



European Journal of Educational Research

Volume 13, Issue 2, 735 - 746.

ISSN: 2165-8714

<http://www.eu-jer.com/>

Independence and Interdependence: A Comparative Case Study of Individuals From Two Institutions in Mainland China and Hong Kong*

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Received: August 6, 2023 ▪ Revised: October 14, 2023 ▪ Accepted: November 5, 2024

Abstract: There has been a clear shift in higher education to prepare and empower the current students for a future quite different and more complex than that faced by previous generations. In particular, it is expected that they will possess comprehensive abilities to deal with challenges arising from new employment demands and beyond. While liberal arts education has a long history in the West, it has been increasingly implemented more recently in East Asia as one response to the need for educational reform. The research reported here is an empirical study of how liberal arts education has affected individuals from two institutions with distinctive interpretations of “liberal arts education” - University N, the first Sino-foreign joint university in mainland China, and University L, the only public liberal arts university in Hong Kong. Drawing on Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, this study illustrates the interplay and balance among students’ practical concerns, their sense of social obligation fostered through liberal arts education elements and the wider social structure. Semi-structured interviews with senior students, fresh graduates, and educators were conducted to gather in-depth primary data. These reveal that, by providing interdisciplinary knowledge and transferable skill sets, a liberal arts education experience does enhance individuals’ personal agency and intellectual competencies in a professional context - they are trained to become independent thinkers and learners. Moreover, the “humanistic” aspect of liberal arts is also relevant: having engaged in various activities and programs, students in both universities are encouraged to care, cooperate, and make positive differences in their increasingly interconnected communities.

Keywords: Hong Kong, liberal arts education, Sino-foreign university, social obligation, transferable skills.

To cite this article: He, S. (2024). Independence and interdependence: A comparative case study of individuals from two institutions in mainland China and Hong Kong. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 13(2), 735-746. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.13.2.735>

Introduction

There has been a clear shift in higher education towards empowering the current students and preparing them for a future, which will be quite different and more complex than that faced by previous generations. It is expected that they will possess comprehensive abilities to deal with challenges arising from new employment demands and beyond. As well as employability theories and models that aim at supporting individuals to exploit their potential and help them cope with future uncertainties, liberal arts education (LAE) has been widely implemented in East Asia as a response to the needs of new educational reforms. With a long history in the West, LAE continues to stress the cultivation of “well-roundedness” of individuals, who are expected to adapt to new circumstances and situations.

The research reported on here is an empirical study of how LAE has affected students from two institutions with distinct interpretations of “liberal arts education”. More specifically, it is a comparative case study focusing on the experiences of domestic students from one university located in each of mainland China and Hong Kong - University N and University L. University N, the first Sino-foreign joint university in mainland China, is informed by the idea and principles of LAE and has a teaching ethos of it. University L, the only public liberal arts university in Hong Kong, is a liberal-arts-oriented university and has maintained its distinctive liberal arts tradition and elements. Both the two investigated universities are members of the Alliance of Asian Liberal Arts Universities (AALAU) that share common goals, values and visions for educating the future generations. Therefore, by comparing the two universities, which use similar LAE approaches in two societies, this research can highlight the influence of the institutional LAE features while drawing a comparison from the

* This paper was presented at the 6th International Conference on Advanced Research in Education organized by EducationCONF, held on June 02-04, 2023 in Cambridge, UK.

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social context where individuals are situated. Furthermore, by looking at individuals' achievements (both self-perceived and from their teachers' perspective) from their education experience as well as their short-term and long-term career plans in relation to LAE, this research concerns itself with the micro-level dynamics of students under LAE, and serves as a potent source of evidence that articulates the longstanding claims of "ambiguous" outcomes of LAE.

This paper comprises eight sections. The first section gives an overall picture of the issue and explains the background, purposes, and significance of the research. The second section reviews some modern developments and practices of LAE in Europe, mainland China, and Hong Kong. The theoretical framework used in this research is also presented. The third section describes the methodology of the research, including its philosophical underpinning and the concrete processes of sampling, data collection, and data analysis. In the subsequent sections, the main findings based on the two investigated cases are presented and critically discussed. Finally, the importance of this research is reiterated, and the author's recommendations for future work are conveyed.

Literature Review

The term "liberal arts education" has been widely discussed by scholars, educators, and policymakers, yet its definition is the subject of constant debates under different periods of history. Though this notion is primarily regarded as a systematic invention from the West or even North America, it does resonate with ideas appearing in classical texts and educational philosophies recognized throughout East Asia, such as Confucian thinking (Lewis, 2016). They share the common goal of cultivating individuals as the ideal type of citizens, who can position themselves in a larger social context and relate their own life experiences with those of other human beings (Cheng, 2017). In recent years, liberal arts education curricula have been implemented in various regional contexts, which represent different academic traditions, structures and cultures (Kirby & van der Wende, 2016). Influenced by LAE models in many Western countries, mainland China and Hong Kong hope to promote both scientific and humanistic knowledge while also bringing back their own cultural legacy. In this study, the discussion of LAE in the contemporary era is re-contextualized by looking at two East Asian universities, each of which embraces LAE and maintains its unique implementation. As different institutions are embedded in their particular backgrounds, this comparative study not only sheds new insights on the institutional and social features that might affect individuals' school-to-work transition, but also illuminates the interplay between their personal agency and the external structural factors and forces. Lastly, this study also bridges the gap between individuals' perspectives on LAE and their experiences related to employment, which is largely absent in the current literature.

