

## **Liberal Arts Education at Lingnan University, Hong Kong: Opportunities and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

Lingnan University (LU) in Hong Kong provides whole-person education combining the best of Chinese and Western liberal arts traditions. LU recently enhanced its liberal arts education by developing critical skills and attitudes required for long-term success in the rapidly changing world (e.g., critical thinking, entrepreneurship, innovation, and leadership), refocusing the balance between disciplinary/vocational training and whole-person development, establishing new programs that meet student and societal needs, encouraging high-impact pedagogies, and expanding residential education. Assessments of student and employer satisfaction indicate appreciation for LU's liberal arts approach. Other universities in China are likely to face similar opportunities and challenges, so LU's experiences can provide a roadmap for success and evidence of the ultimate value of liberal arts education.

*Keywords:* liberal arts education, general education, whole-personal development, higher education, Hong Kong

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## Introduction

Liberal arts education combines in-depth study with broad education to achieve goals such as knowledge of human culture and the natural world, intellectual and practical skills, and personal and social responsibility intended to prepare graduates to deal with “complexity, diversity, and change” (Association of American College and Universities, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). The form of liberal arts education can be exemplified by the small liberal arts colleges in the United States which are typically residential, focused primarily on undergraduates, and characterized by active student engagement through small classes using active learning pedagogies with frequent student-faculty interaction (Brighouse, 2019; Ferrall, 2011; Hirsch, 1999). Although the demise of liberal arts education has been predicted (Altshuler, 2015; Dutt-Ballerstad, 2019; Jones, 2016; Rosenberg, 2020), others claim that modified versions of liberal arts education represent the future of higher education (Altshuler, 2015; Jones, 2016; Dutt-Ballerstad, 2019; Rosenberg, 2020; Hirsch, 1999; Ferrall, 2011; Brighouse, 2019; Mintz, 2020; Moner et al., 2020).

Lingnan University (LU), located in Tuen Mun, Hong Kong, identifies itself

as “the liberal arts university in Hong Kong” (Lingnan University, 2021a) and was recognized as one of the “Top 10 Liberal Arts College in Asia” by Forbes (2015). In this paper, we will examine the history of the establishment of Lingnan University as a liberal arts university in Hong Kong, explore the current “liberal arts” practices at the university, and finally discuss strategies for addressing current and future challenges facing liberal arts education at Lingnan University, in China, and elsewhere in the world.

## Brief History of Lingnan University

The early history of the university that was originally founded in Guangzhou in 1888 (Lingnan University, 2020b) and has operated under a number of names (Christian College in China, Canton Christian College, Lingnan College, Lingnan University) has been reviewed by Wang (2007). Lingnan was unique among other Christian colleges in China at that time because it was chartered by the Regents of the State of New York and managed by a board of trustees, making Lingnan independent of any single religious group (Cheng, 2009) which allowed more independence, but increased the challenge of financing.

Lingnan administration and staff made great efforts to make their institution relevant to the local context. Chinese academics took over the administration duties of the university in 1927 with a board in China overseeing local staff while the original board administered Western staff. The early development of the university was based on the concepts of biculturalism and two-way cultural interaction, but was also influenced by its Christian focus. In order to make the curriculum more relevant to Chinese society the university developed programmes in the liberal arts and professional training in agriculture, sericulture, civil engineering, commerce and medicine. Lingnan was the first coeducational institution of higher learning in China. The university relocated to Hong Kong in response to the Anti-Japanese War. In 1952 Lingnan merged with Sun Yat-Sen University in response to education reforms in the mainland. Lingnan was re-established in Hong Kong as Lingnan College in 1967, moved to its current location in Tuen Mun in 1995, and achieved university status and was renamed as Lingnan University in 1999.

As President Leonard K. H. Cheng stated, “the ‘Lingnan Spirit’, marked by passion, loyalty, perseverance, openness to ideas and cultures, and readiness to

serve, guided not only our forerunners in Guangzhou, who established Christian College in China (the University’s initial name) in 1888, but also our founders in Hong Kong who devoted themselves selflessly to the re-establishment of the institution in 1967. Over the past five decades, it also inspired countless individuals who came together to build the University, contributing to Hong Kong and beyond by upholding our motto ‘Education for Service’” (Lau, 2017). Many aspects of the founding culture of Lingnan were transferred to Lingnan University in Hong Kong including a multicultural and inclusive education style, education and research with a humanitarian focus, the courage to innovate and the spirit to explore the unknown, and whole-person education with a focus of both knowledge and character.

