

The impact of a new 4-year undergraduate program in Hong Kong

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Introduction

What are the attributes of a “good” university? With respect to this question, many people would say that a good university should have good ranking based on international ranking systems such as the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education, and Center for World University Ranking. Unfortunately, while ranking figures may give some snapshots about universities based on quantitative figures, they do not give any idea about the quality of education received by the students, particularly with respect to the question of how the undergraduate program promotes the holistic development of students. In fact, in most ranking schemes, we do not look at what subjects are offered and the impact of the undergraduate program on students. Most important of all, many ranking systems simply do not answer the question of how the undergraduate curriculum may meet the diverse needs of university students.

Actually, contemporary universities have been criticized as failing to achieve the ultimate aim of education (i.e., helping students to develop in a holistic manner). Harry Lewis (1) provocatively commented that “universities have forgotten their larger educational role for college students, namely to succeed, better than ever, as creators and repositories of knowledge. But they have forgotten the fundamental job any undergraduate education is to turn eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds into twenty-one and twenty-two years olds, to help them grow up, to learn who they are, to search for a large purpose of their lives, and to leave the college as better human beings.” He also remarked that “over the decades I have heard many academic discussions about teaching, about the curriculum, about grading, about athletics, and about responding to student misdeeds. I have almost never heard discussions among professors about making students better people” (1).

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Obviously, the comments of Lewis motivate us to think about what should be the essence of undergraduate curriculum.

From a youth developmental perspective, we have to seriously re-consider the needs of university students and ask how the undergraduate curriculum can meet their needs. A few centuries ago, university education was fundamentally “scholarly” in nature, nurturing students in the “ivory tower”. In the past decades, university education became more vocationally oriented, which addressed the needs of occupational needs of the students. However, with the growing complexities of the society and emergence of the knowledge-based economy, we have to ask what sort of development university students should have. There is a growing voice arguing that besides “hard skills” in the disciplinary training, students should also acquire “soft skills” to respond to the needs of the changing world. There are two main areas of soft skills that university students should acquire. The first is on intrapersonal development. Some of the qualities include psychosocial competence (cognitive, emotional, social and moral competence), communication skills, resilience, positive identity, and spirituality. Obviously, qualities such as resilience and emotional intelligence are very important for young people in the knowledge-based economy. On the other hand, university students should have good interpersonal skills, including relationship building, relationship maintenance, team building and conflict resolution. Most important of all, moral character is an important desired graduate attribute under the service economy. For example, having excellent skills in finance is good, but if such skills are used to issue junk bonds, it would not be desirable. Essentially, graduates should do the “right” things in a world full of moral confusion. Besides, addressing the soft skills of university students is also important because there are growing developmental issues (e.g., depression, suicidal and alcoholism) in university students.

With specific reference to Hong Kong, the university structure was a three-year program before 2012/13 academic year, which was modeled after the British system. With the introduction of higher education reform, university structure was changed to four years, with the additional year devoted to general education. At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), the general university requirements (GUR)

was designed to promote the holistic development of the students. There are several components of the GUR, including a) Language and communication requirements (9 credits); b) Freshmen seminar (3 credits); c) Cluster areas requirements (12 credits); d) Leadership and intrapersonal development (3 credits); e) Service-learning (3 credits); and f) Healthy lifestyle (non-credit bearing). Through the new 4-year undergraduate curriculum, it is expected that the graduate would develop holistically, with the attributes of critical thinking, innovative problem solving, effective communication, ethical leadership and lifelong learning.

Obviously, having a set of desired graduate attributes and an elegant 4-year new undergraduate program are not enough. We have to conduct evaluation studies to examine the impact of the new 4-year curriculum. To understand the effectiveness of the 4-year new undergraduate program, we started collecting evaluation data starting from 2012/13 academic year. There are several components in the evaluation study. First, we conducted objective outcome evaluation with three sub-studies: a) we tracked a random sample of students over four years; b) we compared the Year 3 students of the PolyU 4-year program with Year 3 students of the PolyU 3-year program; and c) we compared the Year 3 students of PolyU 4-year program with Year 3 students in a comparable university in Hong Kong. Second, we conducted qualitative studies including focus group studies involving students and teachers. A longitudinal case study was also carried out. Third, we conducted secondary data analyses looking at the student feedbacks through student feedback questionnaires. Fourth, changes in the students were examined using the repertory grid test.

We have already published papers on the effectiveness of the 4-year program (2-5). In this special issue, we bring together several papers based on the quantitative and qualitative studies. Most importantly, we summarize the evaluation findings and answer the question of how well the desired graduate attributes were achieved. It is our modest wish that through these papers, we will have a better understanding the implementation of the General Education program in Hong Kong.

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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