



Soft Skills, Hard Results

The Chatteris Educational Foundation is offering life-wide learning opportunities to allow less privileged students in Hong Kong to overcome the equality gap.

– By George Tarling

Who would you prefer to hire, a candidate with strong technical skills but lacking that certain spark or a less skilled applicant who demonstrated their confidence, creativity, and ability to communicate? Of course, in an ideal world, you would not have to choose between the two. However, a greater emphasis on “soft” skills in modern society requires a similar shift in the way we should approach education and the opportunities offered to young learners.

In Hong Kong, students from privileged backgrounds are 3.7 times more likely to attend university than their less privileged peers. Nearly half of all students are prevented from attending university due to English examination results alone. But, on top of this, a recent study by professors at the Education University of Hong Kong demonstrates how underdeveloped “soft currencies”, including personality, character, and social confidence, contribute to Hong Kong’s worryingly high levels of economic inequality. It describes how the acquisition of these soft currencies requires access to learning opportunities outside of the classroom such as extracurricular activities, professional experiences, and cultural exchange – access that children from low-earning families are unlikely to secure. The growing importance of soft skills to an industry can also be seen in LinkedIn’s 2018 Workforce Report and Deloitte’s Access Economics Report, which state that soft skill-

intensive occupations will account for two-thirds of all jobs by 2030.

As a charity, the Chatteris Educational Foundation’s mission since 1990 has been to raise the English proficiency and self-confidence of all Hong Kong’s young people, but with a specific focus on the less privileged students described above. To achieve this we place 100 international graduates every year in local schools to deliver creative English-based activities both inside and outside the classroom, and we work with a large number of schools that cater for students from challenging economic backgrounds. Many of these schools will be lucky if even one student manages to run the gauntlet of Hong Kong’s public exams and attains the grades to enter university, and we are proud of the specialised support we offer to schools in this situation.

While in school, our tutors lead interactive lessons and fun extracurriculars that assist with students’ fluency, pronunciation, and ability to converse in English. However, as time has passed, we have increasingly recognised the need to place greater emphasis on developing these students’ soft skills, as well as the benefits of doing so. Aside from the study mentioned above, we have first-hand experience with students who struggle to demonstrate their creativity,

confidence, or communication skills as well as any motivation to engage with the English language.

Our response has been Chatteris Inspire. Alongside our tutors' daily activities delivered in their placement school, we have developed a programme of experiential learning opportunities that engages volunteers from the wider Hong Kong professional community to inspire, educate, and motivate our student beneficiaries, and take an active role in developing the next generation.

The Inspire activities are delivered in a number of different formats; we have organised guest talks in schools, office visits that take students to company headquarters, summer camps taking place all over Hong Kong, and many more. The key merit connecting all of these collaborations is the bond it creates between the external volunteer and the students. Although intimidating, conversing in English with these role models provides an essential opportunity to build students' confidence with the language. It also sparks their motivation to use it. We have seen students who would normally be unwilling to use English eagerly asking questions and engaging with the Inspire mentors as they are so interested in learning more about their background and history.

Moreover, we work with mentors in Chatteris Inspire to help pass on the soft skills they have learned in their own career to the students. Every session is engaging and concludes with an activity that focuses on developing a specific life skill. For example, we work with Dr. Ying Ying Liu to deliver Inspire guest talks in schools. Dr. Liu is the founder of LumiVoce, an NGO dedicated to educating Hong Kong students on sustainability, biodiversity, and environmentalism. We collaborated closely with her to plan her session, bringing in a final activity that tested the students' confidence, public speaking, and communication skills as they presented in front of their classmates, trying to convince them on different ways they could lessen their environmental impact.



Another great example of Chatteris Inspire is the office programme we delivered in collaboration with Macquarie Bank. Thanks to the commitment and passion of representatives from Macquarie, we delivered four separate sessions to a group of less privileged students in the bank's headquarters. During this time, we were able to focus on developing the students' creativity, as they each came up with their own business plan, their pitching skills, and also ran an interview skills workshop before hosting a mock recruitment activity. A lot of the students we work with have never even visited an office environment in an area such as Central, let alone believe that one day they could work there, and these programmes aim to give such students motivation that they are capable of finding careers in such institutions no matter what their background.

Overall, we are humbled by how the Hong Kong community has supported the growth of Chatteris Inspire and extremely grateful to everyone who has contributed to it so far. We would also welcome the support of any business or individual who could spare an hour of their time to act an inspiration for students on the other side of the economic divide, and look forward to ensuring that when our partner students go for their first job interviews they are more than prepared to demonstrate both their hard and soft skills. 



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The Chatteris Educational Foundation is a registered non-profit charity established in 1990 that impacts over 70,000 students in 45 schools across Hong Kong. Every year we place 100 graduates from across the world to establish an authentic English-speaking environment in their school, which helps students to view English as a living language rather than just an academic subject. www.chatteris.org.hk