Lingnan University reclaimed its role as a liberal arts university in Hong Kong under President Edward Chen Kwan-yiu who served from 1995 to 2007. His vision of the key characteristics of a liberal arts college included a small, residential, teaching-focused campus, interactions, interdisciplinary studies, intra-curricular activities, and international exposure (the 4 “I”s), close interaction between teachers and students both in and out of the classroom, small class sizes with

dedicated teachers, experiential learning, and international exposure (Chen, 2011). Key components of Lingnan University's liberal arts education including the General Education Programme, the Integrated Learning Programme, service-learning, and the movement towards a fully residential campus were initiated during the early years of its reestablishment as a university. Current President Leonard Cheng, who joined Lingnan University in 2013, has been a strong advocate for the further development of liberal arts education. According to President Cheng, "as the liberal arts university in Hong Kong, we believe our education can best prepare students for success in an unpredictable future, and we pride ourselves on our ability to transform students into global citizens in a rapidly changing world" (Lingnan University, 2017).

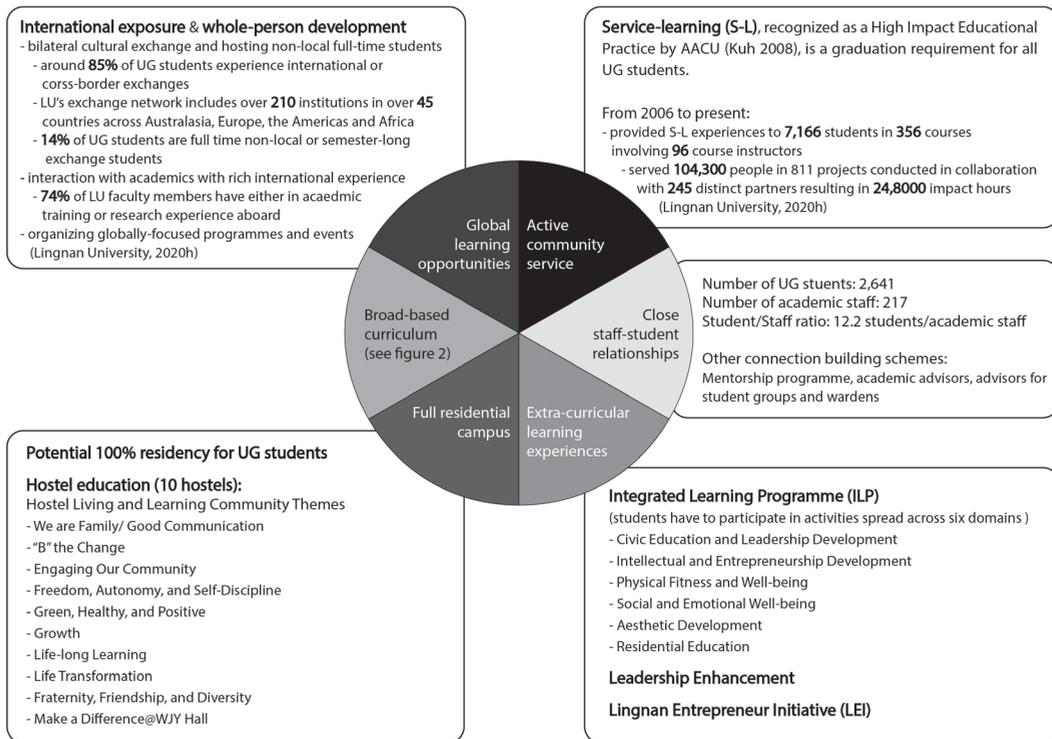
Lingnan's educational philosophy motto successfully nurtured many Lingnan alumni who made major contributions in Chinese history throughout China Modern History. Chen Yuan 陈垣 (1880-1971), a Lingnan University alumnus, was known as one of the "Four Greatest Historians" of Modern China. Together with Lü Simian 吕思勉 (1884-1957), Chen Yinke 陈寅恪 (1890-1969) and Ch'ien Mu 钱穆 (1895-1990). He is known by his work in the fields of

religious history, Yuan Dynasty history, textology and textual criticism. Paul Kwong, a graduate of Lingnan College, was an Anglican Bishop from Hong Kong. The renowned musician Xian Xinghai 冼星海 (or Sinn Sing Hoi, 1905-1945), a graduate from Canton Lingnan University affiliated high school, was one of the earliest generation of Chinese composers. Influenced by western classical music, he composed the best known the Yellow River Cantata which greatly inspired Chinese nation with patriotic spirits during the Anti-Japanese War. The Chairman of Hong Kong Winglung Bank Dr. Wu Po-ko 伍步高, Michael and Executive Director Dr. Wu Po-kong 伍步高, Patrick made significant contributions to not only in the banking and insurance industry, but also to the Hong Kong and China Education sectors.

