

# Perceptions of teachers of the new general education curriculum in Hong Kong: A focus group study

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## Abstract

Through focus group interview, this study explored teachers' perceptions and experiences of the general university requirements (GUR) in the new four-year undergraduate degree program of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in Hong Kong. A total of 52 colleagues involved in teaching and coordination work participated in focus group interviews. Eight focus group sessions were formed to understand the views of teachers on the eight GUR curriculum components. Results showed that teachers generally had positive views of subject content as well as student learning and engagement. Teachers also demonstrated deeper understanding of teaching with active involvement. Teachers also had gained multidisciplinary working experience through teaching GUR subjects. Teachers perceived their subjects and related teaching as beneficial to students' all-round development, particularly in communication, critical thinking, confidence and self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Focus group, general education, Hong Kong, teacher perception, undergraduate education

## Introduction

Teachers play a vital role in educational activities. Some scholars (1) depicted teachers as "change agents" of curriculum reforms. Gaff (2) argued that even the well-designed curriculum could not ensure student learning if there were no effective teachers. Empirical studies consistently suggested that teachers' attitudes and beliefs had significant influence on curriculum implementation. For example, teachers' positive attitudes towards curriculum content could facilitate curriculum implementation, and their beliefs about teaching could influence their teaching practices as well as student learning, motivation and achievement (3-5). In addition, actual implementation of education reforms and effects of such reforms depend heavily on teachers since different teachers may

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interpret new policies differently due to different beliefs and experiences, student characteristics and working contexts (6).

With regard to general education in higher education, the role of teachers is particularly critical. In reviewing general education status in American higher education and advocating further reforms, Gaff (7) proposed that in addition to curriculum content, the teachers as one critical element had to be considered. Particularly, Gaff (7) suggested that it was imperative to examine general education teachers' motivation, barriers to their teaching, and their strategies for successful implementation of general education curriculum. French (8) argued that the role of teachers was particularly important in general education than in specialized education since students' motivation was lower in general education than in specialized education. Hence, teachers' art of teaching, their understanding of student needs and adoption of teaching strategies would be very important for engaging students in general education learning process.

Although the significant role of teachers in general education was recognized, there were fewer empirical studies conducted in this area. Gaff (9) observed that "when the revival of interest in general education began, attention focused almost exclusively on content" and "little attention was given to the teacher and strategies for teaching." A review of existing literature found that teachers' experience and views were only mentioned in a marginalized place in many reports and studies on general education reforms. Even within this limited literature, there were inconsistent findings. For example, Tobolowsky, Cox and Wagner (10) examined faculty's perceptions of freshmen seminar in a university in the United States. The freshmen seminar was designed to foster freshmen transition to university life. The content included time management, study strategies, academic integrity, university understanding, and career planning, etc. The survey found that through teaching the seminar, the majority of teachers perceived that they were more enjoying and engaged in teaching, understood more about student needs, and met more their colleagues outside their own disciplines.

However, many other studies reported teachers' negative attitudes towards and experiences of general education courses and their frustrations in teaching

these courses. For example, a study (11) on undergraduate curriculum reform in a renowned Chinese university to promote general education showed reluctance of faculty in teaching general education subjects. Many faculty members perceived teaching general education subjects as challenging and time-consuming because they had less experience in teaching these subjects and the teaching was not helpful to their own research and promotion. Similarly, in many American universities, teaching staff of general education subjects was normally "borrowed" from specialized departments (12). Therefore, these staff had low loyalty to and little concern about general education subjects and was unaccustomed to teaching these subjects (2, 12).

Similar observation was also reported by some scholars on recent curriculum reform in higher education in Hong Kong that transferred its three-year to four-year curriculum and developed a significant component of general education in new curriculum. For example, Hoshmand (13) argued that some academic staff in universities in Hong Kong perceived teaching general education subjects as time-consuming and worthless since they were more research-oriented and their promotion depended more on their research achievements. Also, since many faculty members were educated under the previous three-year specialized structure of undergraduate education in Hong Kong, they might have less understanding of general education and its related teaching. For example, Hoshmand (13) argued:

"the faculty (in Hong Kong higher education) has not experienced General Education in their undergraduate studies and has difficulty stepping out of their comfort zone to offer the courses that integrate knowledge across the disciplines. They also have a wrong assumption about the nature of the General Education courses. Often they think that a GE course is similar to an introductory course in a discipline. This alone is a major barrier to change."

