

# Well-being of university students in Hong Kong: A longitudinal case study

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## Abstract

The general university requirements (GUR) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) is an integral part of the new 4-year undergraduate curriculum. To evaluate GUR, a longitudinal case study involving 42 cases from different faculties/schools was conducted, with several interviews conducted with the informants over time. The present article is to report the findings of the second year evaluation. Three major observations on students' views about the effectiveness of GUR study were generated from the study, including 1) broadened horizons; 2) increased awareness of the connection between GUR study and all-round development and 3) urge of linking GUR components with one's profession. The longitudinal case study findings suggest that students generally had fruitful learning experiences in GUR study. This study helps to paint a more complete picture of students' views toward GUR and their personal development.

**Keywords:** General education, qualitative research, case study, university students, Chinese context

## Introduction

University students' lives are becoming increasingly pressurized due to higher parental and societal expectations as well as rigorous educational changes or reforms in Western and Asian countries (1-3). The major stresses for university students are commonly related to academic, relationship and financial difficulties (4). The onset of psychological distress often upsets the fulfillment of different developmental and educational needs. The growing of psychological disturbance amongst students in higher education has called for concern of the scholars and healthcare professionals and a body of research investigating university students' psychological well-being has increased in recent decades (1, 2, 4). Although there is an increasing concern for university students'

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development in the higher education fields, one under-researched area is to examine the major transition from their high school to higher education and how the well-being of university students' changes throughout the years in the university (2,4). Hence, studies on how universities assist students to adapt to the higher education and longitudinal research on the temporal changes of students' holistic development and their well-being are indispensable.

Given the challenges of globalization and international competitions in the new century, numerous educational reforms and initiatives have been carried out in the Asia-Pacific Region (5) including Hong Kong. In the past two decades, there have been "large-scale changes in nearly every key aspect" of the education system in Hong Kong (5, p. 7). One notable change is to change the senior secondary education and higher education system from the existing British system (3 years of junior secondary +2 years of senior secondary +2 years of matriculation +3 years of university) [3 + 2 + 2 + 3] to a new academic structure (3 years of junior secondary +3 years of senior secondary +4 years of university) [3 + 3 + 4], known as the "3-3-4 reforms." The "3-3-4 reforms" are intended to promote the future competitiveness of Hong Kong university graduates in the global knowledge economy and align "Hong Kong's educational pipeline with those in the Chinese mainland, the United States and the European Union" (3). However, entry to university "one year younger" in the new academic structure has aroused concerns regarding students' transition from secondary school to the higher education and institutions have focused their efforts on designing the first-year curriculum to assist students to have a smoother transition (6).

Although the 3-3-4 reforms imposed much pressure on teachers and students of the secondary schools, the reforms were perceived as "an opportunity to grow" with numerous new educational initiatives in the higher education in Hong Kong (3). The previous three-year undergraduate degree program exclusively focusing on disciplinary-specific training is changed to a four-year undergraduate degree program with the addition of a substantial component of nonspecialized or general education. The introduction of the new academic structure with the one-year expansion of higher education leads university administrators, teachers and scholars to

explore the reinvention of undergraduate education in Hong Kong (3). This reinvention is not limited to the curricular redevelopment. In fact, holistic development, including the expansion of different learning experiences such as out-of-classroom learning experiences and service-learning opportunities, is emphasized as well. The University Grants Committee (7) asserted in their official webpage that having an additional undergraduate year will "enable students to have more time and space to build a broader knowledge base and a more solid foundation for whole-person development" (paragraph 2). This openness challenges the long-held belief of "academic excellence surpasses other things" initiates the establishment of general education in Hong Kong (8).

The advocacy of general education in the higher education setting echoes with the emphasis on students' "lifelong learning" and "all-round development" in the education reforms (8). In addition, the establishment of general education in higher education setting strikes a right balance between the breadth and depth of different programs and help students "develop a sense of integrity, positive attitude, a broad vision and important generic skills" (9). Most importantly, general education could provide the freshmen opportunity to map out their own study paths to suit their interests and aspirations. This flexible and student-centered education helps nurture students' whole-person development, enrich their undergraduate learning experience and foster their well-being in general.