European Countries

Though the meaning and practice of liberal arts education philosophy may vary according to different contextual backgrounds, needs and values, a persistent identification of LAE can be defined as its distinction from education for specifically professional purposes (The Collegiate Way, 2021). A "professional" education prepares individuals for a closely associated group of positions demanded by the job market, but a "liberal" education equips those individuals with more fundamental knowledge and abilities needed on many occasions. With a humanistic tradition, Europe has seen a re-imagining of the model of LAE in recent decades (Kirby & van der Wende, 2016). Along with the massification of higher education in the post-WWII era and the inspiration of America's reinvestment in liberal arts and sciences, a number of European universities have established liberal arts programs and independent liberal arts colleges (Dekker, 2017). They share the common vision of offering broad and foundational knowledge to students and cultivating their general capacities (Dekker, 2017). In the UK, the Dearing Report (1997, p. 114) particularly called for more comprehensive learning approaches, which "*stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over*". Moreover, to take a leading role in higher education with the aim to promote international standards, the Bologna Process was launched in Europe in 1999 with the participation of 29 countries (University of Aberdeen, 2019). The subsequent Lisbon Strategy specifically stated that the goal of Europe was to become "*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and social cohesion*" (Lisbon European Council, 2000). This clear support of a view of human capital as the main input to economic competitiveness has served as the central approach for European development. Complementary to this but also distinct from it, a few large research universities, drawing on the university college model in America, have recognized and re-emphasized their roots in LAE. They aim to foster well-rounded graduates for participation in a globalizing and ever-changing world, such as Bard College, Berlin, Germany, and Leiden University College in The Netherlands. Some of these colleges reinvigorated a modern philosophical version of the European traditions of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* so as to shelter undergraduate teaching from the competition of research outputs, ranking, and reputation (Kirby & van der Wende, 2016).

Mainland China

Soon after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Soviet education model was adopted as an effective way to promote the development of a socialist economy. Liberal arts education was inevitably neglected due to the social changes and the practical demands of training technical experts required for China's new national construction (Li, 2001). The scarcity of connections among different institutions and disciplines promoted by this approach consequently

brought about a narrow, one-sided development of Chinese students and a decrease in their quality (Li, 2001). As a reflective effort, in 1998, the Ministry of Education of China started implementing *Suzhi Education*, or Quality-Oriented Education to re-emphasize the core idea of LAE. The Chinese word “*suzhi*”, as summarized by Pang et al. (2020, p. 381), refers to “*the relatively stable quality structure, which is due to one’s knowledge internalization, based on the inherent gifts and physiology and deeply influenced by their education experience and social environment*”. A person with good *suzhi* usually exhibits positive traits and qualities, physically, psychologically and intellectually (Pang et al., 2020). The Reform and Opening-Up process in the late 1970s also made policymakers realize that it was the quality of the people that determined the strength of a country.

Contemporary LAE curricula have been integrated in different regional contexts with their respective academic traditions, structures, and styles (Kirby & van der Wende, 2016). In addition, it is observed that Asian universities have an unexpectedly higher prevalence of LAE programs than those in other regions beside North America (Godwin & Altbach, 2016). In mainland China, the practice of *suzhi* education policies and relevant educational reforms were pioneered by a few top-ranking universities. Experiments with LAE models have taken several forms, including curriculum provision, elite programs, academies, and liberal arts colleges (Ma, 2018). As some Chinese universities took a liberal arts curriculum as a culturally-oriented quality education course, especially in humanities and social sciences, some included the “Common Courses” that are available for all students in a university (Gan, 2006). These differences displayed China’s search for an indigenous LAE model, which is inspired by but different from the Western one. At the same time, China has initiated educational and cultural importation in its pursuit of developing world-class universities. International integration of higher education was promoted; different forms of co-operation and partnerships with institutions abroad were introduced, such as Sino-foreign joint universities. These experimentations have, in various ways, adopted a Western LAE model and are, according to Jiang (2014), likely to have a great influence on other Chinese universities.

Hong Kong

When still a British colony, the purpose of Hong Kong’s higher education in the early twentieth century was primarily to meet the labor market demands and ensure the smooth growth of the economy. Financial provision for most Hong Kong universities was funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC) and other sources. Due to its accelerated socioeconomic development and status as a world business and finance center in the 1980s, Hong Kong followed a binary policy in higher education and divided its universities into two categories: (a) Funded institutions, which concentrated on scholarship and research; (b) Polytechnic colleges, which focused on vocational training (Liu, 1996). At the same time, the term General Education was used and introduced by a few Neo-Confucian scholars who aimed to combine traditional Chinese culture and the international experience of LAE by establishing programs at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Lam, 2022). Retaining the influence of the British education system, Hong Kong still largely maintained its market-oriented approach of producing professional expertise, which played a vital role in fulfilling the practical needs of society (Lee, 2005).

