

32/2002

From the Editor:

20 March 2002

'Learning Matters at Lingnan' are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the University. If you feel you have something which might be appropriate for inclusion in an issue of this publication, then please forward it to the TLC. I would be delighted if staff (and not only academic staff) from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre were to be prominent or even occasional contributors.



Research Questions

Major Findings

Do We Add Value to Students?

Prompted by an increasing concern for quality in higher education in Hong Kong, a study was recently conducted at this University to measure the influence of our liberal arts education on students' academic, social and personal growth. Simply put, the purpose of the study is to assess if Lingnan has added value to our students as a result of their university experience and the kind of education they receive. The study adopts an approach of assessing university impact using data collected from individual students about their subjective experience during the university years and their perceptions of the value of the educational experience. Data were collected from two large samples of students (706 and 998) across all years of study by way of a questionnaire for a wide range of variables about the students' background, university experience and learning outcomes.

The four key research questions are thus:

1. Do students change or develop during the university years, and if so, how much and in what directions?
2. What are the students' experiences in university, and how are they related to outcomes, environment, and students' background characteristics?
3. To what extent are student changes or development associated with the university experiences and the various sub-environments within the university?
4. Finally, what feedback or implications for policies and practice can be provided for university administrators and practitioners to improve and facilitate better quality experiences of students?

A vast amount of significant data was generated from the study. The following provides a gist of the major results:

- ◆ An analysis of the students' experience provides evidence to indicate that the university years are a time of student change on a broad front. Students did not just report significant gains in subject knowledge and in a range of general cognitive and intellectual skills, but also change or development on a broad array of value, attitudinal, psychosocial, and moral dimensions.
- ◆ Change of growth was also evidenced as students progressed from one year to another during their university career. A greater magnitude of change was particularly observed between the first and second year of study, and between the first and final year before graduation.

Implication

- ◆ By way of stepwise multiple regression analyses, it was discovered that students' involvement in the university experience and interaction with the institutional environment were by far the two most important predictors of student outcomes on a range of cognitive and affective attributes.
- ◆ However, student demographics in terms of those fixed attributes such as sex, age, and prior academic ability were contributing less to the prediction of university outcome. The analysis results clearly indicated that the quality of involvement of students in the university experience and its activities was one of the most important determinants in university outcomes.
- ◆ The potency of the student-teacher interaction on university outcome was confirmed. Although not being the strongest factor associated with the various dimensions of students' self-reported gains, the experience with lecturers was found significantly related to all aspects of gains especially for general educational development. Moreover, the interaction with lecturers formed one aspect of the student's university experience that largely predicted university outcome on a range of cognitive and affective attributes. Further analysis of the university environment revealed that when students perceived a positive relationship with teachers, they tend to report a higher quality involvement in university experiences overall, especially in course learning activities.
- ◆ Students' involvement in campus residential activities was significantly related to the personal development gains as reported by students. The comparison between the residential group and the non-residential group generally found that hostel-living students reported more personal development than the commuters. Further, the hostel-living students also reported a higher level of involvement in numerous university activities including the use of the library, in clubs and organisations, and of course, in residential events and functions.
- ◆ Campus residence was also identified as a significant predictor of students' satisfaction with the university they attended. Development is fostered when students feel part of a community where members engage in meaningful interactions with each other. The challenge for institutions is to create communities if they do not already exist. Institutions such as Lingnan University with residence halls on campus stand a better chance to wield the greatest influence.

The major implication from the study is for universities and their managers and teachers to shape the educational and interpersonal experiences and settings of their campus in ways that will promote learning, to induce students to become involved in their university experience and activities to exploit the various university settings and opportunities to their fullest. It is important that institutional policies and practices are oriented towards developing a climate in which students' responsibility and active participation in their own university experience are promoted.

Maureen Tam
Director
Teaching & Learning Centre