Echoing the comprehensive curriculum reform carrying out in higher education in Hong Kong, the eight public higher education institutions in Hong Kong have all extended their undergraduate degree program from three years to four years, mandated by the University Grants Committee (UGC) since the 2012-13 academic year. With this implementation, each institution developed its new four-year curriculum by adding a significant general education component. Among these universities, one remarkable case was The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). Since 2012-2013, PolyU implemented a new general education curriculum, named "general university requirements" (GUR) as an integral and significant part of its new four-year undergraduate degree program. The objective of GUR is, in combination with students' specialized education,

to provide an all-round education to all PolyU students, with a particular focus on nurturing them on five desired graduate attributes, including effective communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, lifelong learning and ethical leadership. The nurturance of these attributes is facilitated by different GUR requirements including leadership and intra-personal development requirement, cluster area requirements, freshman seminar, service-learning requirement, language and Communication requirements, and healthy lifestyle.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the GUR, a five-year longitudinal evaluation project has been conducted since the inception of the new 4-year undergraduate curriculum in the academic year 2012-2013. Different quantitative and qualitative evaluative components have been carried out in evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of the GUR. One of the examples is the longitudinal study with 4 waves of data to investigate how the university students grow with the assistance of the GUR in the researched university (10). The study has revealed significant changes in most well-being indicators over time.

Although quantitative studies are helpful, they may not capture the inner experiences of the students. The present study is one of the qualitative evaluation studies of the project. This study attempted to investigate the effects of general education on student development in the Hong Kong context. It helps to broaden readers' understanding of the association between general education and freshmen development, and factors contributing to this association. A longitudinal case study was adopted as one of the evaluative methods in the present project. Case study is one of the most common research methodologies employed in educational research (11, 12). Most of the scholars reached the consensus that a "case" should be the phenomena happening in the "bounded system" where researcher's concern, interests and hypotheses might rest upon (12). With such bounded systems, researcher aims to "uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" (13). "Case study" is specifically appropriate for the present study where the researchers attempted to study a single case (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University) and the newly implemented general education curriculum named "GUR requirements". In addition, how freshmen perceive the assistance of

GUR in their transitional stage from secondary schooling to the university life is what Shaw (14, p. 2) suggested that researchers should focus on "particular groups of people confront[ing] specific problems." Although the researchers are from the researched university, the employment of case study allows the researchers to examine the relationship between "what was known" and "what previous unknown" and leads to a "rethinking of the phenomenon" (15). Concrete and contextual insights could be drawn from this case study with researchers' resonations with their own experiences rooted in the researched university.

Regarding utilizing case study as an evaluation method in research, Guba and Lincoln (16) have concluded that case study is the best reporting form for evaluations. Case study can at its best in providing thick and grounded description and is "holistic and lifelike" (17). The case study not only allows the researchers to revisit the contexts they have been situating, but also enables readers to bring in their own experiences and understanding which lead to "generalization when new data for the case are added to old data" to thicken the description of the understanding (15). As the participants are freshmen of the researched university, the students can add on their own experiences while the researchers were conducting the interviews. This addition has facilitated researchers to investigate the differences of views and suggest how these influences have influenced the understanding and perception of the assistance of GUR.

In the present study, a group of students ("cases") were followed up by researchers on their personal growth starting from the freshman to graduation year. This would help trace the changes and development of individual students throughout their university lives and further understand students' voiced views on their GUR study in greater details. The present study denotes some of the general observations based on researchers' first-year following up with the freshmen.

## Methods

Purposive sampling was adopted in the case selections. A total of 71 cases from different faculties or schools were recruited from participants of student focus groups held in the academic year of 2012-2013.

The students shared their general impressions on their first-semester experience of taking some of the GUR subjects in the focused group interview. These students were invited to participate in the present study of having the longitudinal case study in the form of in-depth interviews. In the present study, the authors report the findings of the second-year longitudinal case study. After the initial contacts in the first year (71 cases), 42 actively engaged cases (59.2%) who maintained regular contacts with the researchers and 10 re-activated cases who had one or two meetings with the researchers during the past year. The remaining 19 student cases (26.8%) showed no interests in joining the study and did not respond to the several rounds of invitations by the researchers. These cases have now been deleted from the longitudinal study. At the beginning and the end of the 2013-2014 academic year, researchers conducted individual interviews for those 42 actively engaged cases using an interview guide developed by the research team. In addition to the two individual interviews each year, informal meetings with the student participants were held by the researchers in each semester. Students were invited to share their university experiences, challenges encountered, and personal gains during the semester with the researchers in a more relaxing milieu.

