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BUILDING GENERAL EDUCATION WITH HONG KONG CHARACTERISTICS

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong is in the process of transforming their secondary and tertiary educational system. This includes the extension of the undergraduate degree from three to four years and the development of a General Education curriculum with an official launch date of Fall 2012. This paper examines some of the unique national forces prompting the educational reform, the process of building the General Education curriculum and courses at Hong Kong universities, the similarities and differences among the General Education programs, and the role of interdisciplinarity in course design and development.

INTRODUCTION

While liberal education is under attack and fighting a rearguard action in the United States (Roosevelt 2006), it is serving as the inspiration for institutional and pedagogical transformation in Hong Kong. In 2005 the University Grants Committee (UGC), the central body governing higher education in Hong Kong, announced that all Hong Kong universities would start preparing to shift from a three to four year undergraduate curriculum. The additional year would allow for the development of a General Education (GE) curriculum, and the four-year degree would be the required standard for all entering university students beginning in Fall 2012.

This paper both describes and attempts to analyze some of the most significant elements of Hong Kong's GE initiative as a case of comprehensive organizational change in higher education (see also Finkelstein & Walker 2008; Hanstedt 2010; Jaffee 2012). The observations and analysis are based on the author's direct participation and involvement in the reform process as a General Education

Fulbright scholar hosted at one of the Hong Kong universities. In this capacity I was able to review official reports and documents, engage in conversations and interviews with university administrators and faculty involved in the development and implementation, and participate in meetings and on committees charged with further developing GE courses and curriculum. Given the fact that this educational reform is a work in progress, and the first cohort of students has yet to begin the new undergraduate curriculum, the analysis must necessarily be tentative and speculative. At this stage, very little data is available to verify empirically the impressions developed from my participation, observation, and conversations.

The analysis will begin with a consideration of various approaches employed to explain the initiation of educational reform and their relation to the case of GE reform in Hong Kong. This will include identifying some of the specific forces potentially responsible for prompting the educational reform and shaping its conceptualization. This will be followed by a consideration of how General Education has been introduced, defined, and structured at the various Hong Kong institutions. The final section will focus on one particular issue – interdisciplinarity—and how this has been operationalized in the Hong Kong context.

FORCES PROMPTING THE HONG KONG GE EDUCATIONAL REFORM

A variety of approaches are used to explain changes in the organization and structure of higher education in different countries. From a globalization perspective, arguments emphasize the homogenization and convergence of cultural and economic life across national borders. If applied to institutions of higher education (see Vaira, 2004), universities and academic training would be expected to move toward a tighter alignment with principles of Western capitalism and neoliberal ideology (see Yang, 2003). Mok (2003), for example, views the process of globalization as demanding a new set of governance principles for national institutions including higher education involving a “major shift of national politics from maximising welfare to promoting entrepreneurial culture, innovation and profitability in both the private and public sectors” to make “autonomous individuals and quasi-governmental and non-governmental institutions such as universities behave in ways consistent with their policy objectives” (p. 119). This is particularly the case in the area of “quality assurance” where “the UGC in Hong Kong largely follows the experiences of the Euro-American practices. Market ideologies, productivity, efficiency, public accountability and cost-effectiveness have been transplanted into each university in Hong Kong.” (Mok & Lee, 2000, p.373). While there may be a common pressure to create accountability and quality assurance systems, there is no global consensus or convergence on a single curriculum for higher education. Rather than homogenization, one sees a great deal of persistent diversity and a range of institutional practices.

For this reason, and particularly for this case, one must consider some of

the unique factors related to the specific situation in Hong Kong. While there are other nations that currently employ the three-year British model (e.g. India), only Hong Kong is implementing a system-wide plan to add a year of general education. Why Hong Kong? Why now?

It is important to keep in mind that Hong Kong was held as a British colony until 1997 when it was reunited with mainland China. However, as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) under the “One Country-Two Systems” model, it retains political-economic autonomy from the mainland. With the end of British rule, Hong Kong was therefore able to consider alternative educational models. Based on conversations with and presentations by various Hong Kong higher education officials, a number of explanations have been offered as to the timing of the reform decision. Some believe the shift to a four-year model was based on pressure from Beijing to conform more closely to the mainland’s four-year degree structure. Others have suggested that the tighter integration of Hong Kong and China revealed relative weaknesses in the Hong Kong system that required comprehensive reform. Finally, and most closely associated with the official position, is the view that the reform was an independent Hong Kong-based decision driven by persistent concerns about the efficacy of the British model that could only be addressed after the handover.

