



Bringing Learning to Life

Learning to pass examinations is not an effective education for the future. At the English Schools Foundation (ESF), specialised programmes help students advance at a greater rate towards their potential. – By Stewart Redden

Learning comes alive when students are in an authentic environment, amongst peers with similar interests, while at the same time the teaching and mentoring comes from experts in their respective fields. In contrast, schools provide a standardised classroom environment that is different from the actual environment that professionals work in on a day to day basis. Environments shape the learning that takes place within them, and if something is missing from that environment the learning experience is less complete.

In the case of students that have discovered their chosen vocation in life, they want to get on with developing expertise and experience within their specialism at a deeper level, as the prevailing educational set-up is restricting for them. Schools centre on students who are uncertain of the direction they want to take in life in providing an education that is as broad as possible, and this is a fair approach

to take, but this method gets in the way of students who have already developed specialised interests and abilities. That said, schools only have finite resources, and it can even be a stretch to provide the specialised resources for science laboratories and art rooms that provide some of the basic features of the professional environments that scientists and artists habituate.

My own realisation for providing specialised programmes came when some art students approached me at a former school in Taipei and asked if they could reduce their course load on their International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) as it was getting in the way of developing their artwork. The issue was that that they needed the time and the extra tuition to develop their work to a sufficient level to further their careers and gain entry to the art colleges/universities that they wanted to attend. It was then that I realised what was needed to purposefully support these students was a specialised


programme that develops their potential and not one that gets in the way.

The external courses that the English Schools Foundation (ESF) has set up, initially through Renaissance College, are for art and design with the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) and performing arts with the Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts (HKAPA). These options provide authentic learning environments for students with enthusiasm and ability within these specialised areas. The students attend two to three afternoons per week over the last two years of their secondary education to pursue accredited courses at these institutions in supplement to art, design and theatre courses amongst other IB DP courses that they take within school. These flexible specialised programmes come under the IB Career-related Programme (CP), which provides an internationally-minded, supportive and progressive educational framework to support students as lifelong learners.

The magic of these programmes comes from environments where the equipment and expertise go beyond what a school can provide. In addition, the students' peers at these institutions also share similar enthusiasms and interests, thus providing further stimulation of ideas and the additional understanding that comes from working in the same field. Just as importantly, in taking the IB CP the students will spend more time on their specialised area, leading them further down the pathway to expertise. It must be noted that this is not just because of the time spent, but also because the external courses take the students to the next level in their development by providing optimal challenge.



The evidence of the effectiveness of this approach has been seen with our graduates achieving places at universities and colleges that would have been much harder to achieve by studying only 240 hours of art that the broader educational pathway of the DP provides. SCAD has been our longest partner of five years now, and our students' work has won prizes in competitions with SCAD's First Year students, and even featured in the SCAD President's exhibition in Savannah. Additionally, when we partnered with HKAPA, what convinced me that a joint programme would work was meeting current students that had completed their secondary education, but were now studying performing arts, as their chosen further educational pathways had not taken them in the direction that was their true vocation.

ESF is currently looking to expand its portfolio of joint specialised programmes into many different areas such as computer programming and hospitality. These joint programmes were never meant to be exclusive, as a community approach enables more specialised programmes to be supported. The reason for this approach is that it is not viable for a school to offer classes for just one or two students, but across a number of different schools this multiplies into a viable programme. 



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The English Schools Foundation (ESF) is the largest provider of English-medium international education in Hong Kong. Its 22 schools and comprehensive programme of extra-curricular activities bring out the best in every student through a personalised approach to learning and by inspiring curious minds. There are 17,770 students from more than 60 different nationalities in ESF schools, PIS and kindergartens.