The above literature sheds light on how teachers perceive and experience general education. However, there are few empirical studies in this area. Also, although some studies explored teachers' positive or negative perceptions, they did not reveal why teachers had related perceptions and what factors contributed to their perceptions. Furthermore, there were fewer studies that explored teachers' perceptions and

experiences in general education in a comprehensive manner. Finally, no study has to date been conducted to understand the views of teachers to general education within the context of an education reform.

Against the above background, the present study examined teachers' perceptions and experiences of a new general education program, "General University Requirements" (GUR), in the new four-year undergraduate curriculum of Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) in Hong Kong. Since the 2012-2013 academic year, PolyU transformed its undergraduate degree program from three to four years. As an integrated part of the reform, the GUR was introduced as a significant general education component of the new four-year curriculum of PolyU. The GUR attempts to develop students in the five desired graduate attributes, including effective communication, critical thinking, innovative problem solving, lifelong learning, and ethical leadership. The GUR was formally implemented in the 2012-2013 academic year. It adopted a more active and interactive pedagogy. The curriculum had six major components, as introduced below.

- Freshman seminar (FS: 3 credits): A FS subject is offered by each faculty/school to all freshmen enrolled in the faculty/school. FS introduces freshmen to their disciplines and potential majors. It also develops students' entrepreneurship, higher-order thinking, and self-directed learning.
- Leadership and intrapersonal development (LIPD: 3 credits): Two subjects are offered in LIPD component. They are "Tango! Managing self and others" ("Tango!") for students in Faculty of Business, and "Tomorrow's leaders" (TL) for students in other faculties/schools. LIPD nurtures students' understanding of theories on inter- and intrapersonal qualities of leadership and develops their self-awareness and self-reflection skills.
- Language and communication requirements (LCR: 9 credits): LCR includes English LCR (6 credits) and Chinese LCR (3 credits). LCR attempts to cultivate students' language and communication proficiencies in both Chinese and English.
- Cluster area requirements (CAR: 12 credits): In CAR, each student is required to study at least four subjects, with each subject being selected from each of four cluster areas, namely "CAR A: Human nature, relations and development," "CAR B: Community, organization and globalization," "CAR C: History, culture and world views," and "CAR D: Science, technology and environment". Among the four subjects studied, three additional requirements should also be fulfilled. They are China studies requirements (CSR), English writing and reading requirements (EW/ER) and Chinese writing and reading requirements (CW/CR). CAR attempts to expand intellectual capacities of students beyond their majors and develop their written communication proficiencies in English and Chinese as well as understanding about China.
- Service learning (SL: 3 credits): Each student is required to take one SL subject with a significant service component. SL attempts to help students apply academic knowledge into practice, help them reflect on their roles as professionals and citizens, and develop their empathy for people in need.
- Healthy lifestyle (HLS: non-credit-bearing): In HLS, students need to complete four components of courses including introductory lecture, sports training/participation, e-learning, and wrap-up lecture. HLS attempts to help students to master important knowledge and skills contributing to healthy living and wellbeing.

In view of the important role of teachers in general education and the fact that there are few studies in this area, this study attempted to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences of the GUR subjects at PolyU. The study is meaningful not only for gaining knowledge of implementation of the GUR and its future improvement, but also for shedding light on teacher views of general education in the broad literature. The present study belongs to a comprehensive evaluation project of the GUR starting from the 2012-2013 academic year. Different evaluation components were implemented in the project,

including objective outcome evaluation, subjective outcome evaluation, and qualitative evaluation. In qualitative evaluation, teacher focus groups and student focus groups were conducted in each academic year. This study is based on the teacher focus groups conducted in the 2014-2015 academic year.

