Unleashing Student Potentials through the Interdisciplinary Common Core Curriculum at the University of Hong Kong

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The changing graduate skill requirements and massification of higher education are leading to various learning systems worldwide to move towards the interdisciplinary direction, whereas Hong Kong is of no exception (Eake, 2012). As early as 2004, the Hong Kong government started planning for the "3+3+4" New Academic Structure (NAS), including three years of junior secondary, three years of senior secondary, and four years of undergraduate. This targets further expanding learning opportunities for all students under 12 instead of 9 years of free education from Primary 1 till Secondary 6, and turning the academicist and selective system to a more broad-based, equitable, and diversified one to meet the contemporary needs in local society and the larger world (Poon & Yiu-Chung, 2008). According to Jaffee (2013), as an important part of the reform of the NAS, students are now undergoing a four-year rather than the original three-year undergraduate degree structure since 2012. The additional year functions as a crucial interface between senior secondary education and higher education requires all eight publicly funded universities to offer a broadening General Education Curriculum (GEC) for their students, which complements their specialized disciplines or professions with early tracking. Meanwhile, universities have redefined their desired graduate attributes and the intended learning outcomes of their respective GEC (Shek et al., 2015).

Common Core Curriculum (CCC) is the University of Hong Kong's (HKU) unique version of GEC. HKU undergraduates from all ten faculties are normally required to take six (or four for those studying double degree programs) CCC courses. To ensure students receive a broadening and balanced learning experience, students have the flexibility and autonomy in choosing their courses out of a list of more than 200 choices. Meanwhile, students are required to take at least one course from each of the four Areas of Inquiry (AoIs), including Scientific and Technological Literacy (CCST), Humanities (CCHU), Global Issues (CCGL), and China: Culture, State, and Society (CCCH). The CCC's four learning outcomes are (1) articulate a broader perspective and a deeper critical understanding of the complex connections between issues of profound importance; (2) better navigate the similarities and differences between their own and other cultures; (3) more fully participate as individuals, members of social groups, and citizens in global, regional, and local communities; as well as (4) demonstrate the creative, collaborative, and communication skills that will contribute to the quality of their own and others' lives. As the "crossroads" of the undergraduate curriculum, CCC provides the key holistic learning experience for all HKU undergraduates, which include the formal curriculum as well as an emerging series of student-based initiatives, which touch upon project-based learning, undergraduate research, as well as local and global partnerships to further enhance the extent of student engagement (Common Core Curriculum [CCC], n.d.-a).

Student Engagement within Common Core Curriculum

Among various HKU's educational innovations, CCC is one of those which reflect students' deep interests and strong commitments (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2016). After

years of constant refinement and improvement, CCC will celebrate its tenth anniversary in 2022 since its full implementation in 2012. While HKU is further professionalizing and evolving this unique curriculum, the issue of student engagement remains as the centre of the discussion. This is primarily because "student engagement" remains as one of the most frequently used term to portray students as the co-creators of learning and teaching, who always bear inestimable potentials to shape a more quality student-oriented curriculum, like CCC in this case study (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). According to Kuh (2009), student engagement can broadly refer to the wide range of activities universities use to motivate and interest students, as well as the time and effort students assign to meaningful activities. Therefore, with the aid of this broad definition, this case study piece will review the range of mechanisms reflected by and incorporated into CCC throughout the years. These include both the dynamic and complementary interplay between the top-down ones offered by the institution and bottom-up ones initiated among students, which help maximise the overall extent of student engagement.

Broadening the Model of Academic Scholarship

The theme-based and issue-oriented nature of CCC reflects the need to broaden the understanding of academic scholarship when research could simply be any set of practices which frames a set of questions that move one into his/her own curiosity and into greater knowledge of how the everyday world operates. This is clearly manifested by CCC's online student work exhibition centre which showcases a wide range of the interdisciplinary student works across the four AoIs, such as drafting a policy position paper, designing creative works in the popular media, and documenting daily observations and practices. All these highlight the importance and value of authentic research rooted in the daily encounters and experience. Some examples include digitalizing both tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Hong Kong, exploring emerging technologies in medicine and science, as well as creating modern poetries in relation to the contemporary social problems. After all, they bear varying extent of importance, significance, and implications to the larger society, be it shifting existing priors, informing policy debates, or even altering individual conceptions (CCC, n.d.-b). Interdisciplinarity is now becoming more essential since many real-life challenges and dilemmas are impossible to be resolved through learning under a single discipline. All these interdisciplinary artifacts also reflect how students formulate connections, intersections, and integrations across academic disciplines in a competent and confident manner.

