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Issues in the future development of business education in Hong Kong secondary curriculum

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Abstract: Business education has come a long way, from its roots in vocational education; and is now becoming an essential part of the school curriculum. As its significance continues to be recognised, business education needs to respond to dynamic changes and to be future oriented. This paper first discusses the relationship between business education and general education—whether business education should be treated as part of vocational education or part of academic education. It then examines changes in the business curriculum, suggesting the integration of academic and vocational aspects as well as a better link between business subjects. This paper ends by stressing what can be done to further develop Hong Kong secondary business education in the future.

Subjects: Asian Education; Education & Training; Secondary Education

Keywords: business education; Hong Kong; entrepreneurship education; curriculum

1. Introduction

From its beginnings as an entrepot in 1841, Hong Kong has become one of the world's leading financial and business centres in the Asia-Pacific region, a leading financial and commercial “hub” and a gateway between China and the rest of the world. In 2008, the Time magazine created a word Nylon-kong to put Hong Kong after New York and London and described how the three connected cities drove the global economy. Hong Kong is also famously rich. In 2014, The Gross Domestic Product per capita in Hong Kong reached an all-time high of 52551.60 USD.

In universities, business subjects are the most sought after among university applicants and many from different fields of career would like to pursue a MBA degree after a few years of work.

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C.K. Cheung teaches in the Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong. His research interests include entrepreneurship education, media education and civic education. He has published more than 40 externally refereed articles and book chapters. He has been successful in obtaining both internal and external research grants. He is a member of the editorial board of a number of prestigious journals. He is also an external subject examiner for the Hong Kong Institute of Education and a panel member of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications. This paper is part of a large project; examining at the future development of business education in Hong Kong secondary schools.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Business education has come a long way, from its roots in vocational education; and is now becoming an essential part of the school curriculum. As its significance continues to be recognised, business education needs to respond to dynamic changes and to be future-oriented. The old image of business education with the primary aims of producing clerks and secretaries is being replaced by a higher mission of preparing students who are able to pursue further studies in tertiary institutions or become business professionals in the future. To achieve this goal, much needs to be done. A good and balanced business curriculum will equip students to function as viable members of tomorrow's society..

Unfortunately, the existing business curriculum in Hong Kong secondary schools does not reflect its significance.

Business subjects were first introduced into schools in the form of vocational subjects designed to produce the technical and secretarial human resources necessary for the growing economy. However, as time goes by, more and more students are recognising the importance of business education. Not only students in prevocational schools, but also students in mainstream schools take business subjects, and the number of students taking business subjects continues to rise and the recent social and economic changes call for a new form of business education in secondary schools. Society is dynamic and is changing at an increasingly rapid pace. Business education in Hong Kong must keep abreast of this accelerated pace of change.

In this paper, the author examines the current issues facing business education in Hong Kong secondary curriculum, namely, the relationship between secondary business education and general education, the role of business education in vocational education, and what can be done for the further development of secondary business education in Hong Kong.

2. Business education and general education

The question of whether business education should be interpreted in the curriculum as vocational preparation or as part of general education is constantly in the minds of business educators (AlSagheer & Al-Sagheer, 2010; Gandy, 2001). The notion of business education as part of general education has long been considered. Enterline (1949, p. 5) stated:

Certain types of business education, such as general business information, an understanding of business, consumer business education, and social-business education, contribute to the economic well-being of all persons regardless of occupational choice, since all use the services of business or live in a business environment.

In many European education systems, where business education is considered as part of vocational education, the general education content of vocational tracks has steadily increased, and the gap between them and the mainstream academic curriculum has steadily narrowed. In the last century, Noah and Eckstein (1988, p. 62), after comparing education in France, Germany and the UK, commented: "Also, as the general education component in vocational education curricula has grown, the distinction between general and vocational education has become less well defined". It can, therefore, be interpreted that business education in some countries has moved out of the vocational track and become part of general education. In the US, the importance of business education as part of general education is acknowledged. When business education first started as part of education, its contribution to general education was identified. In its statement, "This we believe about the mission of business education", the Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education (1977) advocated that business education must be recognised as both vocational and general education. In reflecting on the relationship between business education and general education, Sapre (1988, p. 1) asserted that "the emphasis on academic subjects and basic skills challenges us to reaffirm and enhance our contribution to general education". A statement by the Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education issued in 1989 claimed that business education is a critical component in the general education of all students. When the state and city supervisors of business education were asked to comment on why business education should be the number one priority in the general curriculum in the future, a point raised frequently was that "business education is general education and should therefore be used as a vehicle for teaching the basics" (Moore & Hanes, 1987, p. 157). This view was shared by the Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education (1985):

Business courses, such as business communication, business economics, keyboarding and occupational program sequences contribute greatly to meeting the general education needs of high school students.