Several reports commissioned by Hong Kong educational agencies suggest the rationale for the reform: The first officially sanctioned report pointing to the educational reform was a white-paper published by the Education Commission in 2000 titled “Learning Through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong.” Much of the focus was directed at the secondary sector as the stepping stone to university education. The consistent theme throughout the report was an emphasis on “lifelong learning” and “all-round development.” In identifying inadequacies of the current system, they note that “...learning effectiveness of students remains not very promising; learning is still examination-driven and scant attention is paid to ‘learning to learn.’ School life is usually monotonous, students are not given comprehensive learning experiences with little room to think, explore and create. The pathways for lifelong learning are not as smooth as they should be. To make up for these weaknesses, we need to uproot outdated ideology and develop a new education system that is student-focussed” (p.4).

As it applies to the university sector, the report recommended that undergraduate education “strike the right balance between the breadth and the depth of such programmes. This would, in addition to helping students master the necessary knowledge and skills for specific professions/disciplines, give them exposure to other learning areas and help them develop a sense of integrity, positive attitude, a broad vision and important generic skills” (p.9). The report makes only one reference to “general education” in the context of suggestions from external consultants, and not as a coherent curriculum but that: “universities needed to review their first degree programmes to strengthen general education and multi-disciplinary learning” (p.114). Overall, the 2000 report is most remarkable for its

lucid and candid identification of pedagogical and developmental weaknesses of the existing educational system. Much of the critical analysis is aimed at the British model which tends to emphasize early tracking of students into specialized areas and the direct admission into academic programs at the university level. In this sense, one of the uniquely Hong Kong characteristics is the consistent reference to “broadening,” “breadth” and “interdisciplinarity” based on the British educational legacy.

Two years later, the UGC released “Higher Education In Hong Kong: Report of the University Grants Committee.” This was a significant document for recognizing the potential inherent in the secondary sector reform allowing for an additional year of undergraduate education. Again, while not referring specifically to General Education, it called for a clear departure from the status quo: “The great need now is for creative attention to be given to the uses to which such extra time in the degree programme might be put. Simply to assume that it will be more of the same would be to dismiss the greatest opportunity in a generation for re-thinking the curriculum and the way it is delivered and assessed” (University Grants Committee, 2002: p. 25). Consistent with the 2000 report, it identified the need for “generic and transferable skills,” to “strike a new balance between breadth and depth,” and to transcend specialization so that graduates can see “creative and unexpected connections” (University Grants Committee, 2002: p. 25-26).

It was not until May of 2005 that the University Grants Committee made its formal announcement about the reform with explicit reference to a 4-year undergraduate degree (University Grants Committee, 2005) through an official press release. In stating the rationale for the restructuring, the UGC placed the reform in the context of the needs of students, the changing economy, and society at large:

The UGC strongly believes that all students stand to benefit significantly from the move to six years of secondary schooling and a normative four-year undergraduate programme as it will provide a more balanced, all-round and fulfilling learning experience that suits their different needs, aptitudes, abilities and interests.

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. This will be conducive to the nurturing of capable talents to underpin the development of a knowledge-based economy as well as to meet the rapid changing needs of the society. (University Grants Committee, 2005)

Noteworthy is the fact that there is no mention in the 2005 UGC statement of “general” or “liberal” education. Significantly, the UGC was not prescribing a GE curriculum. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the benefits of an additional year of university education, a “broader knowledge base,” and “whole-person development.” If there were a mandate, it was that the additional year not be devoted to

further academic specialization in a disciplinary subject or professional program.

Although it is not entirely clear when a consensus emerged over the fourth year as a general education curriculum, a number of factors seem to have contributed to this outcome. First, several of the HK universities already had elements of a common or GE curriculum in place (e.g., Lingnan University, Chinese University of Hong Kong). For these institutions, developing a full GE program was a natural extension and expansion of an existing curriculum. Second, turning to a GE model was a logical choice given the deficiencies identified, the outcomes desired, and the knowledge some faculty and administrators had about the US system and how the features of that system might enhance the preparation of Hong Kong graduates. At one institution, the provost developed an early proposal for the first-year curriculum based directly on the GE programs at Harvard University and the University of California-Berkeley. Finally, Po Chung, co-founder of DHL and a product of the U.S. higher education system, was responsible for providing the funding for the Fulbright initiative that brought American faculty and administrators to HK to assist with the development of the GE curriculum. Chung was instrumental in also encouraging all HK universities to use the first year for a common curriculum that would include instruction on the unique social, economic, and cultural place of Hong Kong, as well as provide a liberal arts education comparable to the American model. As early as 2005, before the program for Fulbright scholars was established, Chung proposed to all HK universities a program that would support at each institution an endowed chair that would assist with the development of a broad-based GE curriculum.

