



Yale-NUS College assistant professor Paul O'Keefe said US students are told at graduation ceremonies they have to find their passions, which he calls "well intended" but "not the best message to send". ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Spotting passions too early may limit students: Experts

Those with narrow focus may struggle with issues in other fields

Fabian Koh

Students should be wary of trying to identify their passions and interests too early in life as it could limit their education and hinder their potential, according to new research.

It noted that students who zero in on a narrow range of interests would find it difficult tackling problems that arise in other disciplines.

The research was conducted by Yale-NUS College assistant professor of psychology Paul O'Keefe and other researchers at Stanford University, and could have implications for education here.

Dr O'Keefe noted that students in America are told at graduation ceremonies that they have to find their passions, something he calls "well intended" but "not the best message to send".

"When we tell students to find their passion, we are really in a sense telling them, they sort of have this inborn interest or passion in them somewhere, and that it merely needs to be revealed.

"Maybe you will take a class and it's fully formed and ready to go."

Dr O'Keefe started the research in 2011 with Stanford University's Professor Carol Dweck and Associate Professor Gregory Walton. The findings will be published in *Psychological Science* journal.

It involved 470 participants aged

between 18 and 22, across five studies run at Stanford University and a nearby community college.

Dr O'Keefe noted that students in this age group are "getting the message all the time" and are "exploring their interests and finding out what they want to do for the rest of their lives".

He added that there may be implications for the local education scene, though he said he does not claim to be an expert on Singapore education.

"If you believe interests are fixed and you think you've found yours, like in Singapore you hear people say, 'I'm a science person' or 'I'm an arts person', then there's no reason to explore other areas.

"Or if you do, it's probably not going to be that interesting, because you already found your interest."

Such a person would struggle to find solutions to problems across different fields.

In junior college, when students have to choose between arts or science specialisations, it may have implications on their perception of their intellect and interests.

"They could interpret it as, 'I've been told by a test that I'm good at this, therefore this is what I'm going to do,'" said Dr O'Keefe.

"Similarly with interests, one message is that their interests only lie in one place, or should lie in one place, and it's not a cultural value to branch out."

Mr Heng Yew Seng, director of the Curriculum Policy Office in the Ministry of Education, said the curriculum here provides a broad-based education with subjects in different areas, rather than streaming students into specialisations such as arts or science.

Students also explore how different disciplines interconnect and relate to the real world.

"Nevertheless, some students may develop a strong interest in a particular field," added Mr Heng.

"For these students, they are supported in their interest as they pursue a specific course... while still being exposed to multidisciplinary learning."

Mr Heng added that the curriculum is regularly reviewed to take into account the latest education developments.

"As part of this endeavour, the research by Dr O'Keefe, together with other research, will form a wider body of work that helps enrich our understanding of curricular design and implementation."

In Singapore, a student's passion may be overshadowed by concerns of finding a job and making a living. Sociologist Vincent Chua cited the example of how the sciences may get more attention than the arts and humanities, especially with a renewed emphasis on IT skills and capabilities like coding.

"Pragmatic choices dictated by marketability can often supersede passion considerations," he said.

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HINDERING POTENTIAL

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YALE-NUS COLLEGE ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY PAUL O'KEEFE