Business education originated as a part of vocational education but as time changes, and business activities become an integral part of daily activities, the distinction of business education as a part of general or vocational education is questionable (Railsback & Hite, 2008). Between the two extremes of general and vocational education, there could be general vocational education with both academic and vocational elements.

Research by Bujea (1987) tracing the practices and trends in business education in the UK, the US and Canada revealed that business education had extended downwards into the elementary school. Bujea held that business education, once formulated as a part of the general education for all, would be rid of the stigma of being second best. In addition to comments by educators, results of a survey of executives in New Jersey suggested that employers were quite supportive of a general education that included a business aspect (Castellano, 1992). In Hong Kong, the secondary business curriculum consisted of both general education and vocational preparation (CDC, 1991). In a group discussion at a conference for business educators, it was agreed that business education in the secondary school curriculum was definitely part of the general education (Cheung & Lewis, 1995). Cheung's (1998) study confirmed that secondary business educators would like to see secondary business education as a significant part of general education.

3. Business education: Academic or vocational?

Now that the idea of business education as part of general education is accepted by many, the next issue is the academic and vocational divide with respect to business education.

3.1. Academic vs. vocational education

Vocational education has always suffered from a status problem. Pring (1995, p. 134) commented:

Young people, unable to succeed within the framework of liberal education, are branded failures and uneducable. Those who succeed in vocational pursuits are denied the status accorded to academic success. There is a hierarchy of values and academic excellence is at the top of that hierarchy (p. 134).

A General education, which is more academic in nature, is usually more favoured than a vocational education. Watts's (1983) study concluded that the overwhelming majority of industries were of the opinion that education should be general than vocational in character. Vocational education has always suffered from a status problem.

Another criticism of vocational education concerns its selective nature (Brown, 1988; Halsall & Cockett, 2012). It has been argued that specialised vocational subjects lack flexibility; and are, therefore not a favourable preparation for job training. Studies have shown that vocational education does not necessarily produce the workers needed by employers and that the success of the economy has little correlation with it (Jervis, 2011; Roberts, Dench, & Richardson, 1988). Furthermore, vocational education tends to limit students' choices of occupation instead of exposing them to more options and business educators try to avoid linking business education with vocational education. In view of this, the separation of business education from vocational education is called for, and business educators hope to see the integration of business education into academic education. It should be noted that the tension between academic education and vocational education has been strong, and the distinction between the two was postulated by Blaug (1970, p. 247) as follows:

This distinction, which is actually grounded in the nature of the two curricula, is allowed to carry the implication that some education prepares students for the 'world of work' and some does not. All too frequently, however, those who have taken courses of study generally called 'academic'... reap substantial financial returns from their education, thus producing the paradoxical conclusion that academic education has a greater 'vocational' value than vocational education.

Hodkinson (1991, p. 75) also described the key factors distinguishing between the two extremes:

Academic education is primarily concerned with learning for its own sake, while vocationalism is concerned with education for a purpose. Academics are concerned with cerebral activities. Knowing and understanding for them are the core of education. Vocationalists see their job as training people to do things. Knowing how is more important than knowing what. Where academics are concerned with personal development, they see it in terms of personal autonomy: the ability to think critically and to arrive at logically supported independent ideas and beliefs. Vocationalists, similarly concerned with personal development, will talk about personal competence or effectiveness: the ability to do things, and to make things happen.