Hong Kong Maxim's Caterers Limited founders and entrepreneurs Mr. S.T. Wu 伍舜德 (1912-2003) and Dr. James Wu 伍沾德 (1922-2020) graduated from Canton Lingnan and established one of the most popular Cantonese restaurants, international restaurants with distinctive cuisine features and Maxim Cake Shops in Hong Kong. The pioneer of the "New School" of the Wuxia 武侠 genre in the 20th century Mr Chen Wentong 陈文统 (1924-2009), better known by his pen

**Figure 1**

*Critical Components of Curriculum at Lingnan University*



name Liang Yusheng 梁羽生, Chen was another Lingnan alumnus, alongside Jin Yong 金庸 (1924-2018) and Gu Long 古龙 (1938-1985).

ments including the Integrated Learning Programme, service-learning, residential education, and international exchange (Figure 1).

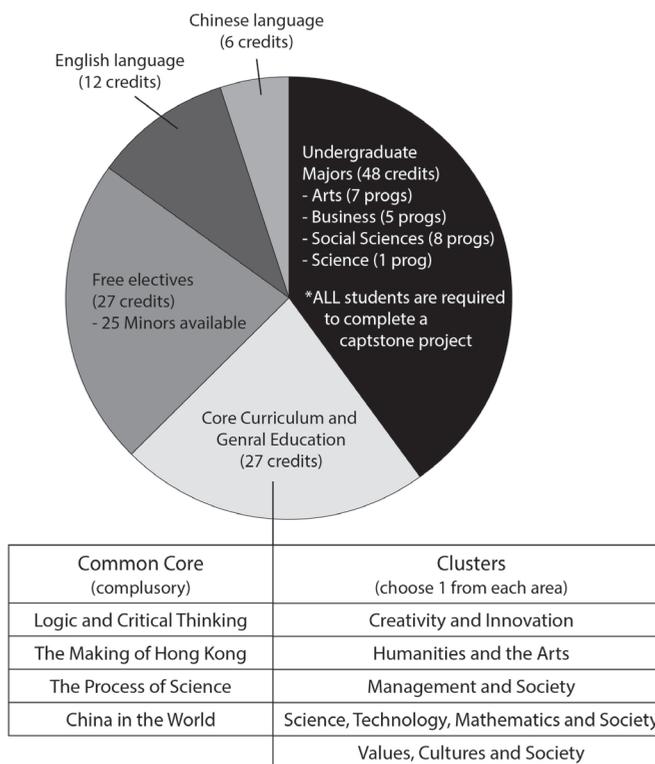
### Curriculum and Philosophy

Liberal arts education at Lingnan University involves both curricular programmes including majors, minors and language enhancement (Figure 1) and extra-curricular/co-curricular compo-

### Curricular Programmes

The academic credits required for graduation are divided between undergraduate majors, language enhancement, core curriculum and general education, and free electives (Figure 1). Successful

**Figure 2**  
*Critical Co-Curricular Activities at Lingnan University*



completion of a major requires students to complete a “capstone experience”.

Lingnan University recently established two new majors intended to exemplify the best of liberal arts education and prepare liberal arts students with relevant technical skills. The Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Global Development and Sustainability provides with a multi-campus and multi-country learning experience in at least two different continents focusing

on interdisciplinary studies with specific professional study areas (Lingnan University, 2021c). Students may choose to study in or visit a number of prestigious partner universities (e.g. Fudan University, the London School of Economics and Political Science, National Taiwan University, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Waseda University and Yonsei University). The LEO Dr David P. Chan Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Data

Science Programme provides training in an emerging interdisciplinary field that integrates knowledge and skills from computer science, statistics/mathematics and artificial intelligence with critical and out-of-the box thinking to process big datasets with different formats from various sources (Lingnan University, 2021d).

The General Education Programme was established as “the hallmark of Lingnan in that it especially embodies the University’s liberal arts philosophy and tradition and aims at a whole person development” (Lingnan University, 2021e). As part of the educational reform in Hong Kong (University Grants Committee [UGC], 2012), Lingnan University expanded and redesigned its General Education Programme in order to encourage students to think critically, appreciate the values of their own and different cultures, recognise the complexity of the modern, rapidly, interdependent world, and understand personal responsibilities in society. Lingnan University attempts to provide an educational foundation by requiring all students to take four “common core” courses and provide breadth of exposure by having students choose courses from five “clusters” (Figure 2). The common core courses, required of all undergraduate students, were developed and sequenced to allow them build

on each other to enhance the students’ learning experience. “The Making of Hong Kong” and “China in the World” provide students with a sense of rooted globalism while “Logic and Critical Thinking” and “The Process of Science” provide students with a grounding in critical thinking and problem solving. Students choose one course from each of the following clusters: Creativity and Innovation, Humanities and the Arts, Management and Society, Values, Science Technology, Mathematics and Society, and Cultures and Society.