## Methods

Participants were 52 staff members who were involved in subject teaching or coordination in different components of the GUR curriculum in the 2014-2015 academic year. These staff members were recruited based on purposeful sampling through the nomination of program leaders or key teachers in different GUR components. These staff members participated in a focus group interview at the end of the second semester of the 2014-2015 academic year. Eight focus group sessions were conducted based on eight GUR curricular areas. These sessions included FS (n = 7), LIPD-TL (n = 8), LIPD-“Tango!” (n = 1), English LCR (n = 8), Chinese LCR (n = 8), CAR (n = 8), SL (n = 6), and HLS (n = 6). Since the subject “Tango!” only had two teaching staff, and one staff member was on leave during the focus group period, this session only had one participant. Each session was conducted by two experienced researchers. One served as the moderator and the other served as the observer. All the sessions lasted for one to two hours.

### *Focus group protocol*

A focus group protocol was developed by the authors to guide the focus group interview. It included a set of guideline questions aiming to explore teachers’ perceptions and experiences of the GUR subjects they taught. The key questions included:

- What is your understanding about the GUR and its significance to PolyU students?
- Please describe the changes you have witnessed from the students attending your GUR subject.
- Could you suggest any particular component(s) of your GUR subject that is associated with the positive/negative feedback from your students?
- How would you comment the support, communication channel, and collaboration from your counterpart? To promote the effectiveness, what kinds of support would you suggest?
- In your perspective, what are the major challenges in the implementation and goal-alignment of the GUR curriculum?
- What is your perception of the alignment of your component of GUR subject with PolyU desired graduate attributes, and with intended learning outcomes of your GUR component?

### *Data analysis*

All the focus group sessions were audiotaped and all audio files were fully transcribed into the texts. Method of framework analysis (14) in qualitative data analyses was adopted. Firstly, one researcher quickly read all the transcripts for twice to familiarize herself with the data and identify key ideas and important themes. The key ideas and major themes were then organized to form a thematic framework for further coding. Secondly, the researcher read all transcripts again to carefully code all data in detail under the thematic framework. During the coding process, the thematic framework was also revised based on the researcher’s enriched understanding of the data. Based on the coding, interpretations, and explanations about the data were formed.

## Results

Teachers generally developed a deep recognition and appreciation of the rationale underneath the design of different components of the GUR. For example, for the design of LCR component that offered different language subjects to students with different levels of language proficiencies, LCR teachers developed deep understanding and recognition of the rationale of the design. This can be illustrated by one ELCR teacher’s narratives below:

“One important difference is that ELC (English Language Center of PolyU which is responsible for offering the English LCR subjects) is now streaming students based on their DSE (The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education) results. I teach one of the high-level (ELCR) courses to students with the DSE English exam score above grade ‘five’. And I am totally impressed by their standard of English, sort of their native speakers’ standard. So, I’m not actually teaching them English in terms of grammar. I’m teaching them ‘persuasive communication’, which is the name of the course they haven’t done before. So I think it is good to let higher level students to get something specially designed for them, which they didn’t get in the old curriculum.”

In some components such as CAR where teachers might have more freedom in designing their subjects, some teachers explored how to design their subjects to cater for the learning needs of students from other disciplines. For example, a teacher teaching a subject in science area of CAR component expressed:

“The subject I taught is *Chemistry in Everyday Living*. In case students had weak mathematical and physics knowledge backgrounds, I taught my subject in a simpler way, mainly focusing on developing students’ appreciation of chemistry. ... The subject also had experimental classes. The students were very excited in these classes.”

Some teachers consciously arranged their subject teaching around “hot topics or themes in real world” or themes that had immediate concern to students’ life. Through this, the teachers intended to have students relate the knowledge they learned from the class closely with the outside world, as a teacher teaching a Chinese LCR subject expressed in the following way:

“For our Chinese LCR subjects, we base our teaching on some contexts that are related closely to the critical issues in current society. Some critical issues include issues related to Hong Kong medical insurance system and environmental protection. Based on these issues, we conduct some language training. In such a way, students would not only gain knowledge about Chinese language but also relate the knowledge to the real world.”

