

## Education's Frustrations: Polytechnics vs JCs

*With the changing views of Singaporeans, especially the younger generation, will the age-old question, "Is JC better than Poly?" ever be answered?*

By Chow Zi Hui Zoey

Most teenagers have a list of answers memorized for the frequently asked questions (FAQs) at family gatherings. The questions span from, "Have you gained weight?" to "Are you dating?" One of the most common questions asked is, "How's school?"

I recently attended a family dinner but instead of my aunts and uncles enjoying the grilled chicken on the table, I was grilled instead.

"Poly is easier, but JC is better for you."

They were questioning if polytechnic education was really the right choice for me, believing that the Junior College (JC) route is actually better although it might be harder. They had brought up how going to JC would make it easier for me to get into university and to find a good job in the future.

The way they questioned my choice to go to a polytechnic made me feel like I had made the biggest mistake in the world by choosing to follow my passion to be a journalist. I felt like my struggles as polytechnic student were dismissed just because they felt that the traditional JC way of studying is much more difficult.

The 'dinner debate' lasted for a while and I was quite amused, sometimes insulted, by the points being brought up. Although some points were valid, I wondered why exactly my aunts and uncles were so against the polytechnic system of studying when so many teens now are pining to get a polytechnic education. I still believe that polytechnic education is in no way worse or easier than JC. JCs and polytechnics have their own pros and cons, which cannot be compared.

I realized that it was just part of human nature to compare people and things. However, people usually compare things based on tangible goals. For example, in this case, if it makes it easier for you to earn money or a degree, it's a better option. People hardly look at intangible goals, like if what you're doing will make you happy. It can be said the older generation do focus more on tangible goals, for example, the 5Cs, while the younger generation would be more focused on the intangible like self-satisfaction with their work.

In July 2018, the Education Minister Ong Ye Kung indicated the possibility that the university entry criteria grading for polytechnic students may stop looking at 'O' level scores combined with GPA. This is to ensure that teens are not too stressed by the fact that their future is being built on memorizing textbook answers.

Additionally, polytechnic courses are expected to decrease by 20% over the next two to three years. To put it simply, the ministry wants courses to cover more material rather than

cover material in depth. Polytechnics also have a Polytechnic Foundation Programme (PFP) for 'N' level students who are unsure of what exactly it is they want to pursue in polytechnic.

On the other hand, JCs have been merging together, and MOE is planning to close 4 JCs by 2019. This closure and merger of JCs has not only led to drama within the schools, but also to people questioning the relevance of JCs with the rise of programmes like PFP, which provide an alternate route for those wanting to pursue higher education.

I don't think that JC is better or easier than poly, I also strongly disagree that JC gives you a higher chance to enter a university or to get a higher paying job. I think it's quite dependent on what kind of education you're suited for and if you have any passions you want to pursue. Polytechnics and JC have their own pros and cons but writing polytechnics off as the inferior option is quite insulting.

Although it is true that a lower percentage of polytechnic students enter local universities, with one in three local university students admitted in 2015 being a polytechnic graduate, the 2015 intake at the six local universities had the highest ever proportion of polytechnic graduates at nearly 34%.

The aim of polytechnics is to prepare students for the working world, but some polytechnics still provide the option for their students to go to an overseas university to complete their degrees faster. For example, a media student from Singapore Polytechnic can go to an Australian university to complete their degree in two years instead of three.

Polytechnic education is good for those who have a clear passion they want to pursue. The polytechnic education system also strongly believes in hands on experience and provides students tons of opportunities they can put into their portfolios. Saying that polytechnic education is easier isn't fair because of "hell week" or "hell month", which usually full of back to back deadlines and tests to cope with. Us polytechnic students also learn useful soft skills like preparing for presentations and dealing with terrible team mates. However, according to NUS Economics lecturer Dr Kelvin Seah, the end result is a diploma and good portfolio which many employers or universities are likely to choose over just an 'A' level certificate.

On the other hand, JC education is like an extension of secondary school. It's waking up at early to head to morning assembly then to lessons, to consultations with your teachers, CAA, then going home to mug and 'chiong' work. The cycle repeats.

JCs provide a fast road to university and although the chances of getting into a university is higher, if your 'A' level results are bad, that leaves you with nothing else but a piece of paper. However, having been through an extra two years of studying by the books and writing essays might be beneficial in university. Dr Kelvin Seah also said that the belief that JCs are more elite is still common amongst parents as a stereotype has developed over the years.

This stereotype would explain why the older generation, AKA my aunts and uncles, think badly about polytechnic education. Honestly, there is no fight here; it's up to the students to pick what they want to do. The polytechnic and JC systems are very different in terms of different environments and learning styles. Something parents always say to us when we're sick or buying clothes is, "You know yourself best." I feel like this sentiment should carry over to teens choosing their future.

Teenagers should never feel like their decisions are invalid. They should do what interests them and makes them happy. Education is very important but if you're not interested in whatever you're studying then there's no point, it'll be like a chore. To adults dealing with these angsty teenagers, I do hope that they support the kids around them. It's good to guide them sometimes but dissuading them by belittling or casting their opinions aside is not the way to go about it.

In the end, teenagers need to pave their own road, and no road is without speed bumps.

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