Recently, Lingnan University established two non-degree offering units to contribute to Lingnan’s liberal arts education by embedding science and performing arts across the university and facilitating collaborations on STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics)- related credit and non-credit bearing activities. The Science Unit, established in 2015 (Lingnan University, 2021f) offers the common core course “The Process of Science”, courses in the Science, Mathematics, Technology, and Society and Creativity and Innovation Clusters, and a minor in Environmental and Scientific Literacy. The Wong Bing Lai Music and Performing Arts Unit provides performances, activities, and courses to enrich music and

performing arts education and enjoyment (Lingnan University, 2021g).

The Centre for English and Additional Languages was established to enhance the English language and thinking skills of its students and to provide language support to help students succeed in their academic studies (Lingnan University, 2021h). The Chinese Language Education and Assessment Centre was established to improve the Chinese language listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities, humanistic literacy and critical thinking skills of Lingnan University students (Lingnan University, 2021i).

### **Extra-Curricular/Co-Curricular Programmes**

The Integrated Learning Programme (ILP), operated by the Office of Student Affairs, aims to enhance students' whole person development by providing "a platform to unleash their potentials and let their talents grow" by extending their learning beyond the classroom (Lingnan University, 2021j). As a graduation requirement, students are required to earn credits from the over 400 programmes offered annually in the domains of civic education and leadership development, intellectual and entrepreneurship development, physical education and well-being,

social and emotional well-being, aesthetic development, and residential education (Lingnan University, 2021j).

Service-learning, an experiential pedagogy integrating meaningful community service, academic learning, and student reflection to enhance subject matter mastery and encourage civic engagement, is recognized as a High Impact Educational Practice by AACU (Kuh, 2008). Since the establishment of the Office of Service Learning in 2006, the university has provided service-learning experiences to 7166 students in 356 courses involving 96 course instructors, serving over 100,000 people in more than 800 projects conducted in collaboration with 245 distinct partners resulting in 24,800 impact hours (Lingnan University, 2021k).

Since 2016-17, all undergraduate students are required to successfully complete at least one credit-bearing service-learning course that includes 30 hours of Service-Learning experience in order to graduate.

Approximately 85% of Lingnan University undergraduate students experience international or crossborder educational exchanges. Lingnan University's exchange network includes over 210 institutions located in over 45 countries across Australasia, Europe, the Americas and Africa (Lingnan University, 2021l).

About 14% of undergraduate students are full time non-local or semester-long exchange students. In 2021, Lingnan ranked #1 in Asia for “Outbound Exchange Students” (Lingnan University, 2020).

The English Language Support Service, staffed by Visiting English Tutors, offers a range of English academic services such as Writing Tutorial Service, IELTS Practicum, Speaking Studio, English Chat Room, and more, to enhance students’ English skill sets. The visiting tutors also organize a variety of social events, The English Conversation Series, Movie Nights, Game Nights, to engage students in English in a more informal setting.

Residential education is a focal component of Lingnan University’s liberal arts education. Each of the ten residence hostels develops themed activities intended to enhance out-of-classroom learning (Lingnan University, 2021m). Residential education focuses on enhancing student competencies in personal development, leadership development, language enhancement, and internationalization (Lingnan University, 2021n). The Lingnan Language Enhancement Initiative takes advantage of the diverse cultural backgrounds of Lingnan University’s student body, recently ranked as #1 in Asia in internationalization (Lingnan University, 2020) and the ability

to house 100% of undergraduate students in on-campus housing to form a key element of residential education by integrating efforts of academic departments, Language Centers for Chinese/English and additional languages, and residential Warden Offices. In addition, a student-initiated “Multi-Cultural and Multi-Lingual Enhancement Programmes Campus Fund”, operated by the Office of Student Affairs, provides funding to students for organizing activities among themselves for language learning and cultural exchange via residential living and learning communities.

Humanitarian Technology, Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Design Innovation are the three pillars of Lingnan Entrepreneurship Initiative (LEI), a programme intended to develop students’ appreciation of how liberal arts’ problem-solving approach in combination of academic learning can generate creative solutions even in unfamiliar disciplines such as engineering and public health (Lingnan University, 2021o). The LEI encourages joint entrepreneurial education programmes among universities. For example, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and Lingnan University jointly offered a credit-bearing Entrepreneurship course led by professors from both universities using

multiple learning modes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, LEI attempted improve the lives of the underprivileged by (1) helping to slow viral spread by using germicidal ultraviolet (UVC) technology to develop a rapid disinfection device suitable for mobile use in sub-divided housing units and (2) working with the Hong Kong Deaf Association to design transparent masks to benefit hearing-impaired people.