The transition of the Hong Kong economy from a manufacturing to value-added service economy was an additional factor impacting the decision to reform the educational system. This was emphasized by the UGC in noting the need for “knowledge workers who are highly educated with diverse and adaptable skill sets” (University Grants Committee, 2002). There was a developing sense that the labor force was ill-suited to the demands of a high-end service economy. This is reflected in the widespread belief that Hong Kong university graduates are not internationally competitive and that global firms in Hong Kong would prefer to hire students educated overseas. It is also the case in Hong Kong that parents possessing the requisite financial resources almost invariably send their students abroad, often to the United States, for their higher education. Finally, according to one higher education administrator, the common complaint regarding Hong Kong students is that they “can’t speak English, solve problems, or think analytically.”

In a widely cited survey of Hong Kong “opinion leaders” conducted by the South China Morning Post and TNS market research, less than 20% are “extremely confident” or “confident” that Hong Kong students possess “sufficient and relevant skills” in analytical thinking, interpersonal skills, leadership, creativity, English, or international understanding. Only 11% of respondents believe that Hong Kong students are “much better” or “slightly better” than their North American counterparts. A survey of employers conducted by the Hong Kong Edu-

cation and Manpower Bureau (2006) on Hong Kong university graduates found perceived lowest performance in the areas of “analytical and problem solving abilities,” “technical skills required for the job” and “English language proficiency,” and “management skills”.

Interestingly, such sentiments and findings exist despite Hong Kong’s consistently high performance on the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In 2009 Hong Kong ranked in the top five on reading, math, and science scores. These scores were far ahead of the United States, which ranked around seventeenth. Observers in Hong Kong increasingly regard such data as symptomatic of the larger problem – teaching and learning aimed at high stakes test performance -- rather than as an indication that students are actually learning or developing the competencies and capacities that make them intellectually nimble and creative. To Hong Kong’s credit, despite this record of exemplary exam performance, they are willing to engage in a comprehensive reform of the entire educational system.

Overall, this analysis of the “triggers” initiating the GE reform in Hong Kong would support theoretical models that intentionally avoid the determinism of strong globalization arguments and, instead, consider multilevel explanatory factors. One such approach is represented by Marginson and Rhoades’ (2002) “glonacal” heuristic that “points to three intersecting planes of existence, emphasizing the simultaneous significance of global, national, and local dimensions” (p. 282). This has been developed with application to the higher education landscape. The model allows for both agency and reciprocity. Similarly, “organizational allomorphism” (Vaira, 2004) and “glocalization” (Mok, 2003) attempt to balance the homogenizing tendencies of globalization with local forces, thus creating the possibility for persisting cross-national heterogeneity.

More specifically, the national-level characteristics of the Hong Kong reform derived from the attempt to transcend the perceived specialization of the British educational model, an auto-critique of the characteristics of the university graduates in a highly competitive and globally dynamic economic and cultural environment, and the reintegration with Mainland China that would potentially expose Hong Kong’s comparative educational weaknesses. These factors both drove and shaped the reform efforts.

THE MEANING OF GENERAL EDUCATION

Once a consensus was established on the desirability of GE as the first-year curriculum, the immediate task for Hong Kong universities was to educate the university community, and in particular the faculty, on the meaning and purpose of general education. Establishing a common institution-wide understanding of general education is not a challenge unique to Hong Kong. In the United States, where GE programs have existed for decades, perhaps for more than a century, there continues to be debate, multiple perspectives, different approaches, and, in

some cases, widespread ignorance among certain segments of the faculty regarding the existence and purpose of general education. In the US, GE has always been highly contested as both a concept and an academic curriculum as a result of the changing role of the university and student composition, as well as differing philosophical orientations to teaching, learning, and disciplinary training (see Aloni, 1997; Boyer & Kaplan, 1994; Bourke, Bray, & Horton, 2009; Newton, 2000; Boning, 2007). GE curricula in the US is also consistently unsettled, reflected in the fact that, as one survey of US institutions reported, over half were in the process of reviewing or revising their existing GE programs (Ratcliff, Johnson, La Nasa, and Gaff 2001). For all these reasons, adopting a “US model” for GE hardly provides a clear or singular roadmap for organizational change and policy implementation.

In communicating the meaning and purpose of GE, Hong Kong institutions presented various contrasting and potentially conflicting statements and definitions. Below are statements about GE posted on the websites of various Hong Kong institutions:

University is committed to providing students with a quality education that develops their intellectual abilities while providing them with the skills and knowledge base they will need to successfully navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

...benefit students by providing a more flexible, student-centred, holistic professional education that is consistent with the University's goals and missions.

