Paper 3

What Values do Students in Hong Kong Attach to Experiential-learning Opportunities?
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Abstract

This study examined the impact of experiential learning at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) from an alumni perspective. The aim of this project was to identify the value of these learning experiences when viewed a year or two following graduation, and learning outcomes for selected participant experiences. This research adopted a qualitative approach to analyzing the identified outcomes for selected alumni experiences. Thirty-five phone interviews, two focus- group interviews and four individual interviews were conducted with recent graduates across different disciplines. The findings indicated the positive impact of experiential-learning activities in terms of:
1) personal growth, 2) social networking, 3) cross-cultural exposure,
4) career development, and 5) academic development. The study also identified five facilitating factors that influence student participation in the CUHK context – curriculum flexibility, students' personal interests, peer support, belonging to related communities/ organizations, and the overall University culture. Implications for optimizing experiential-learning offerings in university settings are provided and the methods and data are key aspects of researching student voices a key theme of the ECE conference.

Introduction

Experiential learning is concerned with the discovery and application of intellectual knowledge through direct experiences and guided reflections (Kolb, 1984; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002). It is a general term used to describe a wide range of educational activities. Although the term is more typically used in referring to specific out-of-class activities such as internships, exchange programmes and community service programmes, it also broadly indicates an educational approach that focuses on learning from authentic or naturalistic experiences. Following Proudman (1995), this research defines experiential learning as any meaningful interaction between individual learners and a unique community/ environment which allows the learner to construct knowledge, skills and values. This research emphasizes the interaction between learners and the unique community/ environment facilitated by different experiential-learning opportunities outside formal lecture- room learning contexts. The paper summarises literature on experiential learning and outlines the research methodology used. It then examines the gains of different types of experiential-learning programmes. The paper concludes by discussing factors that should be taken into account when analyzing student participation in experiential learning.

Literature Review

Since the 1990s, Hong Kong's higher education has become increasingly aware of the importance of providing experiential-learning opportunities to undergraduate students. Different types of experiential learning may enhance different aspects of student development. However, there is a dearth of empirical evidence to demonstrate the values of experiential learning. Most of the studies in the field of experiential learning focus on the evaluation of individual programme implementations. There are few studies examining the overall impact of different experiential-learning programmes on students' development during their undergraduate education, especially in the Hong Kong context. Much of the published research into experiential learning was conducted in Western contexts.

Exchange programmes are the most widely studied experiential-learning activities in the existing literature. Wilson (1993) discussed the impact of cross-cultural experiences in a United States (US) context. She argued that students generally could gain substantive knowledge and perceptual understanding of the global world through cross-cultural exposure. Such experiences may also facilitate their personal growth and interpersonal relationships. Kitsantas (2004) conducted a quantitative study in assessing the impact of studying abroad on graduate students. Her study showed that students had a significantly increased global understanding and cross-cultural skills after being abroad. Students who participated in studying abroad appeared to be better prepared to function in a multicultural world and promote international understanding than students without such experiential-learning opportunity. Sowa (2002) asserted the value

of exchange programmes and summarised that the gains from exchange programmes can include cross-cultural interactions, increase in knowledge and language skills and changes in attitudes and career goals. The intercultural experience enhanced their awareness and appreciation of other countries and cultures. Messer and Wolter (2007) examined the gains of Swiss graduate students after participating in exchange programmes. Their findings corresponded to the previous studies; however, they argued that students with exchange programme experiences were associated with higher starting salaries and a higher likelihood of opting for postgraduate degrees. This indicates the positive impact of exchange programmes on participants' career development.