As in the case of Hong Kong, a historical divide has developed; liberal academic education is associated with high status, central to the public schools and something for the more able students, whereas vocational education is considered to be of low status, peripheral to the school system and more appropriate for the less able only (Carless, 2005). Most students wish to stay on for further studies in the academic mainstream so as to pursue better qualifications and therefore better jobs (Morris & Marsh, 1992). Many believe that academic subjects can provide students with a grounding of basic knowledge and skills, and that business education, which originated as a kind of vocational education, has reduced learning, understanding and knowledge into skills and a list of competencies that equip students for low-entry jobs (Velde & Yu, 2009). However, Rust (1973, p. 27) viewed the distinction between academic and vocational education differently: "It is possible to argue now that every form of education is leading towards some kind of occupation. Hence the former prestige of 'general' education as against 'vocational' education has become open to question." Therefore now instead of a sharp contrast between "general" education and "vocational" education at the extreme of two ends, the differences between traditional academic subjects and vocational subjects are less obvious. This leads us to a discussion about the possibility of an integration of academic and vocational education.

3.2. Integration of academic and vocational education

As noted in the previous discussion, the academic and vocational divide with respect to business education is a poorly defined dichotomy. The debate can go on and on, but students will not benefit from it. The real issue here is about providing the best choice for our students. Historically, academic education and its vocational counterpart have been the two extremes of education, but many have now called for the integration of the two (Hyland, 1993; Shavit & Muller, 2010).

In the US, the 1984 Carl Perkins Act emphasised the need to strengthen the academic foundation of vocational education so that students achieve both academic and occupational competencies, and several states in the US made an effort to integrate vocational and academic education. Since then, the integration of academic and vocational instruction has often been presented as the needed educational format that provides relevance and strong academics at the same time. Hull (1993, p. 9) agreed with the integration of academic and vocational education when he argued:

Preparing students for careers is one important purpose of public education. But useful, effective occupational or technical education requires that the student not just be trained for entry-level job tasks, but also be given a solid foundation of academics. In today's technically sophisticated society, it is both unfair and irrational to continue past practices of training some students in head skills and others in hand skills; good education is the blending of the two. Workers with a solid academic foundation will be able to learn new skills as they are needed, not only for maintaining their jobs in an ever-changing workplace, but also for advancement toward higher career levels.

Gray expressed a similar view (1991, p. 443):

The primary goal of integrating academic and vocational education is to make the experience of applied vocational education more accessible to academic students at

the same time that advanced academic courses are made more accessible to students concentrating in vocational education. In integrating academic and vocational education, we would promote greater intermingling of students in both curricular streams.

Love and Gloeckner (1992, p. 16) noted, after reporting on a number of studies involving the cooperation of vocational and academic teachers, that those who participated in the studies found the benefits included “increased job satisfaction, increased ability to teach basics and theory, new knowledge of real world applications of theory, a more positive school climate, and acquisition of new teaching strategies”. Cheung (1998) also asserted that vocational teachers welcome the idea, as they believed the integration of academic and vocational education could provide long-range, positive benefits for students and the workforce.

4. What needs to be done

4.1. Business education as an integration of academic and vocational education

Should business education continue to be treated as merely preparation for support roles in business, preparing students for repetitive, low-wage employment, or should it be a part of general education? Cheung’s (1998) study suggested the development of two curricula: one for vocational education, in which business subjects provide the necessary facts, skills and knowledge to those who may not further their studies, and the other as part of general education, which would provide a clear route and goals for business education. The second type of curriculum would be aimed at preparing students for tertiary education, which would provide the knowledge and skills necessary for becoming business professionals.

Another possible solution is the integration of academic and vocational subjects. While it is true to say that business education is not an historic academic subject in the same sense that Mathematics, History or Physics are, it is a subject that effectively promotes a diversity of capabilities among students. Business education is based on academic fundamentals and practical application. When the academic side of business education is strengthened, students can combine the rigours of numerical and qualitative analysis with an opportunity to look closely at relevant examples from the real world. Thus integration will make business subjects academically stronger and academic subjects more relevant (Athvale, Myring, Davis, & Truell, 2010; Williams, 2011).

A study by McEwen, McEwen, and Anderson-Yates (1992) found that it was beneficial to integrate academic and business education, by both improving the quality of graduates and by improving the relationships between academic and business teachers. Hudelson (1994, p. 2) echoed this:

Education reformers hope the school-to-work projects will bring about lasting change in the high schools by encouraging integration of academic and vocational course work, teaching all aspects of an industry, integrating work-based and school-based learning and promoting the formation of partnerships among elementary, middle, secondary and postsecondary schools. In the ideal school-to-work system, all students are expected to meet high academic and occupational standards.

