they choose the wrong slot at an early stage, job satisfaction will plummet.

I recommend building a portfolio of options. When some roads to the destination become blocked, there will be alternative routes. So even if a student is passionate about accounting, he may consider studying other subjects first and specialise later.

Such flexibility contrasts with the early pragmatism of many Asian parents. They want their children to become

bankers because of the high earning potential.

Bear in mind most people spend the greatest part of their life working. How terrible must it feel to drag yourself to work every day, longing for the evening when you can pursue hobbies with great enthusiasm? It is far better to use one's energies on the job. Money will not pour in by itself if you do not work for it.

Second, students should think about how they can rise above the noise level by acquiring distinctive competencies. Take a consulting firm like McKinsey & Co, the ultimate dream for many graduates. Every year, thousands of

BACKWARD REASONING

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students with similar academic qualifications apply, but only a few are chosen.

Recruiters look for what is truly special about an applicant's life story. The educational system rewards examination performance, but students need to step out of this narrow box to succeed in life.

How about founding a pioneering company while studying? Why not learn at least five world languages? These objectives seem a tall order given academic pressures. But smart multi-tasking can help to alleviate the workload.

For example, more students should study and work abroad. Instead of defaulting to the United States, they may want to consider Europe, which is winning the soft power contest and offers more diversity. By going abroad, they can pick up a foreign language as easily as an infant acquires his mother tongue.

Besides, significant job opportunities will open up because of differentiation and networking. Imagine an Asian who studies for a year at a top university in Germany and pursues an internship there. Many German companies are investing in Asia and eager to recruit locals with international experience. The student will immediately rise above the crowd and obtain much better job offers than a person who stayed at home.

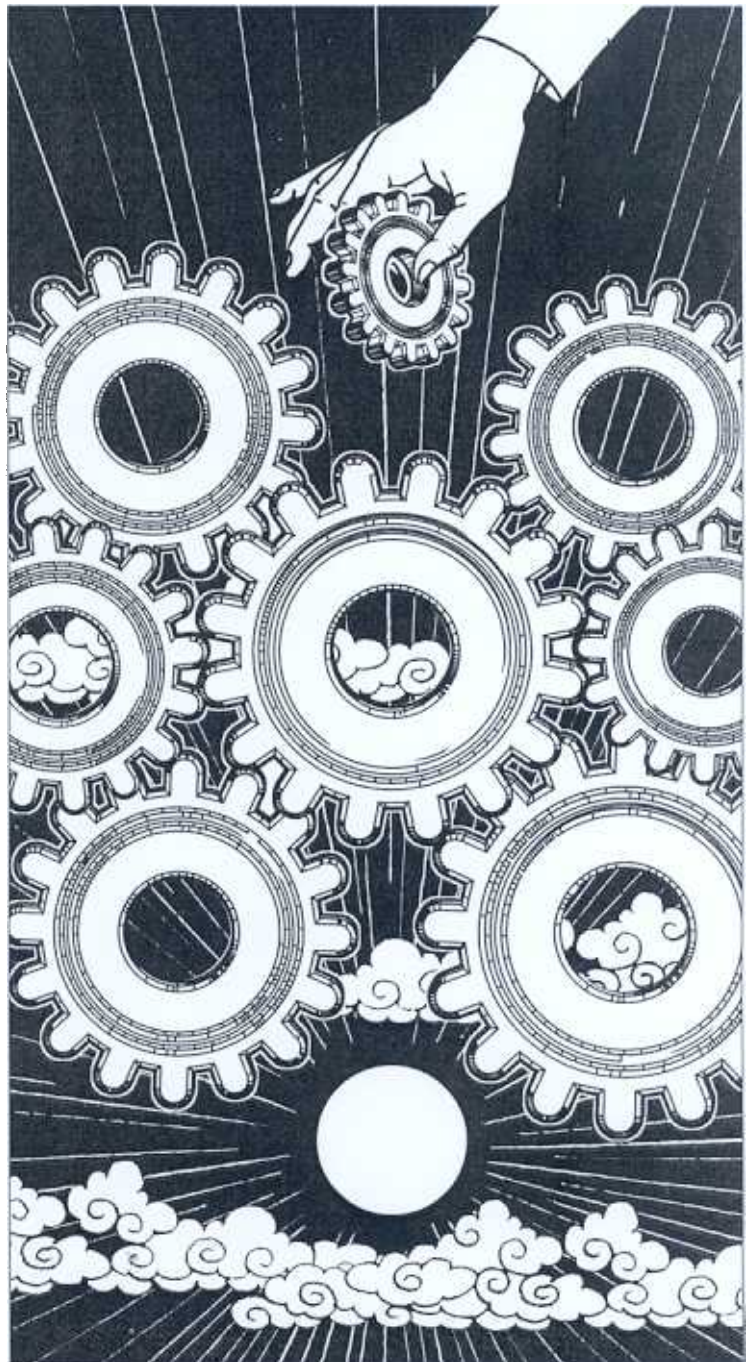


ILLUSTRATION : ADAM LEE

A distinctive leader also needs to solve complex and open-ended problems as well as inspire others to do the work for him. During a stay abroad, students will broaden their horizons and develop a multi-faceted personality since they will be forced to cope with other societies. A nation with more citizens versed in meta-problem-solving and the art of inspiration will become more innovative.

The final ingredients for success are initiative and drive. Many students visiting career fairs in Asia are accompanied by their mothers. Some outsource the task of collecting information to her altogether.

In one sense, parental care is welcome. But unfortunately, well-intentioned care can escalate into micromanagement, which is at the heart of many problems. At an early stage, young people should assume full responsibility for their lives. If they occasionally face adversity, they may just become stronger.

I am not recommending that Asian parents separate from their children. Rather, they should encourage professional independence while continuously strengthening emotional bonds.

My advice is this: Give your children the tools that are needed to excel in this world, act as a sounding board, encourage them to be

the best they can be and to enjoy every minute of their lives. They should use the power of questions instead of telling the kids what to do.

Here is an example: When your child approaches you with a problem, ask him to propose a solution first.

A bright future for the nation starts in the minds of the young and is nurtured by strong leadership. All stakeholders should jointly promote purposeful aspirations, distinctive competencies and professional independence coupled with boundless energy and joy.

The writer is an associate professor at the National University of Singapore Business School.

» A MORAL DILEMMA

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