The return of Hong Kong to mainland China in 1997, however, began to bring changes in terms of the direction and the possible philosophy of higher education in Hong Kong to succeed in local, regional, and international competition (UGC, 1996). From 2005, general education curricula were introduced into the eight UGC-funded universities, which gradually stepped away from the British model of specialized university education (Logan & Curry, 2015). A noteworthy indication of the transition of Hong Kong universities modeled on the liberal arts was the addition, since 2012, of an extra foundation year with a Common Core Curriculum of liberal arts and sciences courses for all students (Postiglione, 2016). These courses were intended to cultivate students’ “*critical thinking, ability to tackle novel situations, communication and collaboration skills, intercultural understanding and global citizenship, and leadership and advocacy for the improvement of the human condition*” (Postiglione, 2016, p. 26). Nowadays, all UGC-funded institutions enjoy considerable academic freedom and institutional autonomy, balanced with their “public accountability” to the community within the law (University Grants Committee, 2015). Jiang (2014) believes that Hong Kong universities are well-performed in terms of maintaining traditional Chinese values and high regard for humanism, preserving its higher education from potential risks caused by excessive materialism or utilitarianism.

Theoretical Framework

As social science research becomes more interdisciplinary (Anfara & Mertz, 2006), the use of social theories can help to shed new light on the understanding and analysis of a broader range of research findings. In many cases, the role of agency and structural forces, which together form the relationship of individuals in and to their particular contexts, become significant concerns in diverse research situations. In this respect, Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice has become widely adopted (or, in some cases, adapted) (Houston, 2017). According to Bourdieu (1991), it is helpful to describe how the body and practice are operated on by agents within their social context through a series of interrelated concepts, notably “*habitus*”, “*field*”, and different forms of “*capital*”. The term “*habitus*” describes the personal dispositions shaped by people’s context and conditions that may lead to the embodiment and production of similar social practices. The “*field*”, which is a system (or systems) wherein the interactions amongst social actors occur, can be changing and changed

through the capital and habitus of the situated agents and, thereby, lead to power imbalances. “Capital” describes different forms of resources, such as financial capacity, qualifications, networks, and tastes, that empower but also set limits to people’s capacities and behaviors (Bourdieu, 1977). A concise model of the emergence of practice was outlined by Bourdieu to illustrate the relation of these three theoretical concepts (Power, 1999):

$$[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}$$

Instead of reducing practices to either habitus or field, this equation emphasizes the “interrelationship” among habitus, capital, and field (Swartz, 1997). A further elaboration is that the outcome of one’s action stems from the interaction between one’s disposition (or habitus, which is socially structured) and position (or power, which is decided by capital) within the arena in which one is socially positioned. Essentially, Bourdieu’s theory is the product of a sociological concern over the means by which structures and structural constraints exert power and impact on the activities and freedom of human beings (Houston, 2017). For researchers who engage with education, Rawolle and Lingard (2013) maintain that Bourdieu’s work can help understand the evolving national, regional, and international “fields” of education in which groups of agents are located and their habitus brought by them that may form practice within those fields.

Methodology

The research reported here explores individuals’ transitioning from higher education to employment within the institutional context of liberal arts education. It investigates the experiences of domestic students from one university located in each of mainland China and Hong Kong; more precisely, it inquires what these individuals gained from their education experience and how LAE impacted their prospects for the future after early steps into the wider society. Drawing on Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, this research illustrates the interplay and balance among students’ practical concerns, their sense of social obligation fostered through the LAE elements advocated by their institutions, and the wider social structure.

Research Design

Case study is one of the primary approaches applied in qualitative research, and in the field of education (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). According to Yin (2018, p. 15), the case study method “*investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident*”. An important feature of a case study is that it is the holistic “package” of a case - including various contextual backgrounds - that is taken into account and studied in detail.

Differing from single case studies, a comparative case study is designed to be encouraging and enlightening in ways that researchers may trace across cultures, contexts, spaces, and other scales or sites (Yin, 2018). As an independent and critical comparative study, this research aims to understand how a series of forces and factors operate to influence one educational phenomenon in two similar but nonetheless distinct contexts, and thereby to identify the relationship between individuals’ experiences and other institutional or social features. With the dynamics among the global, national, and regional forces in recent decades, the comparison has become increasingly relevant to the understanding of common issues among local differences (Arnove et al., 2013). The adopted comparative case study strategy allows for a “cross-regional” comparison of qualitative data obtained from two cases, which may complement the statistical data or other secondary materials in the current literature. At the same time, it will highlight a few newly emerged issues that illuminate the central research topic of liberal arts education.

The research investigation is based on two universities, herein given the names of “University N” and “University L”. University N is a transnational joint venture established by a British university and a Chinese entity. As one of the leading branch campuses in mainland China, University N uses English as the medium of instruction, with a curriculum provision system that is the same as the UK partner university; it admits both mainland Chinese students and their international peers and offers them studying abroad opportunities (Lu, 2018). In addition, University N claims to have been practicing five LAE elements: (a) Cross-disciplinary learning, integration of arts and sciences; (b) Conducting oneself as a proper person before pursuing a study; (c) Student-centered education; (d) Small-class teaching, encouraging questioning; (e) Abundant extra-curricular activities (Yang, 2021).