Community-service programmes are another popular type of experiential-learning activity in facilitating students' personal development. Markus et al. (1993) discussed the benefits of community-service projects, which can enrich undergraduate students' education in the classroom. Their studies showed that students not only took the lessons they learnt in class out into the community, but also brought the lessons they learnt in the community back into the classroom. They fulfilled their civic responsibilities to one's community and gained insight into values and prejudices. Teranishi (2007) also highlighted the positive impact of community-service-abroad programmes on Latino college students' identity, relationships, and connectedness to the community. Her survey results indicated an increased self-efficacy, civic participation, career preparedness, and understanding of diversity. In addition, McClam et al. (2008) pointed out that the value of community-service programmes not only can develop students' personal growth throughout the participation process, but also provide career confirmation to the participants. In fact, self-reflection is a main focus in community-service programmes. Participants usually gain insights on the social issues and develop their professionalism through the reflection process.

On the other hand, programmes such as mentorships, internships and leadership-training programmes are relatively understudied. Riordan (2006) studied the internship impact of experiential learning on high school students in the US. His findings revealed that school students learnt through internships and indicated a significant development in intellectual and personal aspects. Chan (2000) examined the impact of leadership-training programmes on secondary student participants in Hong Kong. His study indicated that the participants generally rated themselves to have more qualities, characteristics, or abilities related to leadership after the training. Lee (2007) highlighted the value of mentorship programmes in learning from experiences. She argued that mentees can benefit from the relationship with their mentor when it is at its most productive. Murray and Owen (1991) also studied the value of mentoring programmes in the US. They pointed out that students can learn time management in an effective mentoring programme. They know how to cope with organizations more productively and get more job satisfaction through the mentoring process (ibid). Although the above studies demonstrated some specific values of experiential learning in secondary school and undergraduate educational settings, it is important to note that within the Hong Kong context, evidence of experiential learning in an undergraduate setting is relatively scarce.

Methodology

Within a qualitative paradigm, this study adopts an interpretive approach that is not concerned with objective facts but with the subjective values alumni have about their learning experiences within the University context. Guba and Lincoln, (2005) argued that human experiences can only be properly understood through a process of empathetic communication. A qualitative approach for this study was chosen because it allows the collection of valid data about the experiences of recent graduates and their understanding of the experiential learning provided by the University. It provides an opportunity for the researchers to further discuss the related topics with the interviewees. An interpretivist approach supports descriptive explanatory quality and it fits with the social constructivist notion of learning and experience. Interview is used as the major data collection method in this qualitative research. It allows the researcher to construct a better understanding of the perception of alumni from different colleges and departments. In addition, it provides access for researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration.

Thirty-five alumni who graduated between 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 participated in this study. All participants completed a full-time undergraduate degree at CUHK. Twenty participants (57%) were female and 15 (43%) were male. Their ages ranged from 23 to 28. Three types of interviews (phone interviews, group interviews and individual face-to-face interviews) were used to collect data for different purposes.

Data collected from the phone interviews was regarded as the first stage of our data collection to understand the general perception of alumni towards their University experiences, and to fine-tune our main research questions. Two group interviews were conducted to trigger deeper insights and four individual interviews were carried out to explore the different learning experiences of key informants. Table 1 below summaries the data collected in this study. All data were mainly collected and transcribed in Cantonese for content analysis. Selected quotations were translated into English for data reporting. All the translated transcripts were checked by the main researcher. Data triangulation was used to test the validity and reliability of the findings.

