

Tips from scholarship recipients

TIME FOR STUDY AND PLAY

From making to-do lists and carving out time for interests, these students prove it is possible to juggle school, CCA and volunteer work



Elisa Chia
Correspondent

I am busy, I have no time. It is a common refrain among teenagers – and understandably so.

Schoolwork can be overwhelming, especially when students are taking around 10 subjects in secondary school. Add to that co-curricular activities (CCAs) and other school events.

How do some youth excel in their academics and CCAs, and still find time to do volunteer work? And without sacrificing sleep and the use of social media?

Ms Govindan Solai Valli, 19, is one of them. The top arts student at Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC) in 2020 and 2021, she was elected to the Principal's Honour Roll in her second year.

She was also the captain of the college's softball team and volunteered as a youth mentor at the Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda).

In August, she received the Singapore Armed Forces Scholarship and the President's Scholarship.

What are the habits of effective students? *The Straits Times* asks Ms Solai and other scholarship award recipients.

GET ORGANISED, SET PRIORITIES

Students should know when to prioritise and have clear limits and boundaries. It is important to understand yourself, and assess how much time and energy you have to complete each activity, says Ms Solai. Then you can plan your commitments and work more effectively.

A study habit Mr Muhammad Daniaf Faharick, 20, uses is to make a list of things to do and prioritise them according to due dates.

For example, you should not jump on the easy mathematics paper that is due later than the challenging English essay, says Mr Daniaf, a recipient of the Prime Minister's Book Prize in 2020 and SPH Media journalism scholarship in 2022. He is now studying at the College of Humanities and Sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Mr Kiran Kasinathan, 19, who received the Public Service Commission (PSC) Scholarship for Teaching Service, usually breaks up tasks into



President's Scholar Govindan Solai Valli (above) was the top arts student at Anglo-Chinese Junior College and a volunteer youth mentor at the Singapore Indian Development Association.
ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Mr Muhammad Daniaf Faharick received the SPH Media journalism scholarship in August.
ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

"I feel this can backfire as the brain ends up being too fatigued to function optimally during the examination itself," Ms Lim says.

FIND A STUDY METHOD THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Ms Seah was introduced to the active recall method from YouTuber Ali Abdaal during her junior college years at Dunman High School.

The concept, she says, is to make up questions on the topic you are studying, based on past-year papers or learning objectives.

The process of generating questions and adding the answers help in memorisation, while the active recall strengthens the thinking path from question to answer.

"During revision, I would go through the list of questions while covering the answers, and try to get the main points.

"I can also go through each topic when on the commute, which saves me a lot of time."

Ms Wong and Ms Lim also practised spaced repetition, another popular study method, which requires one to systematically space the revision over a period of time and helps in storing information in the long-term memory.

"This method, combined with regular revision and practice, aided me in freeing up more time for other non-academic commitments since the time I spent revising during exam season was reduced," says Ms Lim, who was also awarded the Prime Minister's Book Prize in 2019.

She also recommends practising papers under timed conditions. "Mark them yourself and keep track of your grades. Do approach your teachers for consultations if you run into problems."

Ms Solai adds: "Reading textbooks and making notes were in no way enough to do well in school. Understanding concepts and putting them into practice – either through problem sums or short essays – were crucial in helping me tackle my subjects."

TAKE CONTROL OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE on C2

smaller ones, making them easier to cross off from his to-do list.

"This helps me to stay motivated and plan my time more realistically," says the former Victoria Junior College and Anderson Secondary School student. He is now taking geography at the University of Oxford in Britain.

And Ms Seah Qiao Ling suggests estimating the time needed for each item on your list. "I don't believe in spending too much time on a task," says the 20-year-old Singapore-Industry Scholarship recipient. "I aim for the greatest yield in the shortest possible time."

But do not beat yourself up if you take longer than expected. Instead, take time to evaluate why that happened and constantly refine your methods.

Ms Seah, who is studying computing in information systems at NUS, says: "Examinations do not only test you on content, but also your ability to find out what works best for you in stressful conditions."

REVISE CONSISTENTLY

When she was in Nan Chiau High School, Ms Wong Shu Juan recalls

she would revise only a few weeks before examinations.

"My rationale was that if I started too early, I would forget the content by the time assessments come around," says the 19-year-old, who

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MS GOVINDAN SOLAI VALLI, a recipient of the Singapore Armed Forces Scholarship and the President's Scholarship

took up a Singapore-Industry Scholarship to study psychology at NUS.

But she has since found that it is much better to study consistently and review material at systematic intervals.

"This helps me to manage the content much better without having to cram and possibly face burnout," the former ACJC student adds.

PSC scholar Valene Lim, 19, plans her exam revision schedule at least two months in advance, so she can study the subjects at a more relaxed pace.

"I usually begin by listing all the deliverables, then planning what to study each week on an Excel sheet," says Ms Lim, who is now taking human, social and political sciences at the University of Cambridge in Britain.

She would aim to finish content revision ahead of study breaks, such as the September school holidays, to ensure she has sufficient time for timed mock examinations.

A common trend she has observed is how some students sacrifice their sleep the night before an examination because they could not finish their revision in time.

Tips from scholarship recipients



I did not guilt-trip myself if I had to take a whole day to relax and spend time with friends and family. The education journey is supposed to be a holistic one – and that includes having a fair share of fun.