In some components, teachers developed a much richer understanding of the functions of their components than those set by the University. Teachers also wove their understanding into their subject design

and teaching. For example, according to the guideline of the University, the aim of the Chinese LCR component was to enhance students’ language proficiency in Chinese. However, the CLCR teachers understood the function of CLCR at a richer level. They perceived that Chinese subjects, if designed well, could not only foster students’ language and communication competence but also cultivate their ability of critical thinking and problem solving. These teachers implemented this understanding in the subject design and implementation of CLCR. This can be illustrated by two CLCR teachers’ narratives below:

“Actually our assessment methods are also diversified. We are not developing one approach of thinking but hope to have students to think issues from multiple perspectives. So we incorporate role play in assessment of our subjects. During the role play activity, students learn to deal with some problems. ... This would be helpful to students’ critical thinking and problem solving.”

“Many people may think the training of Chinese is not important in the university level. Actually, Chinese is most students’ first language. When these students are thinking, they are using Chinese. Hence, while the University set the goal of this component (CLCR) as language skill training, we think these subjects could achieve more outcomes, including communication, problem solving and critical thinking. ... Therefore, it seems that we are doing language training on the surface but in fact we are doing more. This is also the value of our subjects.”

Teachers’ narratives also indicated that for teachers in certain disciplines such as Chinese language, the GUR or general education served as an opportunity for them to reclaim the value and legitimacy of their disciplines in university community and in contemporary society.

### *Opportunities and challenges in teaching interdisciplinary subjects*

Although teachers generally had positive views about the rationale of GUR and its subject design, their views on Freshman seminar which incorporates knowledge from multiple disciplines and team-based teaching were diversified or even bi-polar.

For a few teachers, FS subject served as an opportunity for them to explore interdisciplinary teaching that they seldom experienced before. For example, in one faculty, in order to engage students who came from different disciplines of the faculty and develop students' interdisciplinary understanding, the staff members of the faculty designed the FS subject content to center on common issues in real world to solve which multidisciplinary knowledge should be utilized. The staff members also incorporated innovative teaching and learning methods in the subject. This was mentioned by one teacher as below:

“Sometimes it’s a bit hard to pick a topic that of interest to every student because we have four departments [in our faculty] and we have a lot of students with different natures. So that’s why we try to pick a theme on environmental protection that is an issue and challenge that students will face when they finish their study and work as professionals. So that’s why in the first lecture what I do is to give them a general message about what is the environmental problem we encounter in construction industry. And then we have another three lecturers from other departments to talk about different things.”

Another staff member who was involved in designing of the same FS subject in the same faculty talked about the incorporation of site visit as another important approach in the subject to engage students in interdisciplinary learning. He said:

“But the site visit is very good, right? Because like Disneyland, we can go there, and it can explain the construction from civil engineering and building management, and there are many hotels in the Disneyland, and then building services, LSGIS (land surveying and geoinformatics), and some sorts of very small parts. So by doing site visit, they...the students...even they come from different disciplines, understand what they will be and how they will be collaborating after graduation.”

However, for staff members from some other faculties, they designed and delivered the FS subjects in their faculties in a different approach that mainly invited teachers from each discipline to give introductory speeches on their respective disciplines. These staff members encountered a failure in the design and implementation. They observed lower engagement of students in their FS subjects because many students did not have much interest in

understanding knowledge of other disciplines and could not perceive the linkage between other disciplines and their own disciplines. Defeated by this effect, staff members from these faculties perceived that the University should fine-tune FS subject to make it more department-based rather than faculty-based.

### *Teaching promoting active learning and student engagement*

Teachers commonly viewed that students liked many active teaching and learning methods adopted in different GUR components, including group project, fieldtrip, and experiential learning. The reason perceived by teachers was that through these methods students learned more interactively and diversely. Students also gained “autonomy” and “initiative” in planning and directing their own learning. These all promoted students' motivation in learning. For example, two teachers shared in the focus group respectively:

“So I think, interview they (students) like it, site visit they like it. I think group project they like it. You know, they are interacting with a different group, and many times they are not from homogenous group. [This is] quite different. [Students come from disciplines of] business, technology, and designs. So they work together. ... I have to say [the learning is] more like a play, learning from a play.”

“(When the teacher was asked about whether students enjoyed the group work on interviewing successful people in different industries in the ‘Tango!’ subject) Yes, they do, because they are actually getting their full freedom, you know, of choosing their own topic, of choosing the person to interview, of choosing the business they interview. So we suggest them that for example if you study logistics and maritime, maybe [it] would be good to interview someone from this area, from this business you want to enter anyways. You know, if you want to be this person, we might want to know what it takes to take this position. And so I think some of them put this assignment through seriously, then they benefit a lot from that.”