Table 1: Summary of Data Collection

Research method	Purpose	Research questions	Constituted data
Phone interview with individual alumni	• To gain background information of a group of alumni • To explore the general perception of the experiential -learning opportunities the University provided to a group of alumni • To inquire about the alumni's willingness to participate in further exploration of this study	• What, overall, memory do you have when talking about your undergraduate studies at CUHK? • What, overall, have you gained in your undergraduate learning experience? • What, overall, do you see as the drawbacks or impediments of your undergraduate experience? • If you could redo your undergraduate experience with any changes made, would you and how?	• 35 completed phone-interview forms and handwritten notes. Phone interviews lasted between 11 to 28 minutes.
Focus-group interview with alumni from different disciplines	• To further explore and clarify analysis derived from phone interviews • To elaborate on the alumni's view of particular broadening activities • To identify key informants for individual case studies	• What have you gained in your undergraduate studies at CUHK? • What are the factors that influence your motivation for participating in an activity? • According to the educational goal of CUHK, what attributes and skills have you developed during the undergraduate studies?	• 2 focus-group interviews audio-recordings lasting from 77 to 93 minutes with handwritten notes
Individual indepth case studies	• To examine the impact of different broadening activities on the development of individual alumni • To collect specific evidences and learning outcomes for selected alumni experiences	• What were you expectations of University education? • What do you value the most in your University life? • Why are those experiences particularly valuable to you? • How do those experiences different from the other you experienced during the undergraduate studies?	• 4 individual-interviews audio-recordings lasting from 98 to 106 minutes with handwritten notes

This project adopted a grounded approach as a guide for analysis. All data was analysed holistically from the initial phases of phone interviews to individual in-depth interviews. This method offers us tools for analysing data as well as for obtaining additional focused data that inform, extend and refine emerging

analytic themes (Charmaz, 2003). Interesting or frequently appeared nodes were coded into themes as the initial set of nodes. The initial list of grounded themes, such as values and impediments of particular broadening programmes, were sorted and reviewed to reduce overlapping themes. Related themes which share similar meanings were merged or rephrased into a category and subcategory relationship. For instance, past experience, personal motivation, reputation and curiosity were merged with the theme of student's personal interest after review. Arguments and comments then emerged from the revised list of themes. The emerging arguments and comments were used to compare and verify the previous analysis to ensure its consistency and validity. A simplified version of the coding structure is shown in Table 2. The first row indicates the grounded themes, which subsequently became the analysis in the second and the third column.

Table 2: The Coding Structure of the Analysis

Planning										
Which modes of experiences	*What kinds of values*					*What facilitating factors*				
Modes of experiential learning	Values/ advantages					Facilitating factors				
	personal growth	social network	cross-cultural exposure	career development	academic development	personal interest	flexibility	University culture	community belongings	peer support
Exchange	√	√	√		√	√	√	√		
Internship	√	√		√	√		√			
Mentorship		√		√		√		√		
Student clubs	√	√		√			√		√	√
Leadership	√		√							

Findings

Qualitative analyses were conducted to examine the impact of experiential-learning activities offered at CUHK. Using grounded theory, five overarching values emerged from the findings: a) personal growth, b) social networking, c) cross-cultural exposure, d) academic development, and e) career skills. Table 3 summarises the values of experiential learning identified in five modes of experiences at CUHK. The analysis highlights the importance of experiential learning to facilitate students' personal growth. Factors facilitating the values of experiential learning among different experiences are also discussed. These factors emerged as alumni reflected on how *much* value they gained from the experiential learning they were involved in; these factors are curriculum flexibility, students' personal interests, peer support, belonging to related communities/ organizations, and the overall University culture.

Table 3: The Value of Experiential Learning

Modes of experiential learning	Values/ advantages				
	Personal growth	**Social network**	**Cross-cultural exposure**	**Career development**	**Academic development**
Exchange	• Problem-solving skills • Reflection from past experiences	• Able to establish friendships in the host country	• Connection with international community • Increase cross-cultural knowledge and international awareness		• Able to study courses that are not available in CUHK
Internship	• Insights into career aspiration	• Able to establish social network in a work setting		• Gain career skills	• Consolidat-ed academic knowledge
Mentorship		• Meeting different people		• Knowledge about work life • Job-hunting skills	
Student clubs	• Speeded up personal development • Acquire generic skills • Leadership experiences • Active learning attitude	• Able to establish long-lasting friendships • Expand social network		• Be able to acquire technical and specialist skills	
Leadership	• Social awareness • Sense of responsibility • Thinking skills and leadership knowledge		• Knowledge of different cultures via interacting with overseas participants		