Mansfield and Echternacht (1999, p. 58) pointed out that the concept of integrating business education course work and academic curricula was being developed in many school districts in the US, and by integrating academic and business education curricula, “teachers can reinforce oral and written communication skills, develop problem-solving and decision-making skills, apply technology to real-world problems, provide a context for student learning, and improve student motivation and understanding”. In his study of the perceptions of business educators in US high schools, Baxter (2011) stressed the importance of the integration of academic and vocational subjects. Kaliski (2007, p. 10) conducted a survey on the future of business education and concluded that “business education will become much more interdisciplinary, working in conjunction with other academic disciplines and the field of information technology”.

In Hong Kong, the relatively low image of business education originates from its initial development as subjects for students in prevocational schools. Over time, the direction of business education has changed and business subjects have become more popular with students. The number of students taking business in the public examination is on the rise and many secondary schools have also introduced business education into their “academic” programme.

4.2. A better linkage between subjects

Curricula for any level of education cannot be formed in a vacuum, and each level of education should link up with the previous and the following ones. One of the criticisms of business education is its lack of cohesion as a subject area (Cheung, 1998). Unlike many other subjects that provide linkage of knowledge from junior level to secondary level, business subjects are spread too widely. Continuity exists more in general academic subjects than in practical subjects. Most of the general academic subjects have long been established, with the curriculum carefully planned, running through junior level and senior level. But business subjects, which are seen to be practical, are mostly available at junior level; and only one namely, Business, Accounting and Financial Studies is available at the senior form level in Hong Kong (Yu, 2010).

One of the ways to solve the above problem, which in turn would lead to the upgrading of the status of business education, is through articulation between different levels of business education. Warmbrod (1987) believed that a better articulation of business curricula was an effective means to attract students and called it a good match because students could see where the programme was leading; and in return, would be more enthusiastic in using their high school work to meet college course requirements, which was time and cost effective. The study by McEwen (1998) added support for the articulation of business education curricula, while in Hong Kong, So’s (2004) study looked at secondary school students’ attitude in choosing business education and arrived at similar conclusion.

Indeed business subjects have the potential to be moved onto a broader and more academic basis to ensure a stronger place in the curriculum if the linkage is better. In Hong Kong, the importance of curriculum continuity is recognised in the *Review of Prevocational and Secondary Technical Education* (Education Department, 1997), where it is suggested that some new subjects should be introduced into the present curriculum and some outdated subjects should be eliminated to ensure a better linkage of subjects.

4.3. Continuous professional development

Business educators have an expanding leadership and planning role in educational circles. Business teachers are increasingly involved in curriculum planning, in-service education programmes, and research (Shumack & Forde, 2011). The role of business educators is important in the further development of business education (Gandy, 2001). Business teachers must become more actively involved in making business education more than just training courses in basic job-entry skills and promote it as an occupational preparatory curriculum in which students are trained to become business professionals in the modern world. They must constantly address issues, and determine policies and courses of action in business education in order to keep pace with the ever-changing, rapidly expanding business world (Kesten & Lambrecht, 2010; White & Roach, 1997). The challenge for business educators will be in convincing parents and students that secondary business education can be the first step towards further education and/or a rewarding and lucrative career. Stout (1997, p. 50) best summarised what business educators can do to elevate the status of business education when he wrote:

Business educators must promote the business course curriculum in terms of basic skills (Core areas), life skills, information technology skills, entrepreneurship skills, international business knowledge, and lifelong learning needed by all students regardless of their career goals. When the business education curriculum is recognized as an essential component in the total school curriculum, the image of the courses changes. This improved image impacts the learning environment by appealing to more students with varying ability levels.

To achieve the above, advanced teacher training for business educators is inevitable. Previously in Hong Kong, many teachers were satisfied with only a teaching certificate but now many wish to equip themselves with further qualifications. In a survey of business educators, Cheung (2012) noted that the majority of those who had not yet obtained a Master's degree wish to get one in the near future, especially in business education. It is thus essential for universities to offer courses of this kind to cater to the needs of business educators.

