

The Hong Kong Education Reform: the End of the Beginning

In September 2012, the first cohort of students with six years of secondary education entered Hong Kong's universities. This was a significant step in the conversion of Hong Kong to the new 6+4 system of education: (six-years secondary school to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education – HKDSE) + (four-years university).

The main intention of the reform is to extend secondary education for all students to *grade 12*, while at the same time implementing a more open curriculum and pedagogy (Hong Kong Education Commission: 2000). But the transition for three-year to four-year undergraduate degrees has presented the universities with a unique opportunity to redesign the undergraduate curriculum (Education Bureau: 2008; University Grants Committee: 2010).

In a previous conference presentation the author noted that the Hong Kong experience is an unusual opportunity to learn more about the forces at work in contemporary higher education, the formulation of responses to those forces and the effectiveness of these responses (Mole, 2011). This paper considers these issues from the perspective of the curriculum reform.

Typically, the starting point for redesign is an existing set of dense, programmatic three-year degrees. While it might have been expected that across different disciplines and institutions a range of new models would have been adopted, there has been a remarkable convergence. The standard curriculum structure model that has emerged includes a substantial *university common core* taking up one-quarter to one-third of the degree, comprising English-language and other competency oriented subjects and *general education* – a requirement for liberal studies. This liberal studies requirement is not simply the addition of humanities and social science to technical and professional programmes, but a genuine effort to create a cross-disciplinary experience.

This common core is complemented in most cases by a broad disciplinary foundation and a set of specialist majors and minors.

The paper provides a detailed analysis of the structural features of the new curriculum across the eight local, UGC-funded institutions.

While the discipline-specific component of the new curriculum is largely a reorganization of existing elements designed to enable broader and more flexible study paths – in itself, no small achievement, the extension of competency-oriented elements and the introduction of required liberal studies breaks new ground.

This is in line with the themes of the educational reform as a whole, and the Hong Kong experiment may be said to represent an effort to realize a progressive agenda widely shared by theorists and practitioners, an agenda that takes on board the desirability of broader graduate attributes embracing competencies valued by employers, civic engagement and a global outlook, while emphasizing a learner-centered pedagogy in achieving these attributes (Kandiko, Camille B. and Blackmore, 2010; Goodlad, 2000; Tagg, 2003; Barnet and Coate, 2005; Bok, 2006,).

US models have had a particular salience in Hong Kong's move to a four-year degree, and an interesting sidelight on the process is the role taken by Fulbright scholars funded by a local philanthropist and coordinated by the Hong Kong American Centre (Hong Kong American Center, 2012).

While this agenda for undergraduate education has considerable rhetorical leverage among higher-education managers, on-the-ground success will be harder to achieve and sustain. Variance across Hong Kong universities in the way in which the common core is to be delivered reveal some of the potential issues. In shaping models for delivery, it has been necessary to take into account available capability and resources. The typical model includes the delivery of a core-of-the-core that all students must complete, plus a distributed requirement delivered by regular academic units.

The paper reports on a series of structured interviews with senior managers at the local universities reflecting on the sources of the reform and their experience in making arrangements to deliver the new curriculum.

The Hong Kong reform may now be said to be at the *end of the beginning*. Future work will be needed to track the full implementation of the new curriculum and to evaluate the achievement as students move toward graduation from four-year degree programmes in 2016.

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