

Which Future Will Hong Kong Universities Choose?

Thoughts About Sustaining General Education

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Hong Kong has decided to embark on an audacious journey to do nothing less than re-invent its educational system.

- All eight of the universities are adding a fourth-year to the baccalaureate degree, admitting one-year younger students, providing more choice for students, and requiring substantially more study in general education for all students.
- It has restructured its secondary education by reducing its length to three years, reducing the number of high-stakes tests from two to one, introducing new liberal studies courses, and requiring attendance to age 18 years.
- It has encouraged the development of the sub-degree sector that has 15 or more diverse institutions serving nearly 100,000 students on a self-financing basis. Although relatively invisible to the University sector, these institutions offer what in the United States would be called certificate programs, Associate of Arts degrees, and four-year degrees. Only 4,000 positions are allocated for transfer to the public universities. All institutions offer a significant amount of general education study, with 40-60 percent required in various programs.

Any one of these changes would be a difficult, complicated, and uncertain endeavor. Doing all of them—and at the same time—is almost unheard of. If the phrase “cultural revolution” did not have such unfortunate connotations here, that would be an accurate characterization of what is involved.

Of course, this conference focuses on general education reform in the public universities, which itself is an enormous undertaking. All eight universities have established goals for holistic student learning far beyond studying a single specialization; designed new programs of general education to intentionally cultivate those outcomes; designed new courses; recruited many new and existing faculty members to teach the courses; allocated resources to support the new programs; and seem to be ready for an auspicious launch in Fall 2012. This is an amazing development that is the happy result of coordinated work of the universities and the government. Within the universities it has involved the collaboration of top administrators, faculty members, and non-academic staff. This capstone conference rightly celebrates these many achievements.

But we would be amiss if we did not acknowledge that universities are notoriously difficult to change. They, no more than other organizations, do not like to reinvent themselves. Frederick Rudolph, the academic historian, has made this point vividly. :

“A young professor was quoted in a 1911 book on the curriculum as saying, “The progress of this institution will depend on the death rate of the faculty.” Prof. Rudolph observed, “The professor was an optimist. By the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, academic institutions had developed an authority that made the course of study a jealously guarded compound of special interests. By then, it seldom mattered who died.”

Po Chung, a visionary Hong Kong businessman, recognized that adding a significant component of general education to the new four-year baccalaureate degree involved “systematic change.” He knew from his own experience that such change, if it were to succeed, needed a great deal of support. He graciously, and strategically, provided the funds to support a cadre of Fulbright Scholars to work with their Hong Kong colleagues, elbow to elbow, to develop the new programs. Glenn Shive, Director of the Hong Kong America Center, implemented this vision effectively, even creatively, by recruiting an exceptional group of American Fulbright Scholars with expertise in general education. The scholars gave speeches, led seminars and workshops, and consulted with virtually all who invited them—primarily faculty members across the full range of academic specializations and administrators. From my point of view, this has been a remarkable vision by Po Chung and a remarkable group of Fulbrighters who have worked with their colleagues—not to impose their own ideas--but to help their hosts to develop the best academic programs possible for Hong Kong students.

As the new general education programs are about to be implemented, and as this magnificently conceived and executed Fulbright program comes to a close, my thoughts turn to the future. As much as I admire this initiative and the individuals involved, I remain staggered by the mountain of steps that must be completed in order for the vision to be fully realized. And I am cautioned by Prof. Rudolph’s conclusion of his classic study of the history of the curriculum in the United States,

“The issue before the colleges and universities was stated over and over again by college and university presidents, by deans, and by curriculum committees: ‘The central problem is ... relevant breadth versus a limited and dangerous

irresponsible competence.” But, alas, he concludes that their pleas were mostly unheeded.

“Concentration was the bread and butter of the vast majority of professors, the style they knew and approved, the measure of departmental strength and popularity. Breadth, distribution, and general education were the hobby horses of new presidents, ambitious deans, and well-meaning humanists who were elected to curriculum committees as a gesture of token support for the idea of liberal learning. When that gesture collided with the interests of the department and the major field, only rarely did the general prevail over the special.”

It would be foolish to disregard the implications this warning.

At this juncture, I can envision three different scenarios for the future of general education in Hong Kong. Having been here for six short weeks, as well as one week in 2009, I do not know enough to predict which scenario will evolve. But let me briefly describe three alternative possibilities.

Scenario 1. Success- the vision is realized

For this to happen, the following will have to occur. Indeed, much has already happened.

- Large numbers of faculty members are continuously recruited, because there will be turnover, to teach and revise general education courses. These new faculty members will learn what general education is and how their courses are distinctive in serving general education purposes, and they become committed to this new form of education.
- Teaching staff learn to work collaboratively to implement a “program” of general education; in the words of my friend Eugene Rice, they move from a vision of “my work” to one of “our work.”
- Instructors, in large part, change their pedagogy “from teaching to learning,” in which students and their whole development occupy center stage.
- Students learn to abandon their comfortable rote learning and regurgitating the “correct” answers on examinations. Like their oprofessors, they will learn to venture outside their “comfort zones.”
- Students will come to understand the nature of general education, why it is an essential part of their education, and will not have to ask “Why do I have to take this course.”
- Institutions will invest in continuing faculty development programs, so that professors can learn from early experience, discuss both pros and cons of what has happened individually and collectively, and make mid-course corrections in

their courses and programs.