The second case study in this research, University L, is a liberal arts-oriented university in Hong Kong. The distinctive liberal arts tradition maintained by University L over the years is a noteworthy point as there are a few special features that distinguish it from its Hong Kong counterparts or many Western liberal arts colleges: (a) Broad-based curriculum; (b) Close staff-student relationship; (c) Fully residential campus; (d) Rich, out-of-class learning activities; (e) Active community service; (f) Multi-faceted workplace experience; (g) Strong alumni and community support; (h) Global learning opportunities (these introductory statements of University L are collected from its official website).

Sample and Data Collection

In line with the nature and aims of this research, purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit the targeted participants in both universities. They include: (a) Domestic students who are in their third or fourth year of

undergraduate study; (b) Fresh graduates with less than two years' work experience; (c) Faculty members who teach in the two universities, preferably with knowledge or experience related to liberal arts education. First, adopting purposive sampling can help frame a sample pool that would meet the specific requirements and criteria, which are judged to be able to offer the most valuable answers to the research questions (Clark et al., 2021). Then, after collecting data from those chosen initially from the target population with the desired characteristics, the use of snowball sampling can let these appropriate participants spread the same recruitment information to people whom they know in their community or campus. This enabled the researcher to gain access to other participants who would be difficult to reach using her own efforts but who meet the sampling criteria.

In qualitative research, continuing data collection does not necessarily guarantee the emergence of new information. Therefore, the sample size was intended to be small but "large enough", and the sampling ceased when the researcher had obtained full theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Aided by Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, and the author's personal network in both universities and other unexpected encounters with potential respondents, a final sample of 21 participants in University N was achieved, comprising 10 students, 7 graduates, and 4 teaching members; in University L, 9 students, 8 graduates, and 4 teaching members were recruited.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each individual participant. The researcher met the participants in person at the appointed venue, which was often a coffee shop, restaurant, or other safe and public place that would promise an undisturbed interview. Each interview session was intended to last for around half an hour, albeit many of them turned out to be almost one hour. For University N, as the interviewed participants were generally mainland Chinese, Mandarin was the language of communication. For University L, participants were free to switch between Mandarin and English according to their own preferences or convenience. As a few working participants were far distant and unable to attend the interview in person, an online interview using a secure digital platform was adopted. The interviews usually began with a brief introduction of the research background and interview procedure. The interview consisted of both factual and more open-ended questions, encouraging the participants to be engaged as much as possible. While recording the interview after the interviewee's consent, the researcher also asked probing questions and noted down key points. When the interview was finished, the researcher expressed her gratitude and wish to be in touch with the participants in case of follow-up questions. Since this research was judged not to involve any physical or psychological harm to its participants, it was identified as minimal risk by the Research Ethics Committee of both institutions.

Analyzing of Data

All audio and text interviews were kept verbatim during transcription to ensure their authenticity to the original. Participants' non-verbal expressions and indications, such as stresses, punctuation and inflections were also recreated in the transcription. An inductive approach to interview analysis was used according to the purpose and nature of this study. After the management and preparation of transcripts, the "coding" - labeling and classifying data - was carried out to identify sections of the text that belong to categories and sub-categories, which were relevant to the research (Dey, 1993). Then, the grounded, thematic approach to analysis was utilized to uncover the underlying patterns or themes that "*capture something important*" across the data related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). Common codes and themes were then organized into different layers of categories, including timelines, events, behaviors, and characteristics. While creating such order in the data, the researcher moved back and forth repeatedly to improve the refinement of key terms, which made better sense of the research findings and added further explanations that illustrate the interconnection among different concepts (Schutt, 2008). Since a case study is necessarily contextual, the researcher used memos to record and reflect on any evolving ideas and perceptions about the data and offered a system that allows researcher reflexivity. In addition, the researcher strove to enhance the reliability of this study by: (a) Ensuring that samples from both universities were comprised of credible individuals who were what they claimed to be; (b) Designing interview questions in a critical and overlapping manner to test the internal consistency of participants' accounts; (c) Having the transcriptions scrutinized by an experienced mentor, who offered his alternative interpretations. Since the subjectivity of the researcher is involved in qualitative research, the validity of this study has shifted to qualitative dimensions, in which findings were reported in a credible and reasonable way based on the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The researcher also discussed the transcripts and the general methodology with other impartial peers, whose examination and feedback served as an external check on the overall research process.

Findings

This section reports themes emerging from the data that address the central research question regarding the benefits of the two institutions' liberal arts education elements for individuals and provides an in-depth interpretation and comparison. This research finds that there are many similarities in the impacts of an LAE experience in the two universities, namely:

1. Independence - the cultivation of a range of qualities and skills that help individuals establish themselves in a professional context;

2. Interdependence - the instilling of a sense of sensitivity and responsibility under the prevailing economic, social and cultural environment. Despite some different characteristics of their respective societies, many students from both universities are equipped to think critically and communicate effectively, and are able to engage with society and solve practical problems that arise from the fast-changing world.