Regarding the recruitment of researchers, eight researchers from the Department of Applied Social Sciences of the researched university started to follow the student cases commencing on the 2013-14 academic year. Most of the researchers had experience in teaching the GUR subjects. This shared experience constituted the common language between the researchers and the students. This “common language” assists the researchers to better understand students’ sharing during the interviews and such an empathic understanding will hence foster the students’ trust in sharing their own experiences in the interviews reciprocally. The trusting relationship between the students and researchers reinforces the process of thickening the data (11). Each researcher was responsible for seven to eight cases. The constant encounters between the researcher and students assist the researchers to better capture the deep meaning of experiences in students’ own words in the form of individual in-depth interviews (18). The researchers act as the “miners” and “travelers” in the interviewing

process to unearth the meanings initiated by the students and wander together with the students to “the unknown terrain” and co-construct the “new knowledge” with more interactive involvements in the interviewing process (19, p. 48). With the mining and traveling between the researchers and students, the substance of the interchanges is constructed and thus the meaning-making process could be thickened.

### *Instrument*

A semi-structured interview guide developed by the authors was adopted in the study to explore students’ views and experiences about the GUR and their university study in general. The interview guide comprised two major categories: students’ experiences in GUR in relation to personal growth and the development of five graduate attributes of PolyU (including critical thinker; effective communicator; life-long learner; problem-solver and ethical leader), and students’ perceptions and expectations of their university lives. The inclusion of students from different faculties and schools was intended to gauge students’ perceptions on GUR with reference to their professional disciplinary training. This arrangement could help facilitate the students to have some “debates” between their established internal frame of reference upon disciplinary professionalism and their perceptions on the GUR. These debates could further facilitate the establishment of a “framework for discussion” in relating their experiences in learning the GUR during the interviews (11).

The researchers were allowed to change the sequence or wording of these questions during their interview process. The questions in the interview guide were listed as below:

1. Apart from the knowledge in your major (disciplinary specific study), what do you think an undergraduate student should learn in his/her undergraduate years? What qualities should a university student develop during their undergraduate study?
2. Do you know the five desirable attributes (critical thinking, effective communication, innovative problem solving, lifelong learning,

- and ethical leadership) of a PolyU graduate? What is your understanding of these attributes (e.g., perceptions and importance)?
3. Do you feel that you have grown or become more mature in terms of the desirable attributes in the past semester/academic year? If yes, please let us know more about the experiences?
  4. In retrospect, do you think the GUR subjects have helped you to develop the ideal PolyU attributes? Have you applied what you have learned in GUR subjects in your life?
  5. Do you have any plans/goals for the rest of your university life? How may any GUR subjects or other resources the university provides help you achieve your goals?

### *Data analyses*

The audio recordings of all the interviews were fully transcribed into texts. The method of thematic analysis was used to analyze and code the data to better understand the complexity and richness of the case. Two part-time research assistants with Master degrees and one postgraduate student pursuing a Master degree coded different parts of the data into different themes under the careful instructions and supervisions of the authors. During the coding process, the authors met with all coders twice to provide feedbacks on the coders' partial coding work. After the coding, all the codes were combined together.

Based on the interviews, each interviewer was invited to write a one-page summary based on their observations during the interviews and the informal meetings with students. These summaries are served as "complementary sources" to understand the researchers' views on their comprehension of students' sharing in the interviews. The use of researchers' summaries helps gauge the "factors normally hidden" and "idiosyncratic variables" that interviews might not reach (20). The "hidden" elements revealed in the researchers' summaries could help thicken the interpretations of data obtained in the interviews. The summaries were read through and analyzed by researchers from the research team.