### **Philosophical Underpinnings**

Lingnan University's approach to liberal arts education is to take advantage of its unique attributes to provide the best of liberal arts education. Lingnan University's small, primarily-undergraduate enrolment allows for whole-person development through small classes, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities to promote the development of close faculty-student relationships while nurturing soft skills through residential education and living-learning communities.

Lingnan University strives to provide "quality whole-person education by combining the best of the Chinese and Western liberal arts traditions" (Lingnan University, 2021p). Historically, whole-person development has been an important characteristic of education both

in China and the west. From its roots in Ancient Greece and Rome, liberal arts were a form of enquiry designed to provide the skills essential for a free person to play a role in civic life (Brighouse, 2019) while Confucian education in China emphasized character building focusing on elements of humanity and service to others (Ng, 2009). Although China and the west both value whole person development the desired characteristics to be developed may vary between regions. For example, Chinese universities may emphasize Chinese thought and history while US colleges may focus on the "great books" of western civilization.

Interestingly, although the focus of whole person development in different cultures may vary, similar pedagogies may be used to promote divergent ideas, e.g., democratic (Dewey, 1916) or socialist ideologies (Zhang, 2012). Lingnan University incorporates both Chinese and western perspectives in its common core where half of the courses ("The Making of Hong Kong" and "China in World History") have a Chinese focus whereas the others ("Critical Thinking: Analysis and Argumentation" and "The Process of Science") are more western focused, incorporating Hong Kong and Chinese issues and perspectives where appropriate.

### **Characteristics and Challenges**

Effectively achieving the learning outcomes and goals of liberal arts education provides a number of challenges, especially in Hong Kong where liberal arts education is relatively new and poorly understood.

### **Importance of Teaching**

Academic teaching staff play a critical role universities' educational efforts and are perhaps even more important at liberal arts universities that place such a high value on close student-faculty relationships. Working as academic staff at a liberal arts university is different from working at a large research-focused university. The close teacher-student relationship expected in liberal arts universities may take time away from scholarly activities which can place heavy demands on teaching staff. Lingnan University places equal importance on teaching and research when evaluating faculty performance. Teaching quality ratings of "Very Good" or "Excellent" are required for promotion and substantiation and teaching excellence is recognized by awards at the individual and departmental level. In addition, the university has created two new professorial tracks,

Professor of Teaching and Research Professor which allow talented teachers and researchers to focus on their main area of strength. Professors of Teaching are expected to be advocates of best practices in liberal arts education through their involvement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Lingnan University strives to ensure that all academic staff have the knowledge, skills, attitude, and support required to achieve teaching excellence in a liberal arts setting. Initially, the importance of teaching in the liberal arts context is stressed during recruitment and all substantiation-track candidates meet personally with the President who emphasizes the commitment to quality teaching required by the university. New academic staff attend an orientation offered by the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) and are paired with experienced academic teaching mentors. All teaching staff undergo regular assessment of their teaching effectiveness and are eligible for ongoing pedagogic development and Teaching Development Grants offered by the TLC.

### **"Vocational" Training and Liberal Arts Education**

The Hong Kong government recog-

nizes that “without a highly educated and capable workforce, with the necessary developmental skills, there will be no success in building a better economy which is not simply appropriate for, but is essential to, Hong Kong’s place as a developed, internationally focused community” (UGC, 2004). Thus, the goal of higher education for many major stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, general public, employers, and the government that provides the funding) is to prepare students, upon graduation, to get a good job that allows them to secure their futures, help their families, and to provide a workforce prepared to build the economy and aid in national development.

According to Lingnan University President Leonard Cheng, “the advantage of liberal arts education is that it provides the skills that are needed in the 21st century... critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration” (Ng, 2020). Research in the USA has shown that students from selective liberal arts colleges earn the same as peers from selective public universities (Hill & Pisacreta 2019) and many successful industry leaders were trained in liberal arts disciplines (Linshi, 2015). Well-known American hi-tech business leaders such as Bill Gates, Mark Cuban, and Steve Jobs have advocated for the

hiring of liberal arts graduates (Chien, 2017). Recent analysis has shown that the median return on investment of liberal arts colleges in the United States is higher for that of all colleges and that the economic value of a graduating from a liberal arts college adds up over time (Center on Education and the Workforce, 2020; Leckrone, 2020). Thus, well-designed liberal arts education can prepare students for immediate and long-term success in the job market.