MR KIRAN KASINATHAN, a recipient of the Public Service Commission Scholarship

Public Service Commission Scholarship recipient Valene Lim (far left) creates an organised system to record her mistakes for future revision, while fellow recipient Kiran Kasinathan (left) breaks up tasks into smaller ones, making them easier to cross off from his to-do list.
ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM

Take control of social media use

FROM CI

LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

Ms Lim suggests creating an organised system to record your mistakes and corrections for future revision.

This is a study habit Ms Seah follows as well, especially for mathematics.

"I'd mark out questions I got wrong, and only revisit these questions each time a major examination comes.

"I would take note of recurring conceptual or careless mistakes, and jot them down together with the key concepts of each topic. Before the examination, I would only read through this list of recurring mistakes and key concepts."

FIND OUT WHAT MOTIVATES YOU

Knowing what would make your learning experience joyful helps you perform better and be happier, PSC scholar Kiran says.

For example, he selected topics he was extremely interested in, such as the arts and culture for General Paper and climate change for geography. He enjoyed the research process, which helped him engage better with the content.

He also found that being around his friends motivated him to study, so he used to have night study sessions with them in school.

He suggests creating a culture of sharing with friends.

"Hopefully, they will share their research and knowledge with you. Through this, everyone can develop their own interests and learn from one another."

KEEP A ROUTINE

From having a revision timetable to listening to the same playlist, President's Scholar Solai finds that routines help her get into the right mindset and focus more effectively.

"It took me a while to find a method that worked for me, but once I did, maintaining a routine was greatly beneficial to helping me study better," says the former Tanjong Katong Girls' School student.

Ms Wong adds: "Having a routine helps to reserve the period of time assigned to the task, making sure that it is done."

CHOOSE CCA, VOLUNTARY WORK YOU TRULY ENJOY

CCA and community service projects would not be a burden to your studies if you have a genuine passion for them.

Ms Solai enjoys playing sports and represented ACJC as the captain of its softball team.

She also volunteered at Sinda, where she taught children how to code and mentored at-risk youth, among other activities.

"Approaching these activities with interest and enthusiasm meant that I had intrinsic motivation to keep pushing and working hard. It helped me focus more at school, pay more attention to understanding concepts instead of merely completing the assignments."

For Ms Lim, participating in voluntary work – including with the Marine Parade Youth Network – and her CCAs at Dunman High School were "a way of relieving stress or having fun, rather than an



Singapore-Industry Scholarship recipients (from far left) Seah Qiao Ling does not believe in spending too much time on a task and Wong Shu Juan finds that revising consistently helps to avoid burnout.

additional responsibility".

She was the secretary general of the school's International and Strategic Affairs Council and also mentors underprivileged youths weekly as part of the Youth Club CCA.

RE-EVALUATE HOW YOU SPEND YOUR TIME

Cut out unnecessary activities that take up your time but do not contribute to your goals.

Ms Seah does not watch dramas and YouTube content. Instead, she believes in making time for her priorities, such as her CCA, family and volunteering.

"I feel that a perpetual state of being busy is a sign of poor time management, and having to turn down things you enjoy and care about because you are 'busy' should not be the case," she says.

Studying for a longer period does not translate to better grades, Ms Lim shares from her experience.

"While increasing the number of hours studied does work initially, we ultimately have limited hours in a day. Hence, the goal should be to improve your efficiency, rather than clocking hours."

She adds: "I would advise students to think about how they are currently studying. Are they truly maximising their time?"

TAKE CONTROL OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

TikTok and Instagram are a source of guilty pleasure for many students, including scholarship recipients.

Ms Seah says there is the feeling of Fomo (fear of missing out) when she is not on social media. Occasionally, she would keep her phone away from where she is studying.

"Studying with friends also keeps you accountable. We can remind one another when we are using our phone too much," she says.

To prevent lapsing into mindless scrolling, Ms Lim and Ms Wong set time limits on their social media apps.

Ms Wong says: "I find that spending too long on my phone not only directly prevents me from doing my work, but phone fatigue also negatively affects my productivity for the rest of the day."

She turns to other hobbies, such as crocheting, as a break instead. "Finishing a crochet project gives me a sense of fulfilment and is also a productive way to take my mind off studying."

Or take the lead of Mr Danial, who follows accounts that are educational.

"So if I were hooked on them, I am at least still learning. You can follow news accounts on Instagram, maths problem-solving accounts or those explaining history on TikTok," says the SPH Media Journalism scholar.

But closer to exams, perhaps a more effective strategy – as many of them tell *The Straits Times* – is to identify the apps that are threatening your focus and delete them.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Taking breaks and having fun are as important as studying hard, says Ms Solai. "Burnout is real and common among students. It is not only important to slow down every now and then, to recharge and refuel, but to also rely on your teachers, friends and parents, who have been a great source of strength to me."

Ms Wong intentionally schedules time for herself to take a mental break. "When we are caught up with things to do, it is easy to forget to give ourselves space to rest."

When she misses her weekly study goals, she practises self-compassion and tries not to be hard on herself. "I focus on what I managed to achieve and what is coming up next."

Mr Danial, who was from North Vista Secondary School and Tampines Meridian Junior College, says one does not need to feel pressured to say "yes" all the time.

"If you need to miss something to do your work, so be it. Don't tire yourself even though you think you can push yourself a bit more."

There is no way to perfectly balance all your commitments, Mr Kiran says. He realised it was "completely normal" to go without revision the entire day because of CCA commitments. "Likewise, I did not guilt-trip myself if I had to take a whole day to relax and spend time with friends and family," he says.

"After all, the education journey is supposed to be a holistic one – and that includes having a fair share of fun."

elisac@sph.com.sg