

# The new norm of learning in Hong Kong today



Shrewsbury International School

By Olga Schiffers & Anne Murphy

A collaboration between Santa Fe Relocation & ITS Education Asia (ITS)

## How virtual education is shaping academic learning for the 2019/20 academic year

With schools closed in Hong Kong until further notice in response to the spread of COVID-19, Olga Schiffers, Education Specialist, Santa Fe Relocation has collaborated with Anne Murphy, Director, Educational Services, to understand the varying degrees of ongoing support and guidance from schools and how parents and students are coping.

Extending school closure was a very difficult decision for the Education Bureau (EDB). But ultimately this is the safest decision to ensure students' health during the virus outbreak. About 900,000 kindergartens, primary, and secondary students steeped in Hong Kong's hyper-competitive, education-focused culture have been out of school since February 3, 2020.

Parents, teachers, Principals and students have adapted to new technology with classes being

conducted through Google, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Jamboard for Mathematics lessons. So how are they all dealing with the virtual learning spaces and what does home schooling look like in Hong Kong?

### THE PARENTS' VIEW

Lisa Gullstrand and her family relocated from Switzerland in December 2019. Her children started Discovery College International School in January

2020. "At first I felt frustrated and uncertain. I couldn't understand this drastic decision and was worried about my children not being able to go to school both from an academic and social point of view". Mrs Gullstrand was delighted with the prompt reaction from the school, but she admits that the online classes differ for her son and daughter.

"For my daughter, Inez in Year 8, it has worked quite well. Her online lessons follow the regular schedule and there is lots of online interaction with her teachers and classmates."

However, it's been challenging for her son who is in Year 5. "But technology skills have improved", she adds: "Our children have learned how to navigate online learning tools and are also more self-disciplined."



Mrs Gullstrand and Henning

During the school closures, parents are suddenly faced with the challenge of keeping their children occupied.

Parents are conscious of their kids having outdoor time every day to boost their wellbeing.

Monika Carruthers, whose two children attend Discovery Bay International School, has been helping them with their daily online classes since the schools closed. "They are coping very well with their new schedules and online learning; the school has been very supportive". Mrs Carruthers explains that regular hikes have become a big part of their lives. "We have explored many hiking trails around Hong Kong; it has been great for them emotionally and physically. I am proud of the steep hills they have climbed."



Carruthers family

### THE STUDENTS' THOUGHTS ON ONLINE CLASSES

Mr & Mrs Schwartz, parents of Upper Primary and Middle School HKIS students, are quite concerned about keeping their kids active during the school closures. They are ensuring their children get outside daily for a walk, run, or even just a game of catch.

"It's week 10 of distance learning and while we continue to accept our circumstance for the betterment of the community as a whole, it's challenging but necessary to remain positive and upbeat for our family and the future."

That said, the Schwartz family find that online learning in the middle school is a long day and it's necessary for one parent to guide the younger child in primary through his daily schoolwork.



HKIS G5 student

Their son who is in Grade 5 says: "I was kind of happy to stay home, but now I really want to go back, it's not as much fun as being at school. I don't like that I can't be with my classmates and teachers."

His sister in Middle school, also a student at HKIS, has faced some challenges.

"It was hard to understand certain instructions at the beginning which our teachers gave us, sometimes I was missing some things out. I really miss my friends and teachers, but in particular, the social aspect of learning. I can get quite distracted at home; I will be doing math for instance and get a text from a friend and then I easily get preoccupied on the message".



HKIS G8 student

"As the closure of schools continues parents and schools, teachers and students will continue to embrace the situation to bring new opportunities to ways of learnings", says Olga Schiffrers at **Santa Fe Relocation**.

## VIRTUAL CLASSES

This is an extraordinary time to be a teacher or school principal. Teaching and learning virtually have been an insightful journey. Schools have been trying their absolute best to accommodate students and reinvent their classes.



Mr Ben Gonzalez, secondary school mathematics teacher

At the **Hong Kong Academy**, the teachers and support staff have been working to maintain a sense of normalcy, with teachers across the school delivering a robust online curriculum and assessing student progress and growth in a virtual environment. Primary School has initiated a specialist subject day each week, encouraging students to go screen-free and create offline. Secondary School introduced Booster Breaks which provide time each day for students to tune in to how they are feeling and engage in an activity which gives them a physical, mental or emotional boost, enabling them to recharge and stay motivated.

Stephen Dare, Head of School at Hong Kong Academy explains how teachers' morale is boosted during the school closures. "Our whole leadership team is incredibly proud of our teachers and support staff who have been adaptive and created an inspiring, welcoming and secure virtual environment for our whole community. For them to do this successfully, we have provided both technical and professional tools as well as focussed on nurturing their wellbeing."

At **ITS Education Asia**, "Online school has always been very popular for IGCSE and International A-Level students from many parts of the world", says, Danny Harrington, Founder. The ITS online school has a range of choices from live classes to video, app-based and blended-learning options. ITS has been able to seamlessly deliver both its tutorial support lessons for key curricula such as DSE, IB, SAT and the UK exams and has seen an increased demand for its full-time learning options for the IGCSE and IAL.



Mike Li, Director of US Admissions, ITS Education Asia

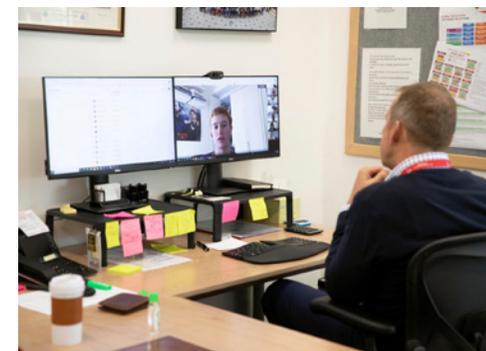
To learn more about the online courses, visit:

[www.itseducation.asia/online/](http://www.itseducation.asia/online/)

At **Kellett School, The British International School in Hong Kong** live check-ins have been rolled out to all classes across the school. Senior students are following a condensed version of their usual timetable of subjects, which allows for time in the afternoons for sporting activities, extra-curricular activities and time away from their screens. At Prep level students have work set for each lesson they might usually be in.

In Senior School there is a lot of live learning, particularly for those studying GCSEs and A-Levels, whereas in Prep the live sessions tend to be more focussed on pastoral issues and guided interaction with peers. Senior Students all have a daily check-in with their tutorial groups online in addition to their regular timetable.

Mark Steed, Principal & CEO commented, "After the school suspension during the peak of the protests last year we conducted a review of home learning and implemented some staff training which proved invaluable during the current suspension. Our teachers are using a wide range of technologies, their teaching expertise and phenomenal creativity to ensure no learning is lost during this period".



Principal, Mark Steed meeting an Oxbridge Student

At **Shrewsbury International School**, the period of extended suspension has inspired creativity, innovation, and camaraderie. The timetabled online learning programme offers the breadth of experience and great variety with a live broadcast, individual pastoral appointments and collaborative work sessions all leading to greater student connection.



Year 2 Shrewsbury International School Student

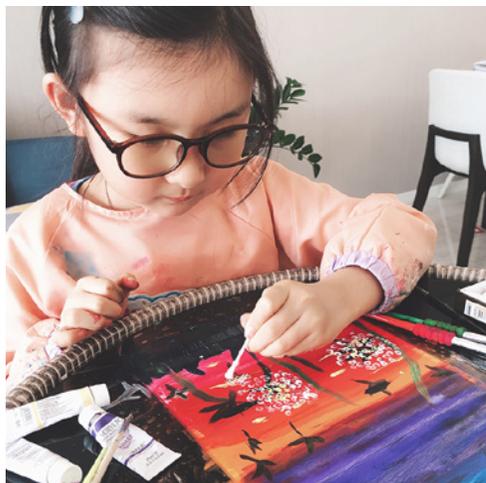
"Collaboration has been a critical factor in the successes experienced and we remain tirelessly driven in our effort to develop the experiences of students, mindful of the ever increasing pressure on families," shared Principal, Mr Keeling.

Themed weeks have provided additional structure and an online Recital Evening provided a key performance opportunity. Creative solution and a continued willingness to experiment and explore seem to be the driving force behind a service that grows in strength and vibrancy day by day.

"We are all learners," Mr Keeling concluded, "critical reflection, when combined with hope, aspiration and fearless endeavour, can be transformational."

At **Stamford American School Hong Kong** online learning follows the daily schedule of a regular school day as much as possible. They continue to deliver the curriculum, including specialist subjects, virtually, on Google Classroom or SeeSaw, or both, depending on the grade. Elementary students begin their day with a whole-class live check-in with their homeroom teacher, who will discuss the day's expectations, and upload assignments and activities. Students connect live for small group work in reading and math, as well as an afternoon check-in with their homeroom teacher.

In secondary, students access a "clickable schedule" which links to their online classroom and their teacher is available at normally scheduled class times. Teachers use live conferencing to take attendance, go over expectations and conduct the lesson. Classes are a mix of live demonstrations, presentations and referring to pre-recorded video content.



Ary, Grade 2, SAISHK

Ary, in Grade 2, says: "I didn't know how to do all of these things before. The first time I was on Meet with my class, I was struggling to find the link but Ms Cherry made some helpful videos to show us how to do it. It's fun, but I still don't get to see my friends in real life, just in our special Snack Chat time."

"The efforts by teachers have not gone unnoticed and amid all this chaos, we must truly applaud all schools for their continuous efforts", says, Anne Murphy

David Simpson from **Team Building Asia** emphasises the importance of reigniting teachers' morale during this very challenging teaching period.

"In unity there is strength, it's good for teachers to do as much as they can together and this can be done by setting up a teacher's bucket list, or they could create virtual artwork together, do a dance battle or meditate together but most importantly be positive and encourage positivity."

Overall, the transition to e-learning has been quite impressive and schools are working to continue more collaborative interactions between teachers and students as online instruction is continuously being adopted.

### IMPLICATIONS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES

While teachers and principals have attempted to deliver informative and motivating online classes, the reality is that the closure of schools has become challenging. The recent cancellation of all IB, A-Level and GCSE exams are now surrounded by exam grade uncertainty.

"As international exams get cancelled, students may well be reacting with glee that they will get a grade without having to do the exam. Parents would be well advised to sit them down and help them understand that in the long term they are being disadvantaged. For a start, confidence in the non-examined grades is going to be weak. Secondly, without the final dash to exams, students miss out on a crucial phase in the learning they would usually do within the system and which prepares them for the next step. So right now, an IGCSE student is being underprepared for starting A-Level or IB next year", says Danny Harrington.

"This is a challenging and uncertain time not only for families already living through this situation but for those who plan to relocate to Hong Kong this year. As well as delivering our school search service to relocating families, my role has been more crucial than ever in guiding and updating them on the evolving situation. Reassuring these families on all the positive aspects Hong Kong schools have to offer. Within this uncertainty, we aim to ensure a successful outcome for both parents and their children's social, emotional and physical well-being", says Olga Schiffers.



### About Santa Fe Relocation

Santa Fe Relocation is a Global Mobility company specializing in managing and delivering high-quality relocation services worldwide. We cover the entire relocation journey, from moving, destination services, home and school searches, immigration, through to full assignment management solutions.

For further information: [www.santaferelo.com](http://www.santaferelo.com)

**Olga Schiffers**

Education Specialist



### About ITS Education Asia (ITS)

ITS provide a variety of learning and education planning opportunities through its Hong Kong schools and virtual school online.

We provide independent education planning services from kindergarten to university. We listen to your needs and advise honestly and impartially as to the correct and most beneficial academic pathway.

For further information: [www.itseducation.asia/](http://www.itseducation.asia/)

**Anne Murphy**

Director, Educational Services