There is also the annual Student Learning Festival (SLF) (usually at the last teaching week of the semester) organized for students to showcase to the wider audience both the process and products of their interdisciplinary learning. Although the SLF has been forced to move online due to the social unrest in 2019 and COVID-19 outbreak since 2020, online technology has indeed further maximized and amplified the learning effectiveness. The online student work exhibition can now incorporate far more selected work from a wide range of CCC courses, which include posters, videos, writings, and even virtual models. Moreover, since many of these works are digital and multimedia, they are now made even more accessible through reducing the friction of physical constraints and distances that has only allowed very limited capacity in on-site settings. Furthermore, the recent SLFs are presented through real-time broadcasts with the aid of Zoom and Facebook Live, such that students, graduates,

and audience from different time and geographical zones can still take part in the event together. Another newly launched initiative of similar nature is Unforeseen Circumstances as a peer-reviewed online journal and exhibit space. Students are encouraged to reflect more extensively and deeply regarding the unforeseen circumstances that have impacted their learning together, especially given the political and public health crisis faced in Hong Kong. Many of the students' work published in this online medium are reflecting their unique perspectives and feelings when they are living under this generation of complexity and uncertainty.

As inspired by the SLF, there is a gradual expansion of student-led workshops and exhibits initiated by students. All these initiatives proposed by students themselves remain highly diverse in themes, such as literature and arts, medical health, and sustainable development. Some of students with specialized and professional background are even further involving themselves in various outreaching engagements through the context of CCC, such as service learning and social learning, which show they remain socially responsible and civic-minded. There is manifested by the list of CCC's student learning partners, such as AIESEC, HeForSheForUs, Eczema Eradication Project, and Chatter That Matters (CCC, n.d.-c). Students are making attempts to establish dialogues and collaborations through understanding the genuine problems, and coming up with innovative insights and solutions. Since they are connecting themselves with the actual world, they need to exhaust and integrate knowledge, methods, and tools across disciplines, so as to cope with all the novel situations and ill-defined problems ahead of them. All these instances demonstrate how CCC are opening up more diverse representations, which will in turn facilitate a better understanding and resolution of problems, and spur more innovation and originality.

Extending the Interdisciplinary Dialogues and Dynamics

An inherent problem for many interdisciplinary programs is the one-off and limited exposure offered to students, which often leave no subsequent coherence and continuities for them to further utilize and deepen the knowledge and skills, as well as values and attitudes required from their courses. The wide range of research projects initiated by students, regardless of taking place within or even outside Hong Kong, are particularly crucial as they serve as mutually constructed learning communities among students to share their interdisciplinary perspectives and insights with one another in the context of CCC (CCC, n.d.-d). For instance, in the local context, the TransDisciplinary Undergraduate Research Project is offered for an individual or small groups of undergraduate students to pursue funded research on an interdisciplinary topic of their own choosing (CCC, n.d.-e). These are valuable opportunities for students taking different CCC courses from the same or even different AoIs to support and learn from one another. While in the global context, CCC also facilitates international interdisciplinary knowledge exchange, so as to enhance students' capacities for understanding and global citizenship, and a critical self-reflection and greater understanding of others. Some examples include Cross-Cultural Well-Being: Student Experiences through Story, Art, and Film with University of Queensland, The More Than Human City: A Global Research-in-Action Lab with Utrecht University, Creativity and Innovation Across Cultures: A Collaborative Experiential Project with Dayalbagh Educational Institute, as well as Scotland's Cultural Landscape – Nation, Heritage, and the Arts with University of Glasgow (CCC, n.d.-f).

Many of these research projects are ongoing and ever-evolving which offer iterative channels for students to cultivate, consolidate, and deepen their interdisciplinary competencies (Graybill & Shandas, 2010). Students are facilitated by experienced academics as mentors, as well as supported by CCC office for infrastructures and resources. After all, learning communities can offer participants with abundant opportunities for identity construction, intellectual exchange, and mutual support (Barak & Brekke, 2014). All these smaller communities allow students to further exchanging and co-exploring specific domains of knowledge and value, which expand their perspectives and potentials. Through making a large curriculum like CCC seem a lot smaller, they can further cultivate and strengthen their critical thinking and inquiry-driven mindset, which can feed back to HKU and the community.

Recruiting Active and Enthusiastic Student Consultants

Since 2014, CCC has initiated an open invitation to all interested undergraduate students in becoming Student Ambassadors (SAs), which are now renamed as Student Consultants (SCs). They are mainly responsible for offering comments and feedback about how to improve the learning experience, propose new ideas for further development of the curriculum, represent the program to a variety of stakeholders through taking part in various visiting delegations and the Student-Staff Consultative Committee, and most crucially, to other students. Since CCC is a university-wide program with the involvement of a highly internationalized student population, the composition of SCs, at HKU is also very broad, which include all faculties and years of study (CCC, n.d.-g).