Some other teachers teaching SL subjects observed their students' attitude change from “not enjoyed” to “enjoyed” in studying SL subjects. They

thought that SL subjects made students feel that they were capable of “do something to the society” and developed students’ “sense of achievement and sense of meaning” through learning. For example, a teacher teaching a SL subject shared:

“Based on our observations of students, we all agree that students enjoy very much the service process. However, at the very beginning of the subject, a number of students were having great reluctance. They probably felt ‘I was forced to come’... Then when it came to the later stage of the subject, they might feel ‘well, I could make some change.’ So they were enjoyable. I think we could all feel that in the later stage students might have realized what they were doing, such as ‘I have helped people’, even though they were much unwilling at the very beginning. So we changed their minds and made them enjoy.”

In addition to teachers’ perceptions of the impact of active teaching and learning on students, a few GUR teachers were going deeper to have talked about their deep teaching philosophy and how they implemented this philosophy in teaching practice. In these teachers’ philosophy, teachers and students were equal in the learning process and they worked together to construct students’ learning. Therefore, these teachers supported very much the active learning approach and implemented this approach in their teaching. This can be illustrated by the following two narratives:

“Um, I hope that they (students) become overall much more open, because I noticed many students... because we especially do most first year and second year students... they come in right from secondary school and have the attitude that teacher is the big hierarchical figure that they cannot question; and they can just sit there silently listening and looking, [but] not disturbing. And I am trying to break through this [kind of] thinking, because I am telling them that, ‘You know, we are on the same level. If I say something that you don’t agree with, you need to tell me. You know, you need to ask questions.’”

“In each term, I would bring students out to do fieldwork. Sometimes we went to museums. Sometimes I watched movies and chatted with students. From their feedbacks, students said the fieldwork made them learn a lot, read more books, and know more things. ... Even in the class, I would also ask them questions every ten or fifteen minutes. This contact with teacher is very important. Through this, I want to have them be more confident. Many

students thought that they could find answers through the Internet. However, the interaction between students and between students and teachers would be something beneficial to their whole life.”

While teachers commonly viewed students’ deep engagement and active learning in GUR curriculum, they also expressed that there were two factors hindering students’ engagement. The first factor was students’ utilitarian attitudes towards their university study, as elaborated by one teacher that “For some students, they were very ‘strategic’ in their university study. When they saw that their four-year curriculum had so many requirements, they only wanted to take, take, take, and to get these subjects done as fast as possible.” Students’ less serious or indifferent attitudes towards their GUR study had defeated some teachers’ passion to teach GUR subjects.

The other factor was that students were “too busy” under the new four-year curriculum structure. This made some students had no time and energy to study their GUR subjects carefully and attentively, as expressed by one teacher in the following way:

“The situation I have seen was this: for these students enrolled in the new four-year curriculum ... the thirteen-week long semester course would be very harsh and they also need to take CAR subjects. So they made themselves very busy. So they had no choice but to cope with these subjects hastily. So instead, I feel that I sympathize with them.”

### *Challenging but joyful inter- and intra-disciplinary collaboration*

The teaching in the GUR provided opportunities and joyful experiences for multiple kinds and levels of collaboration among teachers, in a disciplinary and interdisciplinary manner. This was generally valued and appreciated by teachers for providing opportunities for them to extend their horizons. For example, in coordinating FS subject teaching in some faculties, the academic staff developed feelings that although coordinating staff members from different disciplines to collectively teach FS subject was a quite challenging task, the process gave them valuable and joyful interdisciplinary work opportunities and

experiences. This was shared by one staff member below:

“I am a coordinator. I don’t teach the Freshmen Seminar. I coordinate all the tutors, all the departmental representatives (teaching FS subject). I think this kind of Freshmen Seminar is quite, in the very beginning is very challenging because it is quite diverse. We have to cooperate among different departments, and chase after everybody on proposing [teaching] project and schedule, whatever. But then it turns out that it is quite joyful experience, because I have the chance to mix with other departments’ colleagues. Otherwise I would never work with them, even in the same faculty. I know more people at least.”

