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letters from the dorm

Having fun with your academics

There is no need to be stressed about university exams if you are doing a degree you have freely chosen to pursue and truly enjoy



Henry Lui, University College London, Britain

University is a place for new things, new people and, perhaps most frightening of all, new exams. Though daunting at first, there is nothing worth worrying about if you act wisely and focus on matters you are truly interested in.

Coming into university, what surprises most people is the harsh fact that your secondary school grades don't really matter any more. At top-tier courses, your 45 points (or equivalent top score) mean nothing when you are surrounded by people who have achieved equally high grades. What's more, secondary school grades often do not act as a reliable indicator of what you might be able to achieve at university, given that the skills needed are vastly different. In public exams, memorisation and certain exam strategies may work for candidates, but they may not be helpful at tertiary level.

A top score in secondary school does not automatically translate into a top score at university – sorry. (This is not me being “salty”; your writer did get a 45).

Bearing this in mind, it is best to approach your subject with a more humble, careful attitude. While you might feel you have mastered it after spending countless nights in the library (this is not me, by the way), it is easy to overestimate your proficiency in an area when some course conveners do not provide marking schemes to past papers, leaving you with no way to verify whether your knowledge is as accurate and comprehensive as it seems.

The most important thing is the fact that a genuine interest in a particular area will be rewarded through a comprehensive, nuanced, and interesting answer. Whether it is an animated debate about the nature of automatic resulting trusts or the “true” rationale for awarding damages for pure economic loss (very interesting, I know), your interest should lead you to discover further arguments

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and ideas in your wider reading which you can use effectively in your exams.

As university exams also often offer a selection of questions for you to choose from, there is no need to fret over topics that are unable to engage you in a meaningful way. Having fun with your work helps you stand out.

Although exams and results unfortunately remain the key sources of stress for students at university, my experience with law tells me that these worries are less pronounced when you are doing a degree you have freely chosen to pursue and genuinely enjoy. There is life after secondary school, and a much better one at that.

Mainland universities take tough line against plagiarism



The annual graduation season is approaching, and university students are facing the last hurdle on their way to earning a bachelor's degree – a dissertation or thesis.

Universities around the country are taking a tougher line against plagiarism. Under one such measure, tertiary institutions are setting limits on the amount of material that students can copy from existing publications.

This follows the plagiarism case involving actor Zhai Tianlin earlier this year. Zhai, who apologised publicly for his academic misconduct, was stripped of his PhD by the Beijing Film Academy and expelled by Peking University from a two-year doctoral research programme.

Last month, Lanzhou University, in Gansu province (甘肃), and Xi'an Jiaotong University, in Shaanxi province (陕西), introduced “repetition checks” of bachelor's dissertations. Some students support the reforms, saying that academic integrity is

very important. Yang Yingwei, from Jinan University's School of Journalism and Communication, said: “It's the adviser's and student's mutual responsibility to produce a qualified dissertation.”

She revealed that a random check last year found that four out of six unqualified bachelor's dissertations in Guangdong province came from Jinan University,



There are limits on the amount of material that students can copy

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which spoiled the school's reputation. Yang called for severe punishment for academic misconduct, along with more in-depth guidance courses on dissertation writing in the first three years.

Zhang Chenyi, from Zhejiang Normal University, however, said a certain degree of “repetition” was necessary when summarising a scholar's work.

“Maybe it's a bit too harsh to limit the repetition rate within, say, 10 per cent, as requested by some schools,” she said.

To lower the rate, she said she broke up sentences and paraphrased some literature reviews.

“It's like working on English grammar exercises back in senior secondary school,” she said.

Others said they had doubts about the current plagiarism detection tools. Li Ruozhu from Huazhong University of Science and Technology, in Hubei province (湖北), chose ancient literature for her thesis.

When she put her final version through the China National Knowledge Infrastructure repetition checking system, she was told the original verses from an ancient poem were “copied” or “repeated”.

“It's ridiculous,” she said. “How can you discuss poems without citing them in the text?”

Finally she had no choice but to turn the words into charts or pictures, which would not be recognised by the system. She hoped these academic tools could be “smarter” in the future.

Liang Xinlu, Sun Yat-sen University