Lingnan University offers undergraduate degrees in three faculties, the Faculty of Business, the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Arts. Thus, Lingnan University is unusual among traditional liberal arts universities in its strong historical and current commitment to professional business education. At first glance, a focus on vocational preparation might appear to go against the idea of liberal arts education. For example, Blaich et al. (2004) identified valuing the development of intellectual skills more than professional or vocational skills as one of the three conditions that must co-exist to support liberal arts education. However, Lingnan University appreciates the importance of discipline-based vocational education while recognizing that the attitudes and skills developed through liberal arts education are critical

to the long-term success and happiness of its graduates.

Although they might appear to be in opposition, trade-offs need not apply between disciplinary/vocational preparation and intellectual/personal development. In fact, we believe that thoughtfully integrating vocational/discipline-based preparation with whole-person development can result in positive synergisms. The synergy that occurs between the intentional integration of academic learning and community service that lies at the core of the success of the service-learning pedagogy (Scarlett et al., 2001) and can be replicated by careful integration discipline-based learning and whole-person development at liberal arts universities.

Embedding whole-person development in a familiar and meaningful disciplinary-based environment might foster development of key liberal arts goals. For example, it might be difficult for students raised in relatively homogenous communities to truly appreciate the challenges that can arise in racially, culturally, and religiously diverse societies. However, immersing the development of the ability to address complexities of diversity into a familiar discipline-based problem might provide a more comfortable context for students to explore

cultural diversity. For example, business students applying their discipline-based knowledge by developing marketing plan for a food and beverage outlet in multicultural Malaysia would be forced to come to grips with how religious and cultural differences affects peoples' dining and entertainment choices, thus enhancing their ability to understand problems from various cultural perspectives.

Similarly, embedding discipline-based learning in a meaningful, challenging, novel context may enhance both disciplinary learning and whole-person development. For example, engineering students charged with developing sustainable energy systems for an isolated community in a developing country would not only have to apply the engineering principles they have learned, but the challenges and limitation of the local environment and society will force them to apply their critical thinking abilities to deal with constraints and limited resources. Moreover, such an experience might foster the desire and capacity for public service while increasing awareness of the complexities that characterize enduring human dilemmas.

Lingnan University has addressed a number of critical relationship between career preparation and liberal arts education identified by the Council of In-

dependent Colleges (2015). In order to find the proper balance between liberal and professional education, Lingnan University recently reduced the number of required credits for general education in order to allow more opportunities for students to earn to double majors or minors and altered regulations to allow some general education courses to be included in Majors and Minors. After identifying the contribution of liberal arts to career preparation and the key knowledge, skills, and perspectives that will be needed in the 21st century workplace, Lingnan University redesigned the common core (e.g., incorporating a course on the process of science into the common core), established new graduation requirements (e.g., English proficiency, service-learning, capstone project), developed new academic units (e.g., Science Unit and Wong Bing Lai Music and Performing Arts Unit), academic programmes (e.g., majors in Data Science and Global Development and Sustainability, and minor in Environmental and Scientific Literacy), and extra-curricular activities (language enhancement, innovation, etc.). Finally, Lingnan University has attempted to balance the efforts required to prepare for their first jobs (e.g., discipline-based knowledge, communication skills, internships) while

preparing them for successful careers and fulfilling lives (e.g., core curriculum and general education, Integrated Learning Programme, International Exchange, Leadership Training, Entrepreneurship and Innovation, etc.).

### **Student Understanding and Appreciation of Liberal Arts Education**

Seasoned educators might be able to anticipate and appreciate how a well-thought-out combination of ingredients (e.g., common core, cluster courses, majors, minors, service-learning, language enhancement, ILP, overseas study, etc.), when properly combined with expertise and care, can result in the rich learning stew (or Chinese soup) that is the goal of Lingnan University's liberal arts education. However, it is unrealistic to expect that teens who have just begun their university experience to intuitively understand and appreciate the design of liberal arts education. Just as thoughtlessly throwing ingredients into the pot will not produce the desired taste, allowing students to simply tick off all required "educational ingredients" before they can graduate will not provide them with the full desired educational experience. Thus, the burden falls upon liberal-arts educators to help guide students through

their undergraduate university education by clearly articulating the intentions of all curricular and extra-curricular activities, explicitly and repeatedly identifying the critical links between the various components of their educational experience, and repeatedly encouraging students to actively and carefully reflect on their experiences to help them construct these connections for themselves.

Lingnan University strives to more intentionally integrate various components of its liberal arts education. For example, the Lingnan University Core Curriculum and General Education Office, Wong Bing Lai Music and Performing Arts Unit, and Jockey Club New Arts Power collaborated on a project intended to broaden students' horizons through liberal arts education. Over 400 students from a common core course, China in World History, and a cluster course Music and World Cultures watched a special live performance of *L'Orphelin* by four artists from the Théâtre de la Feuille. The Orphan of Zhao, one of China's oldest plays was retold through the art of the body and monologues, forms influenced by Jacques Lecoq, one of the major figures of Western theatre. For many students in the audience this represented their first exposure to live theatre. The impact of the live performance, the

students' familiarity with the story, and being able to incorporate the play into the context of Chinese history led to an unusually- animated discussion between the students, instructors, and performers that touched not only on literature and history, but also today's life and society, and was followed by the artists talking about their creative and professional lives (Lingnan University, 2019b).

### **Solidifying Lingnan's Liberal Arts Educational Niche Locally and Abroad**

Lingnan University aspires to be the leading liberal arts university in Hong Kong, a leader in the liberal arts environment of Asia, and an important player globally. In rankings-crazed Hong Kong, where five of the eight government-funded universities are ranked in the top 130 in the latest THE rankings (Times Higher Education, 2021), it can be difficult for a small, relatively young, undergraduate-focused university located away from the city centre to gain attention and respect.

It appears that Lingnan University is more well-known and appreciated in international liberal arts education circles than it is in Hong Kong. For example, Lingnan University has been included in articles exploring liberal arts education

in Asia and globally (e.g., Godwin & Pickus, 2018; Jung et al., 2019; Lewis & Rupp, 2015) in the company of top local universities such as The Chinese University of Hong Kong, top universities from mainland China (e.g., Fudan University, Peking University, and Tsinghua University), top Asian Universities (e.g., Seoul National University), top US liberal arts colleges (e.g., Williams College and Amherst College), and top international universities (e.g., National University of Singapore, Yale University, New York University, and Duke University) that are establishing liberal arts programmes in Asia.

To solidify the goal of becoming a leading liberal arts university in Asia, Lingnan University spearheaded the establishment of the Alliance of Asian Liberal Arts Universities (AALAU) in 2017 (Alliance of Asian Liberal Arts Universities, 2021). The vision of this network of more than twenty five universities from Hong Kong, China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, India, and Thailand is to address the major challenges of liberal arts education in Asia, to provide opportunities to students and staff, and to implement collaboration and achieve synergy.

Despite the fact that Lingnan University fights well above its weight class in international discussions about liberal

arts education, its role as a liberal arts university and the value of such an educational approach remains poorly understood and appreciated in Hong Kong for a number of reasons. First, a focus on broad education that encourages whole person development goes against the strong disciplinary focus of the university model inherited from the British. In addition, some people may mistake liberal arts education with liberal arts disciplines and conclude that liberal arts universities only train graduates in the humanities and arts, disciplines that many consider to be likely to lead to low-paid employment compared to business or STEM fields.

In order to provide a clear vision of the form and purpose of liberal arts education to students, parents, employers, a rebranding exercise created a new tagline “Liberal Arts Education-Transformation For Life” which was accompanied by a promotional campaign based on three key brand attributes of Lingnan University’s whole-person education, a vibrant campus life, and global engagement (Lingnan University, 2017).

### **Accomplishments and Effectiveness**

To properly assess Lingnan University’s efforts at preparing students for a

lifetime of success and contribution to society via liberal arts education the university has established a multi-layered system of quality assurance seeking input from students, alumni, employers, and outside experts. All academic programmes are reviewed by an Advisory Board specifically including members from “aspirant peer” liberal arts institutions (including Williams College, YALE-NUS College, and Waseda University). In addition, Quality Audits are regularly conducted by the Quality Assurance Council of the UGC. The university uses this feedback to provide indications of areas of strength that can be enhanced and areas of weakness that should be improved.

### **Student Satisfaction**

Lingnan University students seem highly satisfied with their undergraduate experience. For the second year in a row Lingnan received the highest score in the area of “undergraduate satisfaction with the quality and value which they have gained from their teaching and learning experience” among the eight UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong (Lingnan University, 2019c). The Report on Lingnan University Alumni Survey, 2018 (unpublished) indicates a high sat-

isfaction of Lingnan alumni with their “overall learning experience” with over 80% responding that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied”. According to the 2019 Final Year Student Learning Experience Survey Report (unpublished), the most highly rated items related to the Teaching and Learning Environment that were “teacher and student relationship” and “assistance and feedback to enhance learning” suggesting that students develop satisfying and effective relationships with their teachers. The highest ratings related to the Liberal Arts and Overall Impression of the Lingnan Experience portion of the survey were “exchange experience (outside Hong Kong)” and “hostel life experience”, both core components of Lingnan University’s liberal arts education.

In 2019/20 the Integrated Learning Programme activities were well received by the students (mean score- 8.52 out of 10). The Residential Education Domain of the ILP in 2019/20 rated 8.78 by students. The Hostel Annual Survey in 2020 indicated that the residential education and living experience in student hostels contributed to the important aspects of whole person development such as independence (8.18), self-governance ability (7.94), problem solving (7.72), and interpersonal communication ability (7.34).

### Employer Satisfaction

According to the Report on Lingnan University Employer Survey (Undergraduate) 2018 (unpublished), over 72 percent of employers were satisfied with the performance of Lingnan University graduates. Compared to graduates of other local universities, 80% of employers ranked Lingnan graduates as the “same as others, better, or far better”, suggesting that liberal arts graduates were competing well with those from more traditional universities.

Slightly less than half of employers reported that they were aware of Lingnan University’s Liberal Arts Education, but among that group 96.9% were either neutral (28.6%) or agreed/strongly agreed (68.3%) with the university’s Liberal Arts Education focus.

### Conclusions

Many educators around the world have come to value aspects of liberal arts education which they believe can best prepare students to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world dominated by uncertainty, complexity, and diversity. Godwin and Pinkus (2017) proposed a number of actions required to facilitate the establishment of quality liberal arts

education in China. First, it is important to “make general education matter”. Quality liberal arts education cannot occur if general education is viewed as “wasted” class time that takes away from “the more important” disciplinary-focused studies. Thus, liberal arts universities must (1) clearly consider and articulate the specific role of general education and (2) develop effective plans to achieve those goals. General education courses should not be “simplified” versions of introductory courses for majors. Instead, general education and liberal arts education will benefit from interdisciplinary integration. For example, non-major students may not need to memorize biochemical structures and pathways which can be easily located online. Instead they should benefit much more from understanding how improvements modern biotechnology techniques can affect aspects of their world such as the health effects of growing and eating genetically modified crops and health and the role and safety of vaccines developed to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Implementing novel approaches to liberal arts education will require teaching staff to embrace innovative pedagogies. Expecting teachers trained and experienced in the traditional “lecture mode” of teaching, who are under pressure to produce high quality research

outputs, to be willing and able to explore and apply new pedagogies will require increased focus by universities on staff development and incentives. Instructors must be trained and supported to apply new pedagogies and rewarded for incorporating new and effective pedagogies into their courses if they are going to invest the time and energy required to teach state of the art courses.

Finally, well-designed liberal arts programmes will require students to study multiple traditions. The success of such programmes will depend on student interest and acceptance, as well as the comfort of teaching staff to teach about multiple traditions. For example, academicians raised and trained in one culture might be apprehensive about claiming enough expertise to teach effectively about multiple traditions. Teaching staff need to embrace opportunities for joint learning with the students while exploring a topic through the lens of multiple traditions. Moreover, universities can enhance student exposure to multiple traditions by designing multiple traditions into their curriculum, the internationalizing their teaching staff and student body, and encouraging and facilitating international study options for their students.

A lack of understanding and appreci-

ation has slowed the development of liberal arts in China (Cao, 2008; Ma, 2018; Wang & Xie, 2015; Zhang, Liang & Cai, 2007; Zhang & Ping, 2013). Thus, clearly identifying intended outcomes of liberal arts education at each institution and how those outcomes will be achieved will be critical to the ultimate success of liberal arts education in China. Unfortunately, selling the benefits of liberal arts education is not easy, even in the USA where such approaches have a longer history. In a recent interview Lynn Pasquerella, the President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, urged that “leaders of small liberal arts colleges need to tell their story in a more compelling way, not only to those inside of the academy, but to those outside of the academy as well, who may be skeptical about the value of a liberal education at a time when rapidly changing technology means rapid obsolescence” (Taboh, 2019). Chinese universities will need to diligently communicate the intention and value of liberal arts education to all stakeholders and assure through the design and quality of their programmes, and assess the effectiveness of their programmes that these important learning outcomes are met.

In summary, although undergraduate students are under their charge for only

four years, universities are in a unique position to consider, care about, and influence both the short-term and long term futures of their students. Preparing students for short-term success may not provide them with (i) the attitude and skills required to adapt to the rapidly changing times ahead, (ii) the ability to contribute broadly to society, or (iii) the ability to develop into innovators and leaders that can move society forward. Long-term success of graduates requires knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes well beyond the disciplinary knowledge

required for initial vocational success, and liberal arts education, both as a goal and as a way of teaching and learning, provides a model of how to achieve these results. Rather than competing, disciplinary/vocational education and the acquisition of skills and attitudes required for whole person development should interact synergistically. Thus, universities in China incorporating elements of liberal arts education should be well positioned to provide training and experiences that will benefit their graduates and society throughout their lives.

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