The goal of General Education (GE) is to give you a broad sampling of different academic areas. This sampling exposes you to varied disciplines, increasing the value and breadth of your total undergraduate education. GE allows you to discover new interests that may open a whole new range of opportunities for further study or career choice.

Under the new structure, you will be given flexibility to map out your own study path to suit your interests, aspirations and learning needs.

General education, a key component of undergraduate studies... built upon a balanced approach to whole-person education that combines Chinese humanistic ideals and western liberal arts contents...The University GE curriculum provides students with a broad intellectual perspective and instils in them an understanding of the values of different academic disciplines. Students can choose from over 200 courses offered by various teaching departments is a new requirement for undergraduate students...designed to broaden students' horizons beyond their chosen disciplines and give them the opportunity to explore issues of profound significance to humankind in the 21st century.

The common core program is expected to play a key role in students' overall undergraduate experience, complementing studies in specialist

disciplines and other learning opportunities.

Several common purposes of GE are expressed through these statements. First, GE is presented as a coherent integrated curriculum building basic competencies and capacities that contribute to lifelong learning, intellectual inquiry, and career success. Second, GE is presented as a way for students to survey the disciplinary landscape; such exposure will provide a basis for choosing areas of interest and study. (However, as currently structured, students in Hong Kong are locked into an academic program when they are admitted to the university limiting the ability for “further study” or “career choice.” Therefore, this implied function of a GE curriculum can only be realized when students are able to exercise greater discretion and choice over academic areas of study offered by the university after they are admitted). Third, a constant theme in almost all presentations in Hong Kong is that GE contributes to academic and intellectual “broadening.” The emphasis placed on this factor is likely due to the perception that the current system is too “narrowing” in tracking and training students in particular academic disciplines or professions. Because narrow specialization has been a widely identified weakness of the educational system of Hong Kong, there is logical rhetorical stress on the converse.

One reason for the common conflicting renditions of the meaning and purpose of GE is the conflation of GE and liberal education. While the terms “general education” and “liberal education” are often used interchangeably, they can be distinguished in ways that clarify both the intentions of the GE initiative in Hong Kong and the limitations of the approach. General Education is typically used as the formal name of the undergraduate program that students complete as part of their four-year education. General Education is often most closely associated with an intention to broaden student perspectives, expose students to a range of disciplines, encourage interdisciplinary thinking, and foster generic intellectual skills. Breadth, as an essential purpose, is accomplished through requirements distributed across disciplinary areas. Liberal education, on the other hand, refers more to the potential substance of a GE program and tends to evoke a philosophical orientation regarding knowledge and thinking, the good society, the human condition, and the invariant “big questions” facing humanity (see e.g. Nussbaum, 1998). As one theorist (Aloni, 1997) put it, in establishing the common denominator of theories of liberal education: “What is common to these four theories – the classical plus the three modern ones – is a commitment to humanize people: to provide a kind of education that all human beings, qua human beings, deserve and ought to receive, so that they can actualize their human potentialities and lead full, worthy, and fulfilling human lives.” In Hong Kong, the emphasis leaned much more heavily toward the “general,” rather than the liberal,” side of the curricular equation.

I arrive at this conclusion based on my direct experience serving on committees reviewing GE course proposals and the types of courses both considered and included in the GE curriculum at many Hong Kong institutions. There was

greater acceptance of course proposals from academic programs that lie outside the liberal arts and science disciplines. When there were conflicting opinions over whether to include or exclude a course from the GE curriculum, the disagreement was often based on diverging notions of what constituted an appropriate course for a “general education” program. For example, a course that introduces students to how computers work and how one can ensure the security and integrity of their computer raise questions: Should it be included in a General Education curriculum? One might argue yes, since this is general knowledge and information that would likely benefit all students (general); it introduces students to some basic concepts in computer science (exposure to different disciplines and intellectual broadening); it is about computer science and fits into a science category (meets distribution requirement). A different standard, and one more likely expressed in the US, might ask whether this course constituted “liberal education” in the sense of linking the questions of technology and security to larger social and philosophical questions, or how the course addressed some common aspect of the human condition.

Again, this touches on the issue of differing conceptualizations of GE and how it will be uniquely structured in the Hong Kong context. There is a greater openness to a range of disciplines that broaden a student’s understanding of subjects and information that fall outside their chosen program of study. It is less “liberal” education in the US sense of the term than “general” knowledge about matters that are more practical and applied.