Independence

The first LAE element that the two universities share in common is the exposure to multiple disciplines of knowledge, which was the foundation underpinning individuals' lifelong learning. Allen (Uni-N, tutor) was of the opinion that a good LAE did not only teach job-related skills as different forms of capital that may improve people's symbolic statuses; in fact, it was about "*philosophies and capacities*" - the capacity to "*reflect and take control of your own life*" and the attitudes and skills that would allow people to make judgments about "*what is good... [and] bad... [and] worthwhile*". Many participants responded in various ways that their education gave them a wider and more inclusive view of the world, and made them more diversely oriented individuals who think more critically:

"In the past, I had no feeling for minority groups at all, such as the LGBTQ... what my major impacted me most is that I became more inclusive, I have seen many different things, and I have realized that I could see things beyond my previous vision." (Nie, Uni-N, year 4)

This statement questions the traditional view that human capital development is merely a rational investment seeking absolute returns. Besides, many University N participants were also impressed by their tutors, who did not teach in any didactic sense. They used lectures and participatory seminars as a basic approach, with a high proportion of essays in the course assignments. This gave students opportunities to carry out inquiries before making their own judgement. The main difference between University N's LAE model and a Western one is that University N has not yet implemented the "*broad approach*" to the curriculum, as is offered in many Western liberal arts colleges. Similarly, as the first liberal arts university in Hong Kong, University L is primarily characterized by its liberal arts disciplines and whole-person cultivation. In a recent change to the Common Core Curriculum, University L has started to embrace elements of sciences to broaden students' interdisciplinary knowledge. One student commented that such an education mode has refreshed his original concept of learning:

"The best thing about studying at [University L] is that it teaches us to become multi-faceted learners. We have courses in different areas and we can learn different knowledge. This can make our minds clearer and more well-rounded." (Daniel, Uni-L, year 4)

Seemingly even more impressed, Olivia, who majored in Cultural Studies, stated that the professors were "*very open*" and "*very humanistic*" toward students' weaknesses and flaws, giving them an "*enjoyable*" and "*less stressful*" learning experience. This can be another key factor incorporated in the LAE elements of University L, of which the institutional habitus is inherited by its students:

"We held study groups. Since we could not understand the readings, we all sat down and read them together. Perhaps we could only read one or two pages in one afternoon, but these discussions offered more space for 'breathing'." (Olivia, Uni-L, working)

Regarding this point, Kelly (Uni-L, year 3) explained that a crucial factor enabling such close interactions was that "*the number of students at [University L] was relatively small*". One consequence of this is that students were more easily able to approach the teachers. In addition, though not keeping a small student scale, the positive and supportive attitude of professors and the caring environment or institutional field of University N were conducive for its students to concentrate on their learning process as well. Students were less likely to be calculative or utilitarian in terms of "playing the game" of examinations and treating each other as rivals:

"Group study was my happiest experience in the university. Every week we had a meeting on the current issues... what was worth discussing or what I have been thinking about lately. That was the only time when I felt I was living my ideal university life." (Min, Uni-N, year 4)

In addition to formal education activities, there are others that are not necessarily or directly fulfilment of the academic study but were felt to be worth mentioning in one's university years. Ren thought that University N campus was "*very diversified and inclusive*", while the extra-curricular associations and projects "*attached much importance to the cultivation of people's abilities*". Many participants said that they had made use of these activities, such as volunteer and internship experiences, to enrich their personal abilities and highlighted them to potential employers:

"I let them [employers] know that I was a fast learner, who was quick in grasping skills, receptive to new things, creative and active in thinking." (Ren, Uni-N, working)

"I can lead other people... Many students may not know what to do without being instructed. But I can operate conferences, allocate tasks without mistakes so that the boss does not need to worry about my independence." (Cen, Uni-N, year 4)

Likewise, another participant narrated how he translated the knowledge, skills and other positive qualities gained from the LAE experience into workplace competence. As a Philosophy graduate from University L, Quincy was recruited as a Management Trainee by a large banking corporation in Hong Kong. During the job interview, however, the interviewers “did not ask any technical-related question”; on the contrary, they let him talk about his “leadership experience” and “difficulties and frustrations” in the campus. Quincy attributed this success mainly to his soft skills:

“While they [in HR] were listening to me, they may think I was an interesting person. This was a plus. Also my personality, how I approach things, my mind-set when facing certain things... I think they are able to notice them.” (Quincy, Uni-L, working)

Helping students gain international educational experience is also a key element advocated in University L. Roy (Uni-L, admin & tutor) mentioned that “around 80% to 90% [of] students” had the opportunity for exchange or internship overseas. Such opportunities can be helpful in broadening one’s horizons and fostering good soft skills, which can be highly valued for the workplace:

“They [employers] tested your confidence and adaptability... and whether you know how to adapt things to particular situations... They deliberately created difficulties... to see whether you could answer them fluently and confidently.” (Bill, Uni-L, year 3)

Similarly, regarding this point, Clark (Uni-N, tutor) held the impression that University N students were “more confident than [those from] other universities” because through various activities and experiences, they are inspired to bring more self-responsibility, independence and “agency” into their studies and lives. According to him, employers would not necessarily favor people who lack confidence and cannot think for themselves, whereas LAE allows people to “think for themselves”. One participant referred to the special institutional culture of University N, in which students were encouraged to “speak up” and “showcase” themselves:

“It is a very precious quality. Not all Chinese students are good at it.” (Qian, Uni-N, year 4)

In short, by engaging with LAE, many individuals have strengthened their soft skills and managed to achieve the employability “capital” demanded by the labor market, while also experiencing personal growth during their university life. Eventually, both universities acted upon and shaped students’ actions and how they position themselves - toward self-assured individuals who are able to figure out and develop their own personalities, interests, goals, and plans.

