

Mind The Gap Semester, Pragmatically

TODAY Voices (January 13, 2014)

So, only 1.26 per cent of National University of Singapore (NUS) students took leave from school in the last academic year. (“More university students take break from school to attain personal goals”; Jan 3, online).

It was 0.09 per cent at the Nanyang Technological University and 0.04 per cent at the Singapore Management University (two or more consecutive terms).

The idea of a gap year or semester is not new, but it is, anecdotally, gaining traction globally. Unlike the examples in the report, students take time off typically to develop or explore career pathways and engage in different, advanced academic courses.

Nonetheless, the numbers in Singapore might puzzle some. As sociologist Paulin Straughan pointed out, the modular system of universities today gives students the flexibility to take a break from school and not lose momentum when they return.

Beyond the rat race, this arrangement seems ideal. Immersing oneself in relevant work experience, for instance, is a good complement to school.

Instead, many of us scramble during semester breaks, squeezing in internships and engagements. Idleness is the holiday of fools, it appears.

Individuals who take a gap period in Singapore are certainly the exception, and many of their justifications are extraordinary. A quick survey with undergraduates who choose otherwise would ascertain the prevailing pragmatism.

Varsities emphasise the degrees that take the shortest times, students fret about taking more modules. Why would one, especially one who has completed National Service, want to lag behind one’s counterparts? Are there tangible incentives associated with the gap period?

How can one stay in school for so long, when one must get a job quickly to get a stable income, buy a car and a flat, get married and have children? This as-soon-as-possible mindset is ingrained. I, too, am guilty, which is unfortunate.

I think that schools are trying their best to address this eagerness to fit speedily into Singapore’s economic machinery.

NUS, for example, has programmes with overseas colleges, entrepreneurial hubs and local start-ups, through which participants can take a semester off as students-cum-interns. But there is only so much the universities can do.

Shedding a predilection for certainty is particularly relevant in an increasingly ambiguous world, and I should detach myself from the conventional mentality.

In the bigger picture, a government, or any administrative body, should not be providing prescriptions, expecting undergraduates to do this or be that. A gap term is but one possibility.

Rather, students can be encouraged to think for themselves, to doubt and be introspective. And we must do our part eventually to reciprocate.