The following paragraphs elaborate each value identified in particular experiential-learning activities from our alumni respondents. Facilitating factors which enhance and restrain their participation in those activities are also mentioned. For easy reference, the five facilitating factors are marked in bold throughout the section.

a) Personal growth

Most of the respondents described a strengthened sense of personal growth through experiential learning. Sam, a 25-year-old Engineering alumnus, reflected on his enhanced personal development over the experience of being on a student club committee. He said,

'I believe if you think it is right and comply with your values, you can make breakthroughs. Someone poses a question: "What is success?" You have to show respect to others' beliefs. Business students may have a framework or model of what success is. I reckon everyone can be successful no matter which fields they are in. These kinds of values are established gradually. When you are in the final year, you can realise having such values will give you a distinctive edge over others and you can adapt to the environment much faster apparently.'

These respondents demonstrate how the process of experiential learning offers an environment for them to reflect on their own experience. The ambience participants enjoyed and exercised through experiential learning has facilitated their personal development. Many respondents said they became more responsible and confident after participating in some experiential-learning activities, such as exchange programmes and student activities.

They developed a greater sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy after undergoing those experiences. One respondent, Margaret, a 24-year-old Science alumnus, originally considered herself to be dependent and weak. After she had been through several types of experiential-learning programmes (e.g. cultural exchange programmes, internship and student clubs), she felt an increased sense of self-efficacy, realizing that she could achieve far more than she had thought through adopting an active attitude with willingness to try. She said:

'After participating in exchange tour and student club in Year 1, I realised that my learning attitude has changed gradually. I lowered my expectation on study and started to spend more time on engaging in other activities on campus. I realised that I should acquire not only academic knowledge, but also other skills in my undergraduate studies. I become more active and I want to acquire more (different types of learning experiences). My family also becomes more supportive of my involvement in these non-disciplinary activities, when they see the positive impact (of these activities) on me.'

Many participants highlighted the importance of **flexibility** in facilitating their personal growth in experiential learning. The more flexibility the participant can enjoy, the more reflections they obtain from the activity. One participant, Charis, a 24-year-old Science alumnus, commented that the limited **flexibility** on certain types of student clubs can restrain the personal development of participants through such experiences. She argued that:

'The student club I joined was restrained by many ordinary activities, which was so much alike to the club culture in secondary schools (i.e. mainly focused on organising internal social gathering). So, I did not obtain any profound impact on my personal development in student clubs.'

b) Social networking

Through engaging in a variety of social interactions with other experiential-learning participants, twenty five respondents expressed that the experiences strengthened and widened their social network. They were able to meet a range of people from different social sectors by participating in different experiential-learning programmes. The interactions with mentors, internship colleagues and peers allowed them to develop their social network beyond a course-based community. These established social networks with mentors and internship colleagues enhanced participants' understanding of working life. Interactions with mentors and internship colleagues also provided participants with support and guidance in their career development.

Jeff, a 24-year-old Arts alumnus, pointed out that his broadened social network had enhanced his pleasant memories of the University and facilitated him to enhance his self-understanding through interacting with a range of people during the undergraduate studies. He said:

'…interacting with different people allowed me to understand my limitations and strengths … the broadened social network increased not only my pleasant memories of the University, but also my skills. I am good at imitating others. My interaction with professors (through participating in different

experiential-learning activities) allowed me to learn their presentation skills and apply it to my current job …'

However, the sense of **belonging to the community** and the extent of **peer support** students received in the community may determine the values of social networking in experiential learning. Some respondents explained that their active participation in student clubs was cultivated by their strong **sense of belonging to their associations**. In addition, students seemed to be more eager to participate in the activities when they agree with the value and culture of that particular community. Charles, a 26-year-old Business alumnus, pointed out that a supportive environment and his **belonging to the community** were essential for sustaining his engagement in student activities. He stated:

'I wasn't sure the values of participating in student clubs at the beginning. The main reason of my engagement in student clubs was due to the encouragement from my peers and senior students ... while the continued participation in student clubs during my second and third year was due to my devotion to the college and the good feeling when interacting with other working parties in the environment.'

