

LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

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TEACHING  LEARNING CENTRE

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From the Editor:

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We are much honoured to have the President of Lingnan University to contribute a paper on liberal arts education to make up this edition and the next "Learning Matters at Lingnan". Staff and students alike will find these two editions inspiring which provide a clear message about the mission and goals of this University.

(Please note that a modified version of the paper was published in the South China Morning Post dated 8th March 2001.)



What Price Liberal Arts Education — Part I

The concept of a "liberal education" or "liberal arts education" has a long and honourable ancestry in the East as well as in the West. In the medieval times, a "liberal" person studied the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). In the teaching of Confucius, a scholar should be adept at 六藝 viz. 禮、樂、射、御、書、數. However, the most distinguished expression of liberal education is found in the American liberal arts colleges and to a considerable extent in the British universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Hong Kong has the reputation of being a dynamic place, always open to new ideas. This is of course true for the private sector. Its expeditious response to changing market conditions accounts for much of Hong Kong's economic success over the years. Even the Hong Kong Government is not slow in cottoning on to a new idea. But why are the policy makers, the politicians and the University Grants Committee (UGC) finding it so difficult to get their heads around the idea of "liberal arts", when it comes to deciding how much money should be given to (or, more accurately, taken away from) each of the higher education institutions in Hong Kong this year? Admittedly, it is a new concept for Hong Kong. But aren't we, Hong Kong people, supposed to be good at learning new concepts? What has gone wrong here? The answer is simple. They have failed to recognise the importance of liberal arts education in making the economy, particularly the "New Economy", tick.

The chief characteristic of Hong Kong's approach to education might be defined as "utilitarian": both students and parents are keen that it should lead, in some direct and clearly visible way, to a career. The choice of career is

determined, as often as not, by the prospective, or worse, the immediate financial rewards it will offer. They have however failed to see that it is no longer possible to predict the prospect of a specific career in this ever changing world.

One of the major characteristics of a “liberal” or “liberal arts” education is that it is *not* focussed on a specific career, but aims instead to provide an environment both within the curriculum and outside it that helps students to learn how to think, how to be creative, how to be flexible, how to get on with others — and how to go on learning for the rest of their lives. As one distinguished American Professor of Education put it, in the course of a visit to Hong Kong: “When you’re through learning — you’re through!”

And this is particularly true in the “New Economy”. It has been calculated that, in the US, the average graduate emerging from College these days will have eight different jobs during his working life, which will require him to work in three different professions or occupations. Top employers are already recognising this in Hong Kong, by *not* specifying the subject which graduates must have studied before joining them: 35% of the top jobs on offer to new graduates last year were open to graduates in *any* subject.

More importantly, in the “New Economy”, science and technology are not all that we need. As the Chief Executive of the HKSAR said in his policy address, innovation is equally or even more important than technology. Innovation is important for every single economic activity we undertake in an ever changing techno-economic environment. Innovativeness cannot be learned but can only be groomed through the acquisition of non-timebound qualities such as diversity, flexibility and creativity. Liberal arts education aims at exactly doing this.

One of the most common and serious misconceptions about “liberal arts” is that it comprises certain *subjects* — and that these are (by definition) “arts” or “humanities” subjects. This is an understandable confusion on the part of those who are *not* in the business of education — and of higher education, in particular. It is less excusable on the part of the funding agency — who *are* in the business, or of the policy makers, who are supposed to know something (at least) about *everybody’s* business! But almost all the best American liberal arts institutions offer science and engineering, at undergraduate level. So what is it that makes a “liberal arts” education distinctive?

(The answer will be provided in the next edition.)

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