Peer groups are the most influential source regarding university students' academic and personal development (Astin, 1993). Meanwhile, since students are the pragmatic users of every curriculum, their opinions and advices are often more practical in the fellow students' perspectives. To some students, doing an interdisciplinary education at their very first undergraduate year is intellectually demanding as the learning modes and academic expectations are very different from their practices at high school. Throughout an academic year, a large group of senior CCC SAs is invited to take part in various induction seminars and workshops designated for first-year incoming students, such as Success Strategies for Common Core and Common Core Sharing Session with the Incoming Presidential Scholars, as well as a series of theme-based promotional videos and campaigns, such as Peer Tips for Success in Common Core and Alumni Sharing for Common Core, which allow them to share their first-hand learning insights and experience with their counterparts. Many of these sharing initiatives are never cliched, but highly realistic. CCC SAs are also eager to share how they overcome the struggles, setbacks, and failures throughout their learning trajectory. Some themes include some possible criteria for selecting the best CC course for own self and how to deal with potential free-riders in group projects. While some of these might not be as long-lasting and institutionalized as the student advising system within HKU, these CCC SAs still manage to spend the limited time to inspire and illuminate their fellow schoolmates, which allow them to have a smooth interface and transition to HKU.

Empowering Students in Decision-Making Processes

There is a highly inclusive and respectful culture of student engagement and partnership embedded into the design and implementation of CCC. In fact, many of the issues discussed with CCC SCs or even students across the campus in different occasions, such as Common Core Staff-Student Consultative Meeting, are very pertinent to students' interests. The meeting is one of the most prominent channels of communication that CCC employs to ensure course quality, and bring out future revision and improvement. One of the issues consulted with SAs is the idea of determining students' Graduation Grade Point Average subject to a proviso that either five CCC courses with the highest grades (covering all AoIs), or all six courses will be taken into account, depending on which generates a higher score. This aims to encourage students to be risk-taking and exploratory when selecting their CCC courses (CCC, n.d.-h). Another issue is the offering of Common Core Clusters and Transdisciplinary Minors, which would be recorded as an accomplishment on students' Academic Attainment Profile. This aims to further motivate students to personalize themselves a more coherent interdisciplinary learning trajectory though taking courses of similar themes under the broad distribution requirements. These thematic options include Sustaining Cities, Cultures, and the Earth, The Quest for a Meaningful Life, Creative Arts, The Human Life Span, as well as Gender, Sexuality, and Diversity (CCC, n.d.-i).

Across many higher education institutions, when some issues emerge that have a high relevance for students, they are often tackled from a paternalistic and condescending perspective. The underlying risk for this is that some relevant policies and debates might subsequently be driven by misrepresentations as critical student voices are being excluded throughout the highly centralized decision-making process. Students always think that they are receiving far less attention and engagement. Nonetheless, the case of CCC shows how students might make a contribution informally through individual negotiation as well as formally through purposely developed structures and mechanisms (Oni & Adetoro, 2015). Another problem in higher education is that student engagement is strategically employed by senior managers and administrations to assimilate and co-opt students, and even legitimize the assumptions and decisions made, which leave no room for considering students' genuine concerns. Even if some means of student engagement are offered, they are merely limited to some easy-going and safe issues, so as to avoid embarrassing the senior leadership. Nonetheless, compared with the senior leadership, students are often relatively free to think unconventionally from the conventional bureaucratic wisdom and rigid organisational procedures, which are helpful for the latter to formulate a decision that aligns with students. The case of CCC again reflects how students can be actively involved and played with an integral part in helping to jointly construct both the curriculum and the learning.

Implications for Student Engagement in the Future

Student engagement should remain dynamic, flexible, and adaptive in all types of higher education settings, especially when the wider environment remains complex and ever-evolving. When formulating a student engagement framework, the model of HKU's CCC shows the importance of having complementary and multi-pronged strategies, especially the interplay between top-down ones offered by the institution and bottom-up ones initiated among students that makes changes to become comprehensive and sustainable. With the employment of such diverse modes of

student engagement, HKU can better comprehend her students' preferences, thoughts, and mentalities towards CCC as a university-wide curriculum. While the global educational trend is moving towards the direction of empowering students through various engagement exercises, university students are still seemingly an under-utilized resource in terms of defining and contributing to higher education. For a genuinely student-oriented curriculum, it is all about bringing diverse voices and perspectives into interaction, dialogue, and collaboration.

It is always easy for universities to ground their respective curriculum change on many high-sounding slogans and buzzwords, such as student engagement as this case study paper's overarching focus, but not many of them are genuinely reviewing what is already and perceived to be in place. While universities are differing in terms of their traditions, conditions, and contexts, which lead to specific strategic choices and contexts in enhancing student engagement, students should always be a common and core feature of any curriculum, instead of a fractured experience that is not well embedded into and reflected by it. Although this case study cannot discuss all student engagement initiatives related to HKU's CCC in great details, it is still hoped that higher education institutions around the world might adapt and integrate some of these transferrable elements as reflected by the selected examples, so as to further strengthen and deepen their level of student engagement. While changes are always necessary for making any curriculum to become more sustainable, they should always be based on the recognition of students' interest and engagement towards the system as a whole. This allows the curriculum to remain rooted and committed to its original value and purpose at every decision juncture, regardless of the series of uncertainties and complexities in the future ahead.

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