CREATING A GE CURRICULUM: LETTING EIGHT FLOWERS BLOOM

After attempting to define the “what” of GE, Hong Kong institutions were immediately faced with the next task of defining the “how,” which was necessary in order to generate course proposals and, ultimately, courses for the new GE curriculum. Unlike course development within an academic discipline, or professional program, the faculty proposers did not always have a clear idea of the meaning and purpose of GE or how a course should be designed and delivered for the GE curriculum. For that reason, almost every institution developed a set of guidelines, definitions, and templates to facilitate the process, procedures and committee review of GE proposals, and identify criteria to be used for reviewing and deciding upon their inclusion in the GE curriculum.

The most widely used framework employed for the development of GE courses is the system of Outcomes-Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL), which is used at almost all Hong Kong Universities and has been endorsed by the UGC. It emphasizes three components of course design --“course intended learning outcomes,” “assessment tasks,” and “teaching and learning activities” and their “constructive alignment” (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Under this system, the GE programs have developed “*program* intended learning outcomes” and each course in the GE

program has corollary “*course* intended learning outcomes;” the latter are supposed to align with the former. Further, methods of assessment of students, as well as the teaching and learning activities, should also be consistent and align with the outcomes. GE course proposals include explicit articulation of these OBTL components.

Based on my observations, many of the Fulbright faculty members who were brought to Hong Kong to share their experiences with GE believed that newly developed GE programs should not compromise the basic course design principles. Hong Kong universities have the unique advantage of “starting from scratch” and building programs correctly without being forced by historical context to compromise program integrity. This meant avoiding the mistakes made in the US. On this count, one of the most significant criticisms of US GE programs is the inclusion of courses that were never originally designed for a GE program. Most notable here are the various “basic,” “general” and “introduction” courses that routinely populate US GE programs and that were designed originally as prerequisite introductions for department majors. Given the original intent, these courses possess learning objectives that have little relationship to the larger outcomes articulated for the GE program. For most GE programs in the US, these outcomes have been formulated relatively recently and in direct response to external pressures for accountability that prescribe a “student learning outcomes assessment” protocol. Rather than course development and design informed by learning outcomes, the outcomes are retrofitted post hoc to an existing curriculum and large number of long-standing GE courses. Thus, there is often a poorly articulated and tenuous relationship, as well as considerable tension, between the discipline-based courses and these generic GE learning outcomes. In contrast, Hong Kong institutions--through the application of the OBTL framework--have an opportunity to avoid this glaring weakness with the articulation of program-level GE learning outcomes that both inform and are used to evaluate course proposals and design.

In addition to the OBTL framework, and the program intended learning outcomes, each Hong Kong institution independently developed their own GE curricular structure. As outlined by Newton (2000) there have been three dominant approaches to the organization of GE, each representing a particular philosophy. These are the Great Books Model, the Scholarly Discipline Model, and the Effective Citizen Model. The Great Books approach is often linked to a common core that focuses on big questions on the human condition addressed by an established classical literature which has stood the test of time. The Scholarly Discipline Model, designed to introduce and expose students to the major methods and perspectives of disciplinary inquiry that make up the university, can be associated with the distributional requirements approach. The Effective Citizen Model emphasizes the skills and values that students will need to be effective citizens and lifelong learners in a rapidly changing economic and global environment.

The historical evolution of GE in the US has seen a movement from the

“great books” or “big ideas” often delivered as a common core; to the “scholarly disciplines” organized around distribution requirements in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences; to the “effective citizen” model that places the greatest emphasis on skills and competencies articulated in student learning outcomes (see Schneider & Schoenberg, 1996). Depending upon the age of the institution and the historical traditions, some may combine all three in the structure of the GE curriculum.

The question of the range and diversity of GE programs in the US has been the subject of numerous studies (Warner and Koepple, 2009; Brint et al., 2009; Bourke, Bray and Horton, 2009; Aloï, Gardner, & Lusher, 2003; Gaff and Wasescha, 1991). Brint et al. (2009:606) analysis of GE structures for 292 US institutions over the period from 1975-2000 concluded “instead of convergence, we find non-convergence of forms; instead of a single dominant model, we find competing models; and instead of legitimacy seeking as a primary cause of change, we find multiple interest groups seeking influence in the field, with varying levels of success.” In contrast, Bourke, Bray and Horton, examining GE structures at the top twenty-five institutions within the baccalaureate-granting (liberal arts) and doctoral-granting (research) classifications, emphasize common elements: “the two methods of core curriculum and distribution requirements dominate the structure of general education requirements... for each similarity that exists in approaching general education, so too do differences exist. Despite any differences or disparities, however, there are common elements, common outcomes, that are valued by these top institutions. Whether through the language and rhetoric of core curricula, distribution requirements, Great Books, or optional curricula...” (2009: 235-237).