- General education and the majors will become integrated, because as the late Ernest Boyer noted, “Rather than divide the undergraduate experience into separate camps—general versus specialized—the curriculum at a college of quality will bring the two together.’ Specialists recognize the value of general education and build on that learning by promoting connected learning, higher order intellectual skills, and perspectives like globalization and diversity in their specialized courses.
- Student affairs staff will develop a range of extracurricular activities that encourage student learning in ways that supplement and complement classroom learning.
- Presidents, provosts, deans, and department chairs embrace general education, speak knowledgeably and favorably about its value, and allocate financial and human resources to general education. They will not take the resources gained from involvement in general education and use them to enhance research or the majors at the expense of general education.
- Institutions will provide rewards for faculty who are effective teachers in general education, hopefully by embracing what the Boyer and Rice call “a broader definition of scholarship.” This recognizes that faculty members actually do more scholarship than publishing in their disciplinary journals. They also apply their knowledge in service to the community, integrate ideas across academic disciplines, and engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning. In this scenario, faculty will be rewarded for the rich variety of research they do related to general education.
- Universities will establish effective programs of student advisement to help students make choices that are right for them.
- Universities will assure that their public spokespersons are able to educate the public about the “practical value of general/liberal education.” It will be especially important to explain to parents why a broad education is important for their sons and daughters and how it will help them succeed in their professions.
- Universities will establish programs to assess the extent to which students achieve the expected learning outcomes, provide feedback to the professors and staff, and expect them to use the results to continuously improve the programs.
- Hong Kong citizens and public officials will continue to provide the necessary financial support for the new programs as the new initiatives send their tender new roots deeper into the academic soil and become institutionalized.
- The Hong Kong government, including the University Grants Committee, will sustain a strong, unified system of postsecondary education with differentiated

functions among its institutions. This includes greater coordination between public and private providers and subdegree and university sectors.

- Employers will be pleased with university graduates who are more broadly educated, can think more creatively and solve unscripted problems, have a strong sense of their Hong Kong identity, are more prepared to cope with the demands of globalization, and are more effective world citizens.

As we all know, much has been accomplished already at each of the Hong Kong Universities, but I doubt that any has yet accomplished each of these agendas. And by 2016 the reality is that ALL of these tasks—or their equivalents-- must be completed for this scenario to come true.

Scenario 2. Falling Short

The program will be launched to great fanfare, but after a brief very hot fire, the flame will be extinguished, and there will a disappointing reversion to “business as usual”—with the exception that the universities will have a four-year degree and a hollowed-out general education structure in place. Hong Kong will join the long tradition of grand innovations in general education in the United States that captured the imagination of a small band of innovators but failed to become institutionalized.

Many factors have led to this outcome in my country.

- Leaders whose visions drive the innovation move on to other positions, retire, or even die, and their successors do not have their passion, drive, or deep understanding of what general educational programs are about.
- The reward structure fails to allow faculty members, however effective, to have successful careers teaching general education courses.
- New faculty members are recruited with different views of what is important for students, and competing new priorities emerge.
- The ranking based on research output continues to drive the definition of academic reputation for excellence, and general education fades into insignificance, except as a source of funds to support more research.
- Major social changes occur that make current versions of general education less appealing. For example, in the United States during the late 1960s and early 70s hundreds of innovative new colleges and programs of general education were created, but with the arrival of a recession later in the 1970s the focus of students and their parents changed to narrow preparation for a job, and many of these institutions and programs were phased out.

The point is that none of these factors need to happen. But a sober assessment

necessitates the acknowledgement that such things have occurred historically much more frequently than innovators would like to believe.

Scenario 3. A mixed outcome

- Some institutions will do very well with general education, even making it a “signature program” for which it has an excellent reputation. Others will do less well.
- Even in institutions that do not excel in general education across the curriculum, there will be pockets of effective and dynamic programs.
- Some pockets and programs will have committed teachers, who are determined to stay and do what they believe in, even if they lack institutional support. But they are subject to burn-out by continuing to fight a persistently unsupportive bureaucracy.

Well, which scenario will Hong Kong universities choose? It is not for me to say, because, like all consultants, including this remarkable group of Fulbright scholars, I will leave for home, and our Hong Kong colleagues will be left with the challenge of implementing and sustaining general education and their remarkable reforms. It is your University, your higher education system, your students, your community. Mr. Po Chung and the Fulbright cadre have done all they can for you. You will have to do the rest of the heavy lifting.

If you find the first scenario preferable to the other two, as I do, then there is much work yet to be done to make that happen. Indeed, all of the items listed in that scenario constitute an “action plan” for the future. As we have all learned, general education is far more than a curriculum for students. It is a total University commitment, because everything that happens on a University campus has implications for the education of students. If you want the kinds of generally educated students that are envisioned in each of your statements of graduate attributes, then there is still much work ahead—at least until the first cohort of students under this curriculum graduate in 2016. As Winston Churchill famously said in a different context, “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. It is the end of the beginning.”

And what a splendid beginning it will be!