In addition to gaining interdisciplinary working experience, the teaching in same GUR components promoted some teachers’ interaction and mutual learning with their fellow colleagues within the same departments. For example, one teacher in ELCR and another teacher in LIPD component noted respectively:

“There is one good thing about all (ELCR) subjects actually. [It] is that, um, like I taught PEUS (one ELCR subject) and you taught AEUS (another ELCR subject), and then, there is an area we call it the ‘teacher area’ where we have lots of notes and supplementary materials that we can use. And they are developed and contributed by colleagues voluntarily and then they are all good stuff.”

“(One LIPD subject teacher was talking about another senior colleague teaching the same LIPD subject) Oh, it is really great, really great. She is a great professor. So what we are doing is that we are so responsible for the lectures. But she is always asking me for some inputs or having any comments or suggestions. She is always willing to actually incorporate them in the whole material. And for the tutorials, actually she gives me ‘green light’ to do almost anything. Actually in the seven semesters what we did was that I was more or less developing the contents and then she would just follow my suit. So I found it very very very good.”

### *Positive but belated effects on students’ development of competences*

Teachers perceived that their teaching in GUR has promoted students’ positive development in different skills and competences. The first competence was

effective communication. For example, some teachers from CAR, ELCR and LIPD components perceived that through their subject teaching and paper writing assessment, they observed their students’ increased confidence and self-esteem in English writing skills, as well as a strong sense of achievement in academic writing. This can be illustrated by the following two narratives:

“For the writing requirement, we do see improvements in confidence, and that was what students told us during the focus group meetings. So I can’t comment on the improvement in language but I think they are more confident to tackle a bigger piece of writing. So, I think that is quite important.”

“Term paper is a very good training. Particularly for students in some disciplines, which did not have much writing tasks, they said ‘wow, this is the first time that I have written so many things.’ Particularly for some students upgraded from Associate Degrees, they directly felt ‘it is so good to do this.’ After doing this, they even did not care about their grades. They felt ‘oh, I have achieved something’. Their self-esteem has been improved a lot and they would not be afraid of writing.”

In addition, there were teachers who consciously promoted frequent group discussions or free expressions of their students in classes. They observed students’ improved confidence in presenting ideas in public through these methods. This can be illustrated by the following narrative of a teacher:

“After this course, I collected some feedback from our students. They commonly reflected that they had become bolder in public expression because of the many discussions in tutorial sessions. Maybe in some faculties such as business, there were constant group discussions or presentations. However, for students in department of engineering or other disciplines, it might be hard for them to express their ideas in public. At the very beginning of this subject when they did not know each other, they were unwilling to speak. But I used a lot of methods to evoke their expression, which made them feel that they became more confident in public speaking after they completed this subject.”

Apart from the above-mentioned skills, teachers perceived that some of their students gained improvements in their higher-order thinking ability, also through the active learning practices. For



example, one teacher teaching a LIPD subject perceived that her subject promoted students' multi-perspective and critical thinking through peer influence fostered by group discussion and peer sharing in the classes:

“One point I want to add is that students developed multi-perspectives, because when they were doing some sharing, they found that their peers had different stories. Then they would refer to the experiences of their peers, whose effect was bigger than what we have told them. So the peer influence is more significant, which made them have more multi-perspectives and critical thinking such as ‘what is it exactly? In the moment, am I inside the box? Or could I think out of the box?’ So they gained many experiences from peer learning”.

Furthermore, some teachers believed that the impacts of individual GUR subjects existed but might not be visible in a short time. They believed that each GUR subject served as a piece of an integrated whole to contribute to students' holistic development. Some teachers depicted the function of the GUR as “sowing a seed”, while others perceived that all GUR subjects, together with students' other educational experiences such as internship, and students' life experience, served as a whole to shape students' all-round development at PolyU.

## Discussion

The present study is among the few to explore teachers' views and experiences about general education curriculum in higher education settings, particularly in contexts of Hong Kong. In view of important roles that teachers play in general education, this study could add significant contribution to the existing limited literature on teachers' perspectives of general education.

