

Episode 1: Julian's school life in England (1)

- Kitty:** Hi, Julian. How are you?
- Julian:** Hi, Kitty. I'm well. How about you?
- Kitty:** I'm fine, thanks. I hear you've just finished your secondary school in England and got very high scores in your exams. Congratulations!
- Julian:** Thanks!
- Kitty:** I'm very interested in your learning journey, because you used to study in Hong Kong, but went to England when you were a fourth form student. Were you a **straight-A student** in HK?
- Julian:** Well, **quite the opposite** actually. Before I went to the UK, my school life in HK was **quite a bit of** a mess.
- Kitty:** Oh, **really!**
- Julian:** Because I felt I was forced to study some "compulsory subjects" that I thought were completely useless, difficult and unrealistic.
- Kitty:** I see. What made you feel that way?
- Julian:** For example, in Chinese Literature, we had to guess what ancient Chinese writers said.
- Kitty:** **Right.**
- Julian:** **I mean** why we had to learn some **obsolete** languages.
- Kitty:** **So**, you felt you were unrealistic, **didn't you?**
- Julian:** Yeah, exactly. Another one is Liberal Studies. Again, we had to guess why our society was like the way it was. **Yet**, there are so many issues in our society, and even adults don't know why, but the exams require a teenage student like myself to comment on what is going on and make them feel like they're right with their comments. If we knew the answer, we would be gods and wouldn't be sitting around here anymore.
- Kitty:** **I see where you're coming from.** Justifying the society at your young age is a bit **over your head.**
- Julian:** **Well, anyway**, they were all very **subjective** and **abstract**, which I, as a science person, basically couldn't **comprehend**. **Plus**, there were so much homework and many assignments that **I hadn't got a clue** about how to complete them. I spent **hour after hour** every day to get them done purely for trying not to get any **detention**. **Still**, I got a lot of them. So, I wasn't doing well. They totally **ruined** my mood and enthusiasm to study other subjects as well. **In the end** all my effort **went down the pan** and my overall grade for all subjects was a **washout**.
- Kitty:** Oh, I'm sorry to hear you **went through** such a **rough patch**. You and your parents must've suffered quite a lot at that time. So, what did you feel when you

knew you could study aboard?

Julian: I was completely **thrilled** and felt very fortunate, coz (=because) I could finally **get away from** those stupid subjects. **At first** I was hoping when I began my study in the UK, I would be able to meet new faces from **the four corners of the world**, travel around the U.K., and have a new exciting environment where I could have a fresh start again.

Kitty: That sounds like you **set your mind to** studying in the U.K. without hesitation, didn't you?

Julian: **Well, not really.** I was **on the other hand** a bit sad coz (=because) I would have to **leave** my friends **behind** in Hong Kong, feeling like our friendship was going to end forever at that time, as we would **part ways**. I think all of us face the same problem when leaving our friends. **So**, in order to **keep in touch with them**, we must remain socially active even after we go. Sharing stuff like photos and selfie with them in social media, or contacting them online from time to time.

Kitty: Oh, you certainly have **an old head on young shoulders**. You know how to **get to grips with** problems. Apart from mentally preparing for studying aboard, what kinds of personal belongings did you prepare before leaving for England?

Julian: England is quite cold and dry in the winter. **So**, I prepared some winter clothing, moisture cream, gloves **and whatnot**. Things are more expensive in the U.K. especially electronics, so I brought my own laptop, USB, lamp, headphones as well as some stationeries and snacks.

Kitty: Amongst those things, is there anything you would particularly suggest to other students that they should take with them?

Julian: **You know**, England is famous for their rainy weather, so I think you should bring some hiking trousers and boots for rough, muddy **terrain** because your school might arrange **field trips** and take you to the countryside. You could also bring a fan with you because they don't have air-conditioning.

Kitty: **OK.** I know you stayed in a boarding school. **Right?** Did you have enough space to keep the things you took?

Julian: Yeah, I had my own room and it was about 100 sq. feet., which was quite **spacious**. **But**, still don't bring too much stuff coz you have to change room every year.

Kitty: I see. **A** very good **piece of advice** to us. Amongst those things you took, which ones did you find useful?

Julian: To me, "water filter" is essential because in England they use "hard water" instead of "soft water". **Equally**, the hiking boots and trousers and the laptop are absolute **necessities**.

Kitty: Was there anything which you took was not used?

Julian: Yeah. There was only one thing that I didn't use because the school didn't allow me to use it.

- Kitty:** Oh, what was that?
- Julian:** It was the fan heater.
- Kitty:** Why? I mean why did they disallow it?
- Julian:** They claimed it was too dangerous to use it inside my room as it could cause fire.
- Kitty:** **But, I mean** England was quite cold in winter. Do they have central heating?
- Julian:** Yeah, but the central heating system was only on during the night before bed. **So**, it was **a tad cold** in my room after class in the daytime.
- Kitty:** You've shared quite a lot of things about your preparation for going to the U.K. **Now**, would you mind telling me what school year you started in the U.K. and how long have you been there?
- Julian:** **Well**, after I finished the fourth form of secondary school in Hong Kong, I went there in 2017 to start as a fifth former which they call it year eleven. I stayed at the same boarding school for three years till I finished my A-level this year.
- Kitty:** Was there any entry test when applying to your school?
- Julian:** Yes. I took an entry test arranged by my school. And the test was **based on** the standards of **IGCSE** exam. (the International General Certificate of Secondary Education)
- Kitty:** I know IGCSE exam is taken by international students when they finish the fifth form, or year eleven. **So**, do you mean the entry test simulates IGCSE exam and is used to assess students when they enrol on the fifth form and other forms as well?
- Julian:** **Right**. It's for assessing those who want to get into the fourth, fifth or sixth form. **Basically**, the entry tests of different schools are very similar as they're all based on the IGCSE exam.
- Kitty:** Are international students asked to answer the same questions in the entry test even though they are applying for different years of the school?
- Julian:** Yeah. The school will decide whether your scores are good enough to enter the form you apply for.
- Kitty:** **So**, the result of the entry test is very important then.
- Julian:** **Exactly. Plus**, it decides what subjects you can study in school. So, I'd suggest doing more IGCSE past papers in order to get good scores in the entry test.
- Kitty:** **Right**. What other issues would you suggest to other students?
- Julian:** Well, as I've said, IGCSE must be taken when you finish the fifth form. Although it **overlaps** with the A-Level materials, the content of IGCSE is of lesser depth than A-Level. **So**, I'd say the IGCSE exams are **way too easy**. If you're like me who has finished the fourth year in HK or China and has got a high score in the entry test, you could actually choose to skip one year and start from the sixth form instead of doing the fifth form.

Kitty: **So**, do you mean in your case, you could've skipped one year and finished your A-Level in two years instead of spending three years there?

Julian: Yeah, I think so.

You can **get the most out of it** if you simply start from the sixth form straight away.

Kitty: **Right. But** I wondered why your agent hadn't advised you about this.

Julian: **Well, you know**, most agencies usually tell you to do the traditional way as in my case.

Kitty: **True.** Why **rock the boat**?! Any more tips for us?

Julian: **Well**, I think you could always change school **later on** in the U.K. After studying for some time, you'll know more about other UK academic choices. Getting A-level is just one of the options.

Kitty: I believe your advice certainly gives us **food for thought**.
