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Students’ Views on Learning Outcomes in the Humanities

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Tables</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: The context of the study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning outcomes across the disciplines and cultural contexts</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality in higher education in Hong Kong</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational aims in Hong Kong</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Outcomes-based education in higher education</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is outcomes-based education?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The development of OBE in higher education</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of OBE impact on higher education</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Outcomes-based approaches in the humanities</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline differences: Reviewing some ‘classic’ studies</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic employability skills</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic learning outcomes</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning outcomes in the humanities</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Research strategies and tactics</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research strategies</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The project</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: What do students of humanities want to learn?</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key desired learning outcomes in humanities</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired learning outcomes as applicable to university graduates, humanities graduates, and major subjects of study</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: What have the humanities students learnt?</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key actual learning outcomes in humanities</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual learning outcomes for university graduates, humanities graduates, and by major subjects of study</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Learning outcomes and assessment – examples from humanities</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The examples</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Implications and reflections</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construct validity</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and standards</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality assurance</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9: Conclusion</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions and limitations</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way forward</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1: Differences between a traditional approach and OBE 12
Table 2: Learning outcomes instruments in some selected countries 18
Table 3: Arguments for and against OBE: a summary 23
Table 4: Job skills 28
Table 5: Most popular types of skill to be enhanced 29
Table 6: Personal skills 30
Table 7: Learning outcomes in the humanities: Philosophy, religious studies and English 34
Table 8: Learning outcomes differences between history, business and mathematics 36
Table 9: The distribution of participating students involved in individual and group interviews across different majors 44
Table 10: Selected assignments and the main reflected learning outcomes 101
Table 11: Learning outcomes and other existing models 104
Table 12: A comparison of 16 learning outcomes and five virtues (educational aims and Confucianism) 106
Table 13: Learning outcomes and programmes 107
Table 14: Learning outcomes and standards 109
Table 15: Curricular goals and standards 111
Table 16: Learning outcomes and study units 117
Table 17: Categories of learning outcomes in humanities and their definition 118

List of Figures

Figure 1: Model of an aligned curriculum 11
Figure 2: Classification of academic disciplines 26
Figure 3: Learning styles and undergraduate majors 27
Figure 4: Overall methodology for the ‘Humanities student voice’ project 47
Figure 5: Desired learning outcomes 49
Figure 6: Actual learning outcomes 69
Figure 7: Fisherman 88
Figure 8: Link and align 91
Figure 9: Desire and liberate 93
Figure 10: SOLO taxonomy 113
Chapter 1: The context of the study

Traditional humanities covers a very wide range of subjects. It includes history, languages, linguistics, philosophy and classics – grouped as disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies – as well as creative arts such as music and design (Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2008). Humanities is about people. It is also about how people create the world and how the world makes us the people we are (Humanities Association, 2008). Therefore, research into humanities is challenging because it involves using knowledge and skills to interpret our own experience, at the same time uncovering the underlying issues or contexts that influence us.

It is generally accepted that the word ‘literacy’ can be defined as “a knowledge of a particular subject, or a particular type of knowledge” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, online). Understanding literacy in humanities involves the development of a conceptual framework for measuring literacy within a humanities context. Following this logic, this study attempts to examine different perspectives for developing a humanities model that helps illustrate literacy standards in tertiary education. In developing a model for tertiary education, there is no doubt that a thorough understanding of students’ experiences is needed because the model should adopt a student-centred approach focused on students’ learning outcomes or competencies.

While observing the efforts made by international organizations to develop learning outcomes for tertiary education, the European initiatives of Tuning (Gonzalez & Wagenaar, 2003, 2005) and Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) (2005) projects both addressed the issues at national and international levels. They focused on the logical components of the system and tried to develop a working model for all the European member states. In developing key learning outcomes, they highlighted the influence of the international climate on incorporating learning outcomes as a system for credit transfer and accumulation as well as the statutory efforts needed to raise learning standards in tertiary education. However, they scarcely looked at the differences between the East and the West, and the institution-level differences that may occur. This means that they viewed the system at a European macro level but tended to neglect non-European cultures and micro-level differences between higher-education institutions.

Learning outcomes across the disciplines and cultural contexts

Outcomes-based learning has received substantial attention in recent years. Battersby and the Learning Outcomes Network (1999) defined learning outcomes as a set of conceptual and complex ideas that focus on using and integrating knowledge, ability and attitudes. Kember (2005) indicated that an outcomes-based framework can support best practices in teaching and learning; it incorporates desired learning outcomes in curriculum planning. By identifying the desired learning outcomes, teachers and students can get a better sense of what they should expect in teaching and learning, and this subsequently enhances the