Interdependence

While pursuing the aim of becoming independent and competent learners, students were also made aware that their behaviors and decisions could have an impact on others, including family, community, and the wider society. This makes the purpose of education “liberal” in a more profound sense, which can be related back to the LAE philosophy in the past: it helps people establish a better understanding of themselves and their identities in the world at large, so that their lives can be more fulfilling and meaningful. With the opportunities provided by their campuses, some participants revealed deeper reflections on how to position themselves in a larger context and relate their personal life experiences to those of others. For example, despite studying Social Policy as the main route to access his desired career, Alex had engaged in freelance work in education in the form of “interest classes”. Based on these experiences, he hoped to continue persuading the public sector to offer possible sponsorship for him to hold more activities locally:

“My friends and I have been writing proposals on delivering those interest classes in local schools... The four years’ university has made me realize that I want to do something ‘more’ and something ‘bigger’.” (Alex, Uni-L, year 4)

In many urban areas of mainland China and Hong Kong, the pressure to out-compete others can lead to constant anxiety and involution (*neijuan*) - internet buzzwords that are used to express an internal state of friction with the fear of being eliminated from the competition. However, LAE seems to have provided a way out from such a draining race. For example, many University L participants expressed their gratitude toward the “warmness” of the campus atmosphere, where one could have more chances to be cared for and approached by faculty members. These non-calculative and non-utilitarian encounters have let individuals bask in a sense of genuine delight and fulfillment rather than being placed in a battleground purely for academic triumph over the rest of their peers. LAE can, therefore, nurture, impact on, and witness these young adults’ psychological adventures and their output of fresh, original ideas.

Besides, these abundant and “liberated” experiences also enhanced students’ work performance. Being influenced by the atmosphere of University N and then manifesting the “institutional habitus” in the workplace, another participant claimed to have learned to view many things from multiple angles and was, therefore, “disinclined to make instant judgments”. Such an inclusive state of mind had made her work-life smoother to some extent:

“It can reduce contradictions, and quite frankly - making it easier to get along with others. It seems like I can hit it off with all sorts of people.” (Gu, Uni-N, working)

“Professional excellence”, as referred to by Roy (Uni-L, admin & tutor), should not be the only determinant of workplace success. He then admitted that it was indispensable to cultivate students’ *“values”*, *“ethics”* and *“humanistic concerns”* along with hard knowledge, which can together make a potential driving force of change. Indeed, based on the interviews, an important element of University L’s LAE was service learning. This let many interviewed students ponder their capacity to contribute to society and perhaps at the same time, achieve self-realization. In service learning programs, students cooperate with social organizations, such as *“the community service center”*, *“NGOs”* and *“social enterprises”*, and be involved in activities with crucial but often overlooked themes, including *“poverty”*, *“low-income families”*, *“gerontology”*, and *“marginal youths”* and *“social entrepreneurship”*. Community engagement can be a crucial factor for individuals to improve their agency and better help those who are in need:

“We visited the elderly people... We chatted with them and played games with them. They were very happy, too. I think this is what every university student should do - rather than staying at the hostel and thinking about what to eat or where to play tomorrow.” (Ryan, Uni-L, year 3)

Social problems are not of course exclusive to Hong Kong. Due to its specific socioeconomic feature, a few unsolved issues such as inequality and fertility decline in mainland China are unlikely to be fixed solely through scientific and technological measures. Instead of initiating change through social engagement, one student from University N saw *“producing positive influences”* at the practical policy level by *“becoming a distinguished professor”* as very appealing. Having decided to further specialize in Anthropology, he felt he would be able to apply *“theoretical perspectives”*, *“field work experience”*, and other resources as useful *“knowledge support”* to exert a vital impact:

“Without the knowledge in Anthropology, it can be hard to fully understand... for example, the mindset and cultural deposits of the ethnic groups of China... It will also be difficult to solve some relevant problems.” (Feng, Uni-N, year 4)

With the enlightenment of LAE, many participants have determined their social goals that may facilitate the longer-term prosperity of their respective environments. Nevertheless, with its historical, economic, and geographical characteristics, Hong Kong can be a society with complex social dilemmas, such as the gap between the rich and poor, and discrimination against certain groups of people. With a major in History, Mike (Uni-L, working) used to work in an NGO that aimed to *“promote academic exchange between mainland China and Hong Kong”*. This job was very meaningful in his eyes, even though the salary was low. He was glad to contribute to *“a promising future of the development of the younger generation of Hong Kong”* and *“strengthen the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China”*.

However, it is worth noting that one participant in University L indicated that most Hong Kong students were *“unable to see their future”* due to the scarce resources devoted by *“the incumbent top managers”*, who had *“little intention for abdication”*. Thus, students with such a mentality would rather spend time and money on leisure activities such as *“video games”* or *“traveling”*:

“They [students] do not think about the future. They let the future be taken in other people’s hands. They eat, drink and sleep and repeat these things every day. There is no driving force or opportunity for change.” (Daniel, Uni-L, year 4)

As similarly expressed by some other participants, Hong Kong’s society is still mainly dominated by people with vested interests, showing that the social stratification may reinforce control over social mobility upwards. With this factor, it was more likely for many University L or other local college graduates to continue staying at their initial level of employment for an unknown period of time and eventually, wear away their previous enthusiasm and ambitions initially fostered within the university.

Discussion

The above findings of this comparison study reveal that, by providing inter-disciplinary knowledge and transferable skill-sets, a liberal arts education experience does enhance individuals’ sense of personal agency and intellectual competencies in a professional context - they are trained to become independent thinkers and learners with more self-awareness. In addition, the *“humanistic”* aspect of LAE is also highly relevant: having engaged in various activities and programs, students in both universities are encouraged to care, cooperate and make positive changes in their increasingly interconnected communities. Particularly, aided by the concepts and theories developed by Bourdieu (1977, 1990), the *“context”* and structural forces are highlighted, and a reflexive analysis of individuals’ interactions among these concepts can be developed. The primary significance of this research is that it has contributed to the debate on the value of LAE versus STEM and other *“utilitarian”* educational approaches. By looking into student-level dynamics, findings can provide a powerful advocacy for the adoption of LAE for whole-person cultivation in higher education institutions in greater China, and possibly beyond. Secondly, beside practical and personal employment concerns, both groups of individuals have exhibited their aspirations to make social contributions. Yet the local socioeconomic context and individuals’ socioeconomic statuses should be taken into account, for they can have a large impact on their short-term and longer-term career plans. Lastly, the meaning of today’s LAE should be expanded and separated from the heritage and even restriction of the liberal arts model developed in Western institutional contexts. By using two East Asian institutions that

demonstrate their own forms of inclusions of liberal arts, this study has extended the literature on LAE from one that has long been dominated by a North American discourse.

On Capital

In Bourdieu's (1991) work, capital served as an important tool for understanding the embodiment and accumulation of knowledge and social reproduction by agents within their social fields. Depending on the perceived achievements from participants' narratives, "capital" can manifest itself as various skills and qualities. For example, students were exposed to a wider range of knowledge than they had previously encountered. Indeed, under the expectations of an internationalized curriculum, participants from both universities were required to search for information, think critically, synthesize and generate, and reason about their ideas and arguments. Some participants were unaccustomed to these practices at first, but later they felt that, through them, their independent learning skills had been significantly enhanced. Such a mode of education also developed their personal agency and pro-activity in handling problems, including seeking ways to explore certain issues, learning from various perspectives and accessing additional information and resources by themselves. This has had many influences on their real-world performance as well.

A key finding that challenges the chosen framework of "capital" is that for individuals, education is not solely reduced to the formation of their capital to be exchanged for realistic purposes. Based on the two case studies, university life under a LAE has given each participant different meanings and experiences, the value of which can be "personal" and go beyond their study and practical considerations. As one of the expectations of a LAE, students are encouraged to actively involve themselves in extracurricular activities, which emphasize their social practice in a larger community. Many of them were able to hone skills that made them better adapted to society, such as ways of getting along and communicating with others, teamwork, emotional intelligence and empathy - qualities that cannot be learned purely from classes but can be crucial at work and on other life occasions. Involving themselves in various social practices can engender solid "ideals" that help forge individuals' personality.

On Habitus

According to Bourdieu (1990), cultural and social capital, in their embodied state, tend to convert external experiences into an integral part of an agent - a habitus. The habitus individuals possessed under the LAE elements is therefore "structuring" in the sense that it dictates individuals' current and future practices in the university and other fields, while on the other hand is "structured" by their past experiences and present conditions. On the basis of the empirical results of this study, the LAE elements can help individuals develop transferable skills that are increasingly valuable today, such as critical thinking, creativity, a social conscience, ethical and moral responsibility. These are strong foundations as well as infrastructure for the newest working generation to quickly and flexibly adapt to diverse political, economic and cultural changes in an increasingly complex world. The university had also alerted students that it was the responsibility of individuals themselves to translate LAE elements into the desired "habitus" in many situations, and meet various demands or even exert an influence. Many universities and educators thus maintained a defensive position on the heritage of a LAE and how it is expected to play a significant part in today's generation of students, higher education curriculum, and hopefully shape the wider society.

Another important point that emerged from the investigation is the institutional habitus inherited by its students. Habitus consists of a person's disposition that internalizes his or her social location, such as gender and class and in this study, educational experience. Findings indicate that after four years of study, the dispositions of University N graduates were perceived as proactive and knowing how to take initiative at work. Such a confident and independent attitude resulted largely from their recognition of the special learning mode on the campus, where they were given "freedom" to explore a wide range of disciplines, issues, and intellectual frameworks and gradually benefit from it with their own efforts. Similarly, University L graduates considered themselves to be humble and stable, which can also be attributed to the geographical "field" of University L. The campus is located in a peaceful outskirts district of Hong Kong, somewhat sheltered away from the fast-paced bustling center of the city. These data show that University L's humanistic atmosphere was an important factor that shaped individuals' actions and values, many of which displayed a habitus of simplicity, aloof from sophistication, and potentially an inner thirst for "truth" and idealism.