4.4. Research

Because of its association with vocational education, business education has been marginalised and stigmatised as being inferior to general education (Brand, 2008). Business subjects have been accorded low status as they are seen only as subjects to students for future jobs requiring few skills and little knowledge. Business education has been described by students and teachers as a “non-academic elective” (Gaskell, 1986).

To promote the significance of business education further, the time has now come for more academic research conducted in a vigorous manner, with solid evidence to substantiate the various claims that have been made about what business education can achieve (Gupta & Sangeeta, 2013). The role of research is important to professionalism. Bennett (1988) conducted a national survey of business teachers in the US and the responses revealed that business teachers did consider research a high priority for increased professionalism in business education. Also, the majority believed that business educators were not fulfilling their professional responsibilities in the area of research. The National Business Education Association in the US (NBEA, 1997, p. 44) also highlighted the importance of research and urged business teachers to “apply the results of educational research, develop concepts of research, and interpret professional literature which addresses research and development”.

Business educators need to be equipped with a broad understanding of the leading edge theories and tools in business management. They should make their views known concerning issues facing the profession (Lambrecht, 2007), and need to have up-to-date knowledge to construct educationally sound curriculum, all of which can be achieved through research.

4.5. Introduction of entrepreneurship education

Given that Hong Kong is one of the world's leading financial and business centres in the Asia-Pacific region, schools should be responsible for cultivating in students a suitable entrepreneurial spirit and skills (Cheung & Au, 2010). School leavers who cannot find a place in a university or other tertiary institutions are most likely required to find jobs. However, there are not many suitable jobs for them, given their low educational background. Although the Hong Kong government has spent a lot of money in creating temporary jobs in order to reduce the unemployment rate, this measure has not been successful. People will become jobless again after the temporary jobs disappear. Entrepreneurship education is important in many aspects. It can provide students with an understanding of business—its purposes, its structure, and its interrelationship with other segments of the economy and society. Many studies have noted that an entrepreneurship course has a positive impact on students' views of entrepreneurship (Danko, 2005; Hayward & Sundes, 2000; Mohan-Neill, 2001). Entrepreneurship education equips students in many aspects such as self-empowerment, values clarification, role modelling, and systems thinking. This is important for all students, not only those who aim to become entrepreneurs. The value of, and need for, entrepreneurship education was summed up in a report by the Global Education Initiative of the World Economic Forum (Wilson & Sepulveda, 2009, pp. 7–8):

While education is one of the most important foundations for economic development, entrepreneurship is a major driver of innovation and economic growth. Entrepreneurship education plays an essential role in shaping attitudes, skills and culture – from the primary level up. We believe entrepreneurial skills, attitudes and behaviours can be learned, and that exposure to entrepreneurship education throughout an individual's lifelong learning path, starting from youth and continuing through adulthood into higher education – as well as reaching out to those economically or socially excluded – is imperative.

Unfortunately, entrepreneurship education is not developing in Hong Kong at the rate that it should be (Cheung, 2012). While there is little entrepreneurship taught in the secondary school curriculum, private and public organisations play a significant role in the development of entrepreneurship education. They give schools support of various kinds including the provision of seed capital and first-hand and the latest information about the business sector. Programmes like the Business and Entrepreneur Enhancement Programme; the Teen Entrepreneur Competition; the Young Entrepreneurs Development School-Company Partnership; and Junior Achievement Hong Kong, are provided by tertiary institutions and private companies to help students acquire the knowledge and skills related to entrepreneurship education (Cheung, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The secondary curriculum in Hong Kong has been in a state of rapid, continuous change since the beginning of the new millennium. Business education has come a long way from its root since its beginning in vocational education and is now becoming an essential part of the curriculum. The old image of business education with the primary aims of producing clerks and secretaries is being replaced by a higher mission of preparing students who are able to pursue further studies in tertiary institutions or become business professionals in the future. To achieve this goal, much needs to be done. A good and balanced business curriculum will equip students to function as viable members of tomorrow's society. As its significance continues to be recognised, business education needs to respond to dynamic changes and to be future oriented; business subjects need to be better integrated; business teachers need to be equipped with up-to-date knowledge of the business world and different teaching methods, through continuous development in teacher training and research. Furthermore, the introduction of entrepreneurship education is inevitable (Cheung & Chan, 2011).

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