Several major observations could be generated from the findings. First, teachers teaching different subjects in GUR generally supported the rationale and subject design of their respective GUR components. Some teachers even consciously designed their subject contents and teaching to be around important issues in contemporary society, to promote interdisciplinary learning, and to meet student needs better. This demonstrated teachers' deep under-

standing of and engagement in general education teaching. This observation challenged part of the existing literature that suggested teachers' lower engagement in general education teaching (13, 15). This might be explained by the application- and practice-oriented culture of PolyU. Newton (15) argued that in institutions that had a more entrepreneurial-oriented culture and whose mission was more sensitive to outside needs, faculties and general education courses might be more responsive to students' needs and more influenced by students' aspirations. A practical-oriented culture in PolyU might have made teachers more sensitive to changing requirements of the society and student needs; and therefore more devoted to general education teaching and subject design that were deemed important for contemporary society. The finding was also in line with the previous studies based on teacher focus groups and qualitative evaluation, which showed that teachers of different GUR subjects generally understood and support the rationales of the GUR (16, 17).

Secondly, teachers commonly perceived that the GUR subjects with a variety of active teaching and learning methods such as service learning, group project, and writing assignment were effective to engage students in deep and active learning. Not only this, some teachers consciously designed their subject content and teaching based on their educational philosophy to promote students' active, interactive, and interdisciplinary learning. The views and actions of teachers also indicated GUR teachers' deeper understanding of general education and active participation in teaching and learning, which challenged the current mainstream of literature suggesting that most teachers were lack of experience and enthusiasm in general education (2, 11-13).

Thirdly, some teachers gained quite valuable interdisciplinary working experiences from teaching the GUR subjects. The GUR teaching and subject coordination in some subjects offered teachers new opportunities to work with fellow colleagues outside of their own disciplines. The finding suggested that teachers appreciated and valued these “fence-breaking” experiences. This finding supported the current limited literature suggesting that some general education subjects such as first-year seminar

promoted professional partnership among teaching staff across different disciplines (18).

Fourthly, teachers perceived positive impacts of the GUR on the holistic development of students. These impacts included the development of students' sense of achievements, confidence and their increased self-esteem. They also included students' improvements in oral and written communication, and critical thinking skills. Teachers perceived that one major factor contributing to students' positive change was the active teaching and learning methods adopted. This was supported by the literature that teachers' instructions promoting active and interactive learning could foster students' growth in important competences such as thinking, communication, problem solving, cognitive skills, etc. (19, 20). These views are also consistent with the findings of other evaluation studies of the GUR (21, 22).

Furthermore, challenges in teachers' teaching of the GUR subjects were also identified. One major challenge was the design and teaching of subjects with an interdisciplinary nature such as FS subject. One major reason was that many staff members were educated under the previous British structure of higher education that stressed early specialization and strict division of academic disciplines. They may get less chance to experience interdisciplinary teaching and learning (13). Meanwhile, teaching interdisciplinary subjects were also a worldwide challenge in general education since the over-division of knowledge and disciplines in modern universities greatly hindered this kind of teaching and it was more and more difficult to find interconnections and common understanding among different disciplines. Another challenge was some students' unserious and utilitarian attitude towards their study in GUR. This phenomenon has also been noted by the literature (15, 23), which suggested that some students viewed general education requirements as obstacles to overcome since they wanted to focus more on their major studies. Findings from the present study further enriched the existing literature by showing that students' utilitarian attitudes towards their GUR study might be partly caused by their increasingly packing undergraduate study in contemporary society.

Despite the challenges, the present study in general suggested teachers' overall positive perceptions and experiences of the general education

program in the new four-year curriculum of PolyU. The findings are also consistent with the existing literature (24-26). In view of the shortage of scientific literature in this area, the present study contributed significantly to the literature on teachers' views and experiences of general education in Hong Kong contexts.

## Acknowledgments

The 5-year evaluation study on GUR is financially supported by the Teaching Development Grant at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

## Ethical compliance

The authors have stated all possible conflicts of interest within this work. The authors have stated all sources of funding for this work. If this work involved human participants, informed consent was received from each individual. If this work involved human participants, it was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. If this work involved experiments with humans or animals, it was conducted in accordance with the related institutions' research ethics guidelines.

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*Submitted:* March 15, 2017. *Revised:* April 06, 2017.  
*Accepted:* April 11, 2017.

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