On Field

For Bourdieu (1977), there can be a variety of fields in which the agents are located, including social, economic, cultural, and artistic. At the local level, the vision of LAE is embodied in an institutional field, where agents experience, construct, and make sense of the meanings of this educational practice. As students gained more achievements at the university, their self-awareness was improved, supporting their better identification and articulation of their own interests, values and preferences, which may not be consistent with those of others. The "field" of the university thus enhanced their personal agency in the making of choices both academically - to explore what motivated them - and in a broader sense - employability skills and strategies plus deciding the future direction of their personal development. Students are likely to have the capability of being better prepared to benefit from their university education rather than passively and precipitately accepting any arrangement imposed on them. It can also be especially common for some of them to spend

time working out an area for further personal academic and career development more clearly. The type of education they receive in the educational field is also likely to impact their future development in the economic field.

The contexts of the two case studies are two special East Asian societies that share similarities and exhibit certain differences. Over the past few decades, mainland China has seen ongoing economic achievements that have brought about the emergence of a significant Chinese middle class, whose consumption and investment levels have been elevated in education, traveling, and housing (Sicular et al., 2022). Some aspects of these investments underline Chinese people's desire for cultural and ideological advancements as they have satisfied more of their material requirements while at the same time, having access to a wealth of new information. Therefore, a better education or a "higher-class" pursuit can make them feel more "advanced" than others. Topics such as having cultural and social influence in society can be regarded as an emerging form of cultural capital that may boost their self-perceived social status and self-realization. As a consequence, it is likely for China's newest workforce entrants to play an important role in its social transformations in more of a cultural way due to their increasingly strong self-awareness. This, again, has created a vibrant space for innovation and individuality, particularly among the country's young adults.

Hong Kong, however, still plays its established role as the Asian financial center with the highest level of income inequality in the Asia-Pacific region (Census and Statistics Department, 2017). Although efforts are being made to enhance educational accessibility that can improve the quality of young people's employment and living conditions, higher education expansion does not necessarily guarantee better career prospects or higher expectations for individuals' social mobility (Chan et al., 2014; Mok, 2016). Channels for local tertiary educational graduates to move upward tend to become narrower than before (Mok, 2016). Addressing practical issues such as high housing prices and job searching is usually a matter of primary importance. At the same time, with the geographically limited space of the city and the influx of skilled labor from all around the world, it can be difficult for local, "ordinary" students, who are temporarily not in a position of power in society, to initiate profound changes that can effectively overturn the "plutocrats". As expressed by University L participants, many graduates had no choice but to yield to the current reality.

Conclusion

This research is an exploration of the impact of liberal arts education on individuals from two institutions located in two differing social contexts that share certain cultural heritages. The essence of LAE has assumed many forms across time and space, acting as an indispensable source for important education objectives. However, an insufficiency associated with current academic research is the lack of attention to the micro-level experiences of graduates from an LAE. Results show that LAE does prepare individuals for desired qualities in the workplace - it develops their self-initiative and makes them become more "independent". Moreover, LAE is having an impact beyond employment needs - it makes graduates become more interconnected in their concerns for knowledge and understanding of, and empathy with others and society. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice has informed the discussion of the major research findings, in particular by providing three key theoretical and analytical categories. This research has reflected the chosen theoretical framework, while in some parts questioning the view that human capital development is merely a rational investment seeking personal, material returns. It also sheds new light on the context-dependence of LAE by using an appropriate theoretical framework for the description, analysis, and interpretation of its influences. As different institutions are embedded in their particular backgrounds, the adopted case study approach not only sheds new insights on the institutional and social features that might affect individuals' development, but also illuminates the interplay between their personal agency and the external structural factors and forces.

Recommendations

Firstly, the two case studies investigated by this research can provide a basis for future researchers and practitioners to build up on them, notably by providing other cases and other contexts. It is advised to also expand the range and context of the research subjects so as to bring about potentially more interesting and fruitful comparisons. Secondly, the interviews were conducted with interviewees regardless of their fields of study or industries of work. It would be meaningful if pools of participants from certain disciplinary studies were involved, to allow comparisons so that more differences - or similarities - may be uncovered. Thirdly, the findings and conclusion of this research would be further bolstered by well-constructed quantitative data collection and analysis, offering the feasibility of exploring correlations among various demographic variables, such as gender, location, socioeconomic status, and other personal experiences. Fourth, it is also advised that a narrative study be launched to explore the transitioning and life journeys of graduating and graduated individuals in more detail. A major strength of doing this is that the changing mentalities before and after their engagement in the real world can be better unraveled.

Limitations

This research is intended as a helpful start for a qualitative investigation of the impact of liberal arts education on individuals' university-to-work transition. A small number of students and graduates were studied, who were about to approach the transitional phase into the workplace or in the early stages of employment. Therefore, data are limited in terms of applicability to other universities that have implemented an LAE, and individuals enrolled in different liberal

arts programs. Also, with its qualitative sampling and processing techniques, this research is not - and not intended to be - generalizable or statistically representative. In terms of methodological weakness, the personal inconvenience of some working participants only allowed them to accept online text interviews, which turned out not to be the most effective way of data gathering; the lack of Mandarin proficiency of some University N participants have caused certain communication barriers, although this was remedied by their use of English when necessary and the author's own perceptive capacity as a researcher.

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