## **Results and discussion**

Several general observations were derived from the researchers' summaries on student development and their views towards GUR study based on the transcriptions. First, most researchers mentioned that they have developed trusting and reciprocal relationships with their case students which were beneficial to students' self-disclosure of their views on GUR study and university life. Second, three major observations on students' views about the effectiveness of GUR study were generated. These included 1) broadened horizons, 2) increased awareness of the connection between GUR study and all-round development, and 3) urge for linking GUR Components with one's profession.

### *Trusting and reciprocal relationships*

Researchers have agreed that trusting and reciprocal relationships had been established through the constant encounters or informal meetings with the students. It is believed that the relationship helps college students better adapt to the life as a freshman, and most importantly, the researchers' understanding and self-disclosure in the process support its beneficial role on students' learning outcomes (21). One of the researchers stated the impact of empathic understanding and self-disclosure on her student case in her summary:

From the interviews, I witnessed the personal growth of my students after taking these experiential and diversified courses. I felt their enthusiasm and excitement on learning. Meanwhile, a closeness relationship was established between us. When listening to their sharing and thoughts (e.g., memorable service learning experience, academic study difficulties and personal issues), I also shared my thoughts and feelings with them (e.g., difficulties and challenges that I faced in my freshman years of college).

College students' level of strain was generally highest during Semester 1 in their freshman year. This period is predominately an anxiety-provoking time for college students (2). Although the researchers approached a limited number of students compared to the entire student population, the timely support and

empathic understanding from the researchers led students to their awareness of “personal growth” and helped lighten their anxiety in their first year of study in the university. In addition, this connection between the researchers and the students fostered human spirituality. Spirituality has been demonstrated to be uniquely and meaningfully associated with university students’ psychological health (1).

### *Broadened horizons*

Students acknowledged that GUR subjects provided them with opportunities to understand knowledge beyond their own disciplines. Quite a number of researchers reported that the students were exposed to domains that “they have never seen” or “they seldom have experienced before”. Learning experiences in GUR study also promoted students’ “openness” to new things and challenged their preoccupations. For example, while some students initially perceived GUR subjects as simply “mandatory” to fulfill for graduation or “not as useful as the major subjects”, these misunderstandings and preoccupations were quashed after the students had immersed themselves in learning these subjects. Students in different interviews noted that they were “more aware of the importance of service and learning” after taking the SL subjects; they also understood that “leadership actually relates to personal qualities and individual development” after studying LIPD subjects.

For the course “Tomorrow’s Leaders,” it is not about how to lead others but leading oneself, that is “self-leadership.” That is why we have to behave well and be the role-model of others.

I am a passive person and usually listen to others’ commands. I am not an in-born leader. I love to be in the supporting role...this is my personality and I might not be that brave to be the leader.... But I would like to learn more about the concepts and skills in the course to see if I could try later in my life.

Most students also reported that CAR subjects “exposed them to a new world.” These experiences encouraged students to view things from different perspectives and be aware of one’s preoccupations. From the researchers’ reports, students have developed a more reflective attitude toward their lives

through multiple reflective activities in GUR classes (e.g., LIPD subjects like “tomorrow’s leaders” and SL subjects). Similar point of views is found in students’ interviews.

When a decision is made, I will think of the reasons of making that decision and its applicability on the problems. When I am willing to reflect upon what has happened, I have learnt a lot from a newer perspective.

I will always ask myself “why did I fail this time?” and the disappointment generated will be lingered on for a while. But I think time is usually too short for happiness. Sufferings make one grow. I will reflect upon the sufferings and think of ways to improve.

Students’ responses also assured the importance of experiential learning adopted in most GUR subjects. The focus of the experiential learning is not just the experience itself but the reflections on the experiences which are instrumental to personal growth. The interview process has granted students’ opportunities to reflect upon their first-year learning experiences as well. Some students have expressed their appreciations for the researchers to have offered them a chance to “talk over” and “explore” their ways of thinking and understanding of their new academic lives, with the assistance of the general education GUR in the university setting.

### *Increased awareness of connection between GUR study and all-round development*

Students’ awareness of the importance of GUR study in helping their personal development has increased. Researchers learned from the cases that students enjoyed the interactive and collaborative learning activities conducted in most GUR subjects and perceived such teaching and learning methods to have helped them step out of their comfort zone and polish their social and interpersonal skills. The strengthening of students’ sense of connectedness and thus their optimism has enhanced students’ well-being and “feelings of relief, happiness, perceived social support, and [thus] quality of life” (1). Other skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership were also taught and practiced in GUR study, which echoed the desirable graduate attributes

defined by PolyU. Students believed that these skills were indispensable for their all-round development thus enabling them to become competent professionals in the future.

