

# Introducing a common curriculum for all first year undergraduates

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## Abstract

In response to a nation-wide curriculum reform in Hong Kong where, commencing in 2012, students will do one year less at secondary school and have an additional year in undergraduate education, one university has implemented a common curriculum as the center piece of this bold reform. The overall aim of this curriculum is to provide a key common learning experience for all undergraduates and to broaden their horizons beyond their chosen disciplinary fields of study. This university is an English Medium of Instruction, research intensive evidence based led teaching university in Asia.

This new curriculum is seen as an essential part of academic induction to facilitate the transition from secondary school to university particularly in the climate of this major educational reform. It is well known that academic induction plays a crucial role in the transition from secondary to university education for freshmen (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 1993) and there should be a sustained process of learning throughout the first year (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). The focus is on issues that have been, and continue to be, of significance to societies, the core intellectual skills that all undergraduates at this university should acquire and the core values that they should uphold.

To fulfill the purpose of undergraduate education, that being to facilitate students to become autonomous persons and effective members of their disciplinary community and the wider social community (Krause, 2006; McInnis, 2001) requires strategies that foster first years deep learning and inspire their interests. Such strategies are manifested in inquiry-based experiences (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; The Boyer Commission, 1998). The curriculum frameworks reviewed in the development of this common curriculum initiative include the work of Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Dennis Lawton, one of the founding members of curriculum studies in the 1980's and 1990s, Donald Levine (2006) Powers of the Mind and Derek Bok (2006) Our Underachieving College.

The common curriculum is divided into four Areas of Inquiry (AoI's) to ensure a broad and balanced coverage. These AoI's are 1. Scientific and Technological Literacy; 2. Humanities; 3. Global Issues; and 4. China: Culture, State and Society. With each AoI there a number of key themes which provide the context for the individual courses. The curriculum comprises tutorials of small groups of students and the assessment includes a diverse and range of assessment modes.

So after the first semester of the introduction of this new curriculum, what are the students saying? In this study we looked at the student experiences in relation to the connection between lectures and tutorials, the role that issue inquiry played in their learning and how the assessments were aligned with the outcomes of the course. Generally the students were positive about the design of the courses they took and appreciated the inquiry based nature of the curriculum. Students outside of the cognate areas found those courses more challenging but at the same time could see the value of taking courses that provided an opportunity to better understand the complexities and the interconnectedness of the issues that they were confronted with during the courses.

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