c) Cross-cultural exposure

Some respondents also received certain exposure to cross-cultural issues in particular types of experiential-learning programmes. The exchange programme is one of the typical programmes that provide a cross-cultural and a global perspective to participants during the learning process. Twelve participants reflected that they especially cherished such cross-cultural experiences. Bryan, a 24-year-old Science alumnus, shared his reflection on the cross-cultural exposure he experienced during the exchange period. He commented:

'This may probably due to my host family as it was really an intensive experience. Yet, I reckon my attachment to Japan is because learning Japanese and its culture enables me to have more understanding of Chinese culture as a great deal of Japanese culture stems from China as early as in the Tong dynasty. This is something I cannot learn in Hong Kong and China. As a result, I would like to discover more in this area (Chinese and Japanese cultures) afterwards.'

Due to the important learning value of cross-cultural exposure, some experiential-learning programmes have become more diversified and integrated (i.e. internship-abroad programme, across-cultures leadership programme). However, the impact of cross-cultural exposure could be hindered by the type of culture and the familiarity of the participant towards that culture. Sam explained the limited impact he had on an across-cultures leadership programme with Singaporeans and mainland Chinese. He said:

'… I have been to Singapore and Peking. So, even though the programme (leadership-training programme) provided cultural exchange opportunity, the benefit and impact weren't very impressive and obvious to me.'

Thus, the factors of **personal interests** may hinder students' cross-cultural exposure. For instance, some participants tended to show a stronger initiative to learn new knowledge and create new experiences than the others. This may explain why Sam seemed to show less appreciation for the interaction with those familiar cultural groups in the programmes. **University culture** is another significant element in cultivating students' cross-cultural exposures. Yanis, a 24-year-old Science alumnus, pointed out the growing trend in obtaining cross-cultural exposures at the University. He said:

'A few years ago, there was only a few students who participated in exchange programmes ... People were doubtful of the value (of cross-cultural exposure) with the cost of deferring their degrees for an additional year … Now, it's weird if you do not have any exchange experience.'

d) Career development

Nine participants also indicated the positive impact of their career development through participating in experiential-learning programmes. Eight out of the twelve internship participants argued that the

experience was essential to their professional development. They were able to understand more about their professions through interacting with professionals in the field. In fact, it contributed to their career development positively. For the participants who are working in a job related to their placement nature, they found the experience exceptionally useful, as it provided them an opportunity to experience the working culture of the field and enhanced their competitiveness in the job-hunting process.

In addition, mentorship programmes cultivated the interaction between students and working alumni. Such interactions allowed students to further understand the working environment. The network between students and working alumni also enhanced their career development. Two participants pointed out that their mentors were keen to provide support on their job hunting. They offered reference letters and provided interview skills training to them in order to boost their competitiveness in the job market. Alan, a 24-year-old Social Science alumnus, shared the gain of career development he obtained through participating in mentorship programmes. He said,

> *'…these (mentorship) programmes allowed me to meet different people and learn more about work life in various setting. Like [the name of one mentor], I have been trained under his thinking mode for a year … His thinking mode benefits me a lot … Another mentor gave me mock job interviews and offered me reference letters for my job hunt preparation.'*

However, student's career development in experiential learning can be enhanced and restrained by **the culture of the University** and the **flexibility** of departments. Many internship programmes in supporting students' career development are bounded by curriculum designs. In addition, there are very few career-related experiential-learning programmes offered on campus. Bryan criticized the lack of career support in the University. He complained that:

> *'I didn't know there were internship opportunities provided by the University. Even though there was some internship opportunities offered by my department, it was mainly related to laboratory work, which is not in my interest.'*

e) Academic development

Experiential learning not only can facilitate participants' personal growth and widen their horizons as well as social network, but also can enhance students' academic development. For instance, exchange programmes offer an opportunity to students to study courses that may not be available in their home University. This enhanced the flexibility in their studies. Yuki, a 24-year-old Social Science alumnus, claimed that her current career development was inspired by a random course she studied during the exchange period. She explained:

> *'I think that exchange is of great importance. I studied in the School of Journalism and Communication and it was deemed that the University offered a range of courses to choose from. Yet, when I was an exchange student, I realised that other universities provided some courses which cannot be found in CUHK. During the exchange period, we tend not to enrol in courses that are available in CUHK, as we prefer to try something new. For example, I took a course called "Magazine Editing", which cannot be found in CUHK. I've gained interest in magazine editing through that particular course and I am now working in this field.*

In addition, the experience of being an intern in a field related to their discipline allowed students to apply the knowledge they learnt in the lectures during the internship period. The experience consolidated their theoretical knowledge and allowed them to further explore their interest in particular academic areas. Margaret felt that the depth and breadth of her academic knowledge was both enhanced after the internship experience. She said:

> *'…this process (being an intern) deepens my understanding. I do not gain much knowledge from attending lectures in the University, whereas I obtain some practical knowledge from these experiences. For instance, if someone asks me what kind of food is suited for kindergarten students, I may not be able to answer even though I have completed the course. Yet, my knowledge increased after completing the internship and*

thus makes me become more professional … We reckon this is quite useful as we can apply what we have learnt.'

Although students' academic development can be enhanced through experiential learning, their **personal interests** and the **flexibility** of their curriculum designs may vary the extent of their development in such experiences. Some participants argued that some departments have particular high demand on students' academic performance. They created very intensive curriculum for students, which limited their opportunities to explore their academic interests and restricted their study options. Andrea, a 25-year-old Arts alumnus, explained how the **flexibility** in exchange programmes supported students' academic development. She said:

'…the most important element (in exchange) is the right to choose. I won't insist to fit study abroad credits into my programme … If it is compulsory to fit a certain amount of study abroad credits into the home programme, we will turn back to a "Hong Kong learning style", which relies too heavily on textbook and focuses only on findings notes and references. As a result, we won't able to learn much.'

Implications and Conclusion

Our findings outlined above indicate that the success of experiential learning depends on student's participation and reflection (AEE, 2002; Seaman, 2006). The understandings and learning outcomes alumni constructed through reflection on concrete experiences are hindered and facilitated by five main factors including flexibility, personal interest, peer support, belonging to related communities/ organizations, and University culture. Figure 1 indicates the interrelationship between modes of experiences, their values and facilitating factors revealed in this study. The size of the circles is indicative of the strength of the relationships.
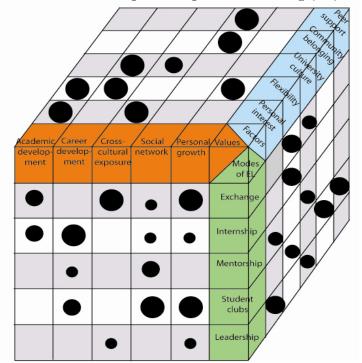
Figure 1: A matrix model of the impact of experiential learning (EL) in CUHK

Experiential learning has value for students in deep personal growth and self-discovery. This study into the outcomes of experiential learning supports a rationale for the learning gains on undergraduate students in CUHK. Our analysis indicates that a range of experiences through experiential learning are acquired, the extent of positive impacts depends on the quality of student participation. The quality of student participation can be influenced by a number of factors (i.e. curriculum flexibility, students' personal interests, peer support, belonging to related communities/ organizations, and the overall University

culture). Our analysis leads us to conclude that it is highly desirable to ensure a provision of equal access to all students in experiential-learning programmes. In addition, facilitation and reflection contribute immensely to the success of experiential learning. Therefore, it is important to provide opportunities and supports for all students to create diversified learning experiences. As students, it is necessary for them to become active learners to engage in reflection and constructing meaning through experiences.

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