

LEARNING MATTERS at LINGNAN

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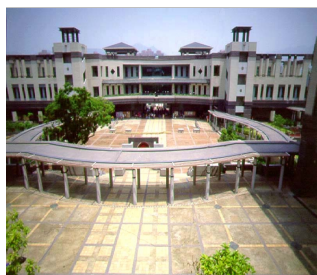
TEACHING  LEARNING CENTRE

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From the Editor:

11 April 2001

This edition is a continuation of the exposition on “liberal arts” education by the President of this University. It is a good opportunity for all of us to understand better what liberal arts education means for us and to clarify those misconceptions we may have about this concept of education that makes Lingnan so unique in the local higher education scene.



What Price Liberal Arts Education — Part II

What is it that makes a “liberal arts” education distinctive?

The answer lies in the *process* by which the education is delivered — and received. The core of this is in the nature of the relationship between students and staff: close, intimate, caring. Its distinguishing characteristic is its view of what education is *for*, and of how that objective can best be achieved.

Put simply, the objective of liberal education is to produce thinkers, not workers: the education should be useful — but not utilitarian. It is therefore not so much a question of *what* is taught but of *how* it is taught. The question is not so much about *subjects*, but about *processes*.

These processes, very resources-intensive, are advanced and fostered as much by what happens outside the classroom as inside. The American liberal arts college environment and the college system at Oxford and Cambridge is recognised throughout the world as a close approximation to an ideal environment for the education of young adults: it enables them to get on with the important business of educating themselves and each other.

As one academic wisely observed: “the best curriculum is that one that interferes least with the student’s education!” Students are allowed to have a liberal choice of subjects. In many cases, a student can design his/her own major programme. It is difficult to re-create from scratch an environment that has taken many years to construct. But it is possible to take and apply some of its lessons in the local environment, without necessarily having at one’s disposal the endowments of the American liberal arts and Oxbridge colleges. We cannot aspire to the one-to-one tutorial as the basis of our teaching (in *all* subjects, not just “arts” subjects). But we *can* try and deliver most of it in small groups, endeavour to teach our foreign languages by a process of “total immersion”, and offer our students the opportunity to develop a one-to-one relationship with at least one member of staff, through a system of academic advisers. We can’t reproduce the intimate scale and feel of an Oxbridge college, with a tutor on every staircase, or the beautiful landscape of an American liberal arts college which inspires creativity — but we *can* try and give all of our students an extended experience of living on campus, away from the protective and sometimes not study conducive atmosphere of their home, of learning to get on with their fellow man (and woman), and of taking responsibility for organising their own lives.



What price a liberal arts institution in Hong Kong? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be “Too high — at any price”; too high, not in absolute terms (as Lingnan is given the lowest student unit cost), but relative to the utilitarian value it is erroneously assigned. So the UGC sticks to its rigid, subject-based formula, giving its “moral” support to, but not recognising the resource implications of, the different and distinctive institutional mission to which a small liberal arts institution aspires.

The “liberal education” we aspire to deliver is not wholly inward-looking, and campus-based. We aim also to foster a sense of responsibility towards the community, by encouraging our students to engage in a broad range of community services. We also want our students to lift their eyes to the wider world beyond Hong Kong. For this reason, we need to provide our students with opportunities to go abroad, spending perhaps a semester or a summer in a culture totally different from that in which they have grown up. And, for those who do not go abroad under our scheme, we try to attract a significant number of students from other countries to come and spend a semester with us — with a resulting benefit, we trust, both to them and to us.

It may be claimed that *all* universities (or at least all the local universities) are trying to do these things — but this is not wholly true. There is only one small, residential local institution which places the concept of a liberal arts education at the heart of its mission — and this is the one that has been singled out for the unkindest cut of all. 3.9% (the average cut) is not small, but it’s not drastic. 8.3% (the cut that Lingnan is asked to accept) on a budget that is already the smallest of the lot, and for an institution that has limited initial funding and is still in its early stage of development, is certainly a cut too far. It calls into question whether the distinctive nature of what we are trying to do is appreciated in the places where the decisions are taken.

Two of the many misconceptions about liberal arts institutions are that they should not teach postgraduates and they do very little research. Both of these are mistaken, as can be seen by looking at the publications record of the best American liberal arts colleges, and at the increasing number of graduate programmes they offer. Worse, both these misconceptions carry resource implications, which are detrimental to the small liberal arts institution in Hong Kong.

If the intimacy of the teacher-student relationship, and the benefits of campus living, are to be a reality for a liberal arts university, it must remain small. Lingnan has about 2000 students: most American institutions have between 1000 and 2000, and some are no more than 500–600. Within reason, the smaller the better (pedagogically speaking). But it is as true here as in other areas of life that “size matters”! As a small university, we lack economies of scale so long as we remain small. This is an aspect of our distinctive mission for which we need to be compensated — not penalised.

What liberal arts institutions aspire to transmit is “values and virtues”, not *primarily* knowledge and skills. But a student who has enjoyed the benefits of a truly “liberal education” will have acquired — *en passant*, as it were — knowledge and skills which will be of inestimable value to him or her, not only in the career(s) that they choose to pursue thereafter, but in the whole of their life.

A modest ambition, in this utilitarian community of ours, but one which the community will surely wish to support.

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