Usually most of us would only encounter friends from our own discipline. Certainly, knowing friends from our own discipline will help me build a future network and gain some help for the professional examination. But we should extend our social circle. Studying GUR could help extend my social circle and have my social network extended.

We should know more than our own disciplinary knowledge. We should learn knowledge from other disciplines. And the learning should not be limited to the “present moment.” It is life-long learning that we could learn after graduation.

On the other hand, researchers reported that several students knew less of how the “desired graduate attributes” of PolyU could be developed through the general education course, although these attributes were yet subtly and progressively developed through their learning experiences. This indicates that more efforts are warranted to help students know more explicitly what the expectations of the University are and the importance of holistic development in terms of how these expectations relate to one’s professional and personal growth.

#### *Urge for linking GUR components with one’s profession*

Researchers reported that although the students in the present study agreed that the GUR components have provided them with new learning experiences, they were not able to clearly identify the linkage of different GUR components with their disciplines and profession. The aim of providing general education in higher education settings is to offer students another platform for exploring and developing students’ various competencies and skills, and to have “major transformation of both faculty and student orientations toward the learning process” (22). PolyU has her own strong tradition in making knowledge into practice and it is understandable for the students’ urge for linking up what they have learned in the University to their professions. Judging from the students’

responses, there seems to be a gap between University’s rationale for general education and students’ understanding of the aim of general education.

At first, what I understand of GUR is to choose [the subjects] we like or are interested in. This is to equip ourselves with different talents and thus to develop ourselves. But it seems that not every university student understands the importance of GUR. I think this is a problem. The design of the GUR is nice and helpful for our growth. It is sad to know that we do not understand its rationale well.

The students were aware of the “problem” of not understanding the rationale of the general education offered. They felt “sad” about not being able to understand how the general education assists their personal discovery and growth in their freshman year. With such gap and insufficient understanding of the purpose of general education, such “urge” might hinder students’ integration of their learning experience with their personal growth. While it takes time for students to understand the meaning and importance of general education to their professional development, more opportunities for reflecting upon the purposes and meaning of learning the GUR components should be given to students during their learning experiences in the GUR. Even though the case students may have accomplished their freshman year, they are still experiencing the initial stage of university life. With maturity in their professional and personal growth to be expected in later years, the relevance of what they have learned in their disciplines and the GUR components to their own life development may be gradually seen.

There are several strengths of utilizing case study as the major research methodology in the present study. First, the focus on freshmen perspective could assist the researchers to focus on freshmen’s perceptions upon how the GUR could have been maximized in the fixed period of time available in case study (23). Second, the present study gave the students an avenue to share their perceptions and understanding of the general education implemented in the researched university. This inclusion is a “highly significant part of the story” (24) that has facilitated the exploration of the meanings of GUR in freshmen perspective and thus thickened the

understanding. Third, case study is known as a triangulated research strategy (12, 25). The present study is one of the evaluative components of the longitudinal research project. The findings of the present study could be used to ensure accuracy and alternative explanations of other evaluative components in the project.

Despite the strengths of the present study, some limitations are noteworthy as well. First, the cost-effectiveness of collecting and analyzing the data is doubted. Scholars have commented that both the data collection and analyses pertaining to case study are time-consuming (12, 25). Second, the data collected in the present study may not be generalizable in the conventional sense. The sample in the present study focuses on the freshmen of a single university that the sample may be idiosyncratic. It would be difficult to establish the likelihood that the data are representative of some larger population of other universities in the Hong Kong context (24).

Overall speaking, the researchers' reports and the students' interviews on the first year longitudinal case study suggest that students generally had fruitful learning experiences in GUR study. While the students became more aware of the benefits of GUR study, the linkage between different GUR components and the students' professional development could be further highlighted. Longitudinal follow-up studies would help to form a clearer picture of the students' views toward GUR and their personal development.

## 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 experiments with animals, it was conducted in accordance with the related institutions' research ethics guidelines.

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