

Editorial

How to promote holistic development in university students?

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In the global context, there is the challenge of how we can help university students to develop in a holistic manner. With particular reference to Hong Kong, there is also a rising concern about whether university students in Hong Kong develop in a healthy and holistic manner. In particular, the public has raised the question of whether universities help students to acquire psychosocial competences. These concerns emerge because there are many incidents suggesting that university students in Hong Kong lack psychosocial competencies. One striking example reflecting the lack of nurturance of psychosocial competencies in university students can be seen in a local case reported by the media in early 2011 (1). The case was about a university graduate who had obtained an undergraduate degree and a postgraduate degree in statistics and who had performed well in public and internal examinations. Despite his academic success (only 18% of young people in the relevant cohort are admitted to government-funded tertiary institutions in Hong Kong), he failed to get a job after attending more than 200 job interviews. Eventually, he applied for Comprehensive Social Security Allowance provided by the government and lived on welfare. When he was interviewed by the media, he stated that he might lack social competence but claimed that such knowledge “was not taught in the formal curriculum in the school settings”. While this may be an isolated case, the public has raised one question: to what extent universities are able to nurture university students in a holistic manner so that they can live and work well in early adulthood?

Ironically, even university students are not satisfied with university students. For example, in a “Big Character Poster” recently posted by the students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, “seven deadly sins” in university students were mentioned. Among them, six sins were related to the virtues or moral standards of university students. The first sin was “non-attendance in lectures but asking classmates to sign attendance”. Actually, an informal survey among teachers shows that this is a prevalent student problem. Obviously, it involves dishonesty and may constitute a criminal offence (i.e., forgery) in the legal context. The second sin was “submission of poor-quality assignment – copying from others’ work and late submission of work”. This problem is a serious one because university students are commonly regarded as “learned people” or “intellectuals” in the Chinese culture. The third sin was “premarital sex – having sex while the roommate sleeps”. This problem has been regarded as an adolescent developmental issue in Hong Kong (2). The fourth sin was “cheating”, which again signifies dishonesty and challenges the notion that university students

are intellectuals. The fifth sin was “compensated dating”, which means having sexual or non-sexual relationships with those who pay for the relationship. The sixth sin was “chasing materialistic life”, which is simply a reflection of the situation in Hong Kong. Shek et al. (2) also highlighted this as a common adolescent developmental problem in Hong Kong. The final sin was “inappropriate use of the Wall of Democracy”, which was set up for students to express their views.

It is noteworthy that the above observations may not give a fair and balanced picture about university students in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, research findings revealed that there are developmental phenomena among university students in Hong Kong deserving our attention: stress and anxiety problems are common among university students; political apathy and instrumental mentality are worrying attributes of university students; employers were not satisfied with university graduates (3). Of course, the above problems are not unique to university students in Hong Kong. There are also research findings showing that there are developmental issues in college students in the West: there was a drop in empathy in college students; narcissism levels in university students in the USA have gradually increased over the past 25 years; plagiarism and academic dishonesty are also growing problems in college students (4–8). In addition, mental health problems, such as alcoholism and substance abuse are prevalent in university students. As remarked by Mowbray et al. (9), “averaging across a number of studies, it appears that approximately 12%–18% of students on college campuses have a diagnosable mental disorder” (p. 227).

Having reviewed the aforementioned worrying phenomena in university students, two issues should be addressed. First, we need to have a better understanding of the needs and developmental issues of university students. A survey of the literature shows that the needs of university students are frequently studied in the West. For example, in the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), spirituality in college students is examined in a longitudinal study (10). In contrast to the abundant research in the West, comparatively fewer studies have been carried out in different Chinese contexts. Hence, if we wish to help university students develop in a holistic manner, we have to understand their needs and behavior in the first place. The basic argument is that inaccurate assessment will lead to inaccurate intervention.

The second issue that should be examined is how holistic development, particularly intra- and interpersonal competence, could be promoted among university students in Hong Kong and in other parts of the world. In the literature on positive youth development, there are many theories and models asserting that the development of psychosocial competencies in young people

is important, which include self-awareness, social awareness, intrapersonal competence (e.g., self-understanding and self-management), and interpersonal competence. While there are different ways of nurturing psychosocial competencies in university students, there are views suggesting that the development of credit-bearing courses incorporating elements of positive youth development would be a promising strategy (11). This proposal is based on the observation that adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs are effective in promoting adolescent development (12–19). This proposed strategy is also in line with the spirit of primary prevention (i.e., no student is left behind). Of course, from an evidence-based practice perspective, there is a need to understand the effectiveness of the developed courses in the university settings.

Against this background, we are pleased to edit this special issue on the holistic development of university students. With reference to the two issues mentioned above, papers examining the needs of university students are included in this special issue. Moreover, several papers pertinent to the development and effectiveness of a course on leadership and intrapersonal development developed at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University are included. Under the new undergraduate curriculum structure at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, a subject entitled “Tomorrow’s Leaders” is developed to satisfy the General University Requirement in the area of “Leadership and Intrapersonal Development”. This course is strongly supported by the Chairpersons and/or ex-Chairpersons of Elderly Commission, Commission on Youth, Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education and Action Committee against Narcotics, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, P.R. China in their own personal capacities, thus reflecting the importance of this course from the personal perspective of the leading people in the field of youth development. We earnestly hope that, through this special issue, more attention will be given to the developmental problems of university students and ways to promote holistic development of university students in the context of higher education.

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