There is another common pattern worth noting: For the distribution requirements, almost all programs distinguish between humanities, natural science, and social science categories. Overall, this literature suggests convergence around the necessity and purpose of a general education or liberal education, and restricted diversity in the curricular structure aimed at realizing this purpose.

What is the situation for the Hong Kong institutions? While all Hong Kong institutions of higher education were required to add a fourth year of undergraduate education, and a consensus emerged around a GE-like curriculum, there is also considerable divergence in the shape, form, and philosophy. This can be attributed to the “layers and conditions” (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002, p. 292)—“historically embedded structures on which current activity and influence are based”—at the various institutions that have shaped the forms of development and implementation in “path dependent” trajectories.

Among the eight institutions, several have a history with General Education: Chinese University of Hong Kong once had a four-year curriculum that included General Education, but it was abandoned under pressure to conform to the Hong Kong three-year model. Lingnan University is the “liberal arts” institution within the Hong Kong system, which had already developed a liberal education curricu-

lum. Some institutions had offices of general education that developed elective courses for students. Others, such as City University of Hong Kong, evolved from a polytechnic model and developed “out-of-discipline” courses as electives. In short, there were a variety of already existing conditions, and the development of the first year GE curriculum that began in earnest in 2008 was built on these foundations. Each institution also has its own philosophical emphasis. For Hong Kong Baptist University it is “whole person education;” for City University of Hong Kong it is “professional education;” for Hong Kong Polytechnic University it is “Academic Excellence in a Professional Context” and so forth.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the eight GE programs as of Spring 2011 on three dimensions – name of program/emphasis, core requirements/foundation, and area of study/inquiry distribution requirements. Since the UGC did not mandate a GE curricular structure, no two programs are exactly alike. As in the US, there is a great deal of diversity in design, language, and emphasis across the eight institutions (see Finkelstein & Walker 2008 on patterns of convergence). Some use the term “General Education” to describe their programs while others employ “Core Curriculum” or “Common Core.” One institution has invented the term “Gateway Education” to denote its introductory and foundational purpose; “Whole Person Education” is also used to signal a holistic and broadening approach to student development.

Second, there are different kinds of courses included in the core GE requirements that all students must meet in common. The courses in the core vary from the languages (English and Chinese) to civilization (Chinese and world) to the more traditional great ideas/books (“Dialogue With Humanity” and “Dialogue With Nature” at Chinese University of Hong Kong or “Great Thinkers” at Hong Kong Institute of Education). The distributional requirements, which also contain an array of organizational divisions, include configurations of the standard triumvirate of the humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, the addition of a category devoted to Chinese studies, and/or skills-based categories such as “Creativity and Imagination.”

Third, while no two programs match perfectly, there remains fidelity to a GE structure that includes both core and distributional requirements. Thus, there are some courses that all students will take in common along with distribution categories from which students can select courses. While the categories have the diversity indicated above, there is also, as noted, reverence to the distinction among humanities, sciences, and social sciences. These might be called “Area of Inquiry”, for example, but the disciplinary content and courses within each essentially align with this holy disciplinary trinity. Within the science category, almost every institution has included “technology,” which is a highly valued feature of Hong Kong society, expands the range of courses that might be included, and reflects the applied/pragmatic emphasis in Hong Kong educational pursuits.

Finally, when combining the “core” and “distributional” requirements, the total number of credits devoted to GE varies widely from 38 credits at Hong Kong

Baptist University to 18 credits at University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Eight Hong Kong University's General Education Programs (as of Spring 2011)

| Institution | Name for Program/Emphasis | Core Requirements/Foundation | Areas of Study/Inquiry/Distributional Requirements | Total Credits* |
|--|--|---|---|----------------|
| Chinese University of Hong Kong | University General Education "Prepare students to be lifelong learners and engaged citizens with a global awareness" | - In Dialogue with Humanity - In Dialogue with Nature | - Chinese Cultural Heritage - Nature, Science, and Technology - Society and Culture - Self and Humanity | 21 |
| City University of Hong Kong | "Gateway Education" "GE is the core of an undergraduate education." | - English - Chinese Civilization | - Arts and Humanities - Study of Societies, Social and Business Organizations - Science and Technology | 30 |
| Hong Kong Baptist University | "Whole Person Education" "a foundation for each students' development as a Whole Person" | - University English - University Chinese - Public Speaking - Info Management Technology - Numeracy - Physical Education - History and Civilization - Values and Meaning of Life | "Five Areas of Learning" - Arts - Business - Communication/Visual Arts - Science/Chinese Medicine - Social Sciences | 38 |
| Hong Kong Institute of Education | "To Become an Educated Citizen" | one year-long foundation course tentatively titled "Great Thinkers" | - Person, Interpretation, Perspective - Community, Society, Culture - Nature, Science, Technology | 18 |
| Hong Kong Polytechnic University | "University Core Curriculum" General University Requirements | "Reading" and "Writing" Requirements in English and Chinese Subjects will be given "W" and "R" designation | "Four Cluster Area Requirements" - Human nature, relations and development - Community, organization, and globalization - History, culture and world views - Science, technology and environment | 21 |
| University of Hong Kong | "The Common Core Curriculum" "broaden students' horizon beyond their chosen discipline... explore issues of profound significance to humankind in the 21st century" | | "Four Areas of Inquiry" -Scientific and Technological Literacy -Humanities - Global Issues - China: Culture, State and Society | 18 |
| Hong Kong University of Science and Technology | Common Core Curriculum | | "Seven Common Core Broad Areas" -Humanities - Social Analysis - Science and Technology - Quantitative Reasoning - English Communication - Chinese Communication - Healthy Lifestyle (non-credit) | 27 |
| Lingnan University | "Common Core" "a curriculum with balance between breadth and depth" | - Logic and Critical Thinking - Making of Hong Kong - Understanding Morality - World History and Civilizations | "Five Clusters" -Creativity and Imagination - Humanities and the Arts - Management and Society - Science, Technology and Society -Values, Cultures and Societies | 32 |

* Core plus distribution requirements

GENERAL EDUCATION AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

In every General Education program in Hong Kong, interdisciplinarity has been emphasized as a positive criteria and valued characteristic of a General Education course. But the meaning and actual application of this concept are the source of some tension. In some cases interdisciplinary is interpreted to mean that a course must include multiple disciplines. This is then translated into a perception or requirement that a course must have a team of faculty members from different disciplines to represent the various perspectives, a practice which may conflate the meaning of and difference between “inter” and “multi” disciplinary.

The practice of using faculty teams is more likely to promote *multidisciplinarity* rather than *interdisciplinarity*, the latter of which requires an *integration* of disciplinary perspectives (see Orillion, 2009; Klein & Newell, 1997). Inviting single-discipline experts to represent a disciplinary perspective may simply reinforce, in the eyes of students, the rigid disciplinary division of labor and specialization that GE is trying to discourage. Klein and Newell (1997, p. 393) define interdisciplinary studies “as a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession” and it “draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective.” As they note, this should be the case regardless of whether the course is taught by a single faculty member or a team: “In interdisciplinary courses, whether taught by teams or individuals, faculty interact in designing a course, bringing to light and examining underlying assumptions and modifying their perspectives in the process. They also make a concerted effort to work with students in crafting an integrated synthesis of the separate parts that provides a larger, more holistic understanding of the question, problem, or issue at hand” (Klein & Newell, 1997, p. 404).

An alternative to the multidisciplinary team approach occurs when a single faculty member teaches a course, develops and demonstrates for students the interdisciplinary connections, and links a particular question or issue to a range of disciplinary perspectives and approaches. Most of the Fulbright scholars, as well as staff members, who were involved in teaching and learning centers at Hong Kong universities believed that this was the best approach for interdisciplinary course development. However, it was my perception that there was a greater reluctance among faculty in Hong Kong, as opposed to those in the United States, to take on the individual responsibility for developing an interdisciplinary course in this manner. One faculty development administrator thought that, in order for a faculty member to develop an interdisciplinary course, they would have to be “very confident in their own discipline in order to embrace others.”

Another possible explanation for the interdisciplinary reluctance resides in the emphasis on specialization and authoritative knowledge in the Hong Kong educational culture. For faculty, this means that they are expected to exhibit expert authority in their disciplinary subject matter (Pratt, Kelly & Wong, 1999). This

may discourage efforts at interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary integration, or stretching beyond one's disciplinary boundaries, since to do so might reveal uncertainty or dilettantism. Efforts at interdisciplinarity could also produce intellectual discomfort and potentially delegitimize or undermine the expert authoritative role of the faculty member. A related cultural interpretation, made by a long-time observer of Hong Kong higher education, was that the emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships discouraged imposing oneself in another's discipline and was associated with a respect for proper disciplinary boundaries.

More generally, an environmental factor that may also discourage interdisciplinarity is the particularly strong emphasis among Hong Kong universities on international rankings (Deem, Mok & Lucas 2008). This, in turn, creates equally strong pressures for particular forms of faculty research and publication. In order for faculty to be recognized and rewarded, and for institutions to move up in the international rankings, research publications need to be among the most prestigious journals in each field. Research topics and publications that will carry the greatest weight for the faculty member and the institution tend to be in core disciplinary areas and journals rather than those that are outside of and/or straddle disciplinary areas of concentration. Thus, there are institutional incentives that reinforce disciplinary concentration. These research and publication pressures have also been cited in Hong Kong (as they have elsewhere) as having a negative influence on faculty involvement in and attention to teaching and learning issues and development, which are imperative for preparing for the new GE curriculum (Hanstedt 2010).

The multidisciplinary team approach also has practical significance for generating faculty participation in GE course development. The perceived need to enlist the support of additional faculty might serve as an additional disincentive or obstacle to developing a course, since it requires additional time and effort in recruitment and collaboration. Once team members are enlisted, there is the problem of dividing teaching assignments and the potential fragmentation of the course curriculum and student learning experience. While some have argued that having multiple faculty involved will create greater stability than having a course that is solely dependent upon a single faculty member, if the course itself is designed with the necessity of having all members of the team participate, it is also unlikely that this team will be available and stable over time. Furthermore, it creates the classic problem of the "diffusion of responsibility" where many contribute, but no one person takes full responsibility for ensuring that the course meets intended outcomes and is offered on a regular basis.

Another issue is whether the emphasis on interdisciplinary integration (or multidisciplinary perspectives) at the GE level will be reinforced or undermined at the academic program level. A director of the GE program at one of the Hong Kong institutions expressed concern that interdisciplinarity at one level will be followed by narrow specialization at the next, as students move from GE to their more extended major area of study. This reflects the larger organizational prob-

lem of the “loosely coupled” system of academic institutions (Weick 1976) such that the implementation of an entirely new curricular structure in GE has little impact on the actions of other academic units or sectors that remain independent, autonomous, and largely insulated from the change. In this case it is a particular departmental academic program that may be unaffected along with the content and nature of disciplinary instruction. In Hong Kong style, this curricular disarticulation might be expressed as a summative property--a 1+3 four-year degree, denoting the discrete and less than fully integrated experience of having the additional first year simply bolted on to the existing 3-year structure. It will be interesting to see how or if the GE philosophy is able to penetrate the disciplinary and professional programs of study.

CONCLUSION

Hong Kong is currently engaged in a comprehensive reform of its secondary and tertiary educational system. One of the most significant features of the reform is the extension of the undergraduate degree from three to four years, thereby permitting the development of GE curriculum at all eight universities. This organizationally challenging and administratively complex undertaking is being implemented in spite of Hong Kong’s exceptional comparative international examination performance.

Based on the analysis here, the origins of the reform are related to the end of British rule and the transfer of Hong Kong sovereignty to China, a candid and critically self-reflective analysis of the existing system education, an assessment of deficiencies in student intellectual development, concerns with the competitiveness of Hong Kong graduates, and the shifting demands of an advanced business service economy.

While there was no mandate to implement a US-style GE curriculum, a consensus of opinion seemed to emerge over time in favor of this type of academic program based on remnants of GE and liberal studies courses at several Hong Kong institutions, the congruence of GE student learning outcomes with those deemed most in need of nurturing, and more direct forms of emulation of US-style GE programs by Hong Kong officials and academic administrators familiar with the system. Nonetheless, because each institution was free to formulate their own GE program and curriculum, the net result has been GE with some unique Hong Kong features as well as considerable diversity across institutions.

Among the most salient Hong Kong characteristics are the emphasis on breadth and multidisciplinary as mechanisms to counter the perceived narrow specialization associated with the British model, a greater receptivity to the participation of programs and the inclusion of courses that fall outside the traditional liberal arts and sciences (such as engineering and computer/information sciences), a stress on technology within the GE science category, and the use of Outcomes Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) as a common structuring frame-

work. OBTL is widely embraced by the Hong Kong tertiary sector and it has shaped the development of the curriculum and the design of individual courses. This will facilitate a more systematic and potentially authentic assessment protocol for GE than exists elsewhere. Hong Kong institutions have also been more receptive to the participation of programs that fall outside the traditional liberal arts and sciences – such as engineering and computer/information sciences. Finally, similar to US schools, among Hong Kong institutions there is considerable diversity in the way GE is described and the development of the curricular structure based on the divergent history, student composition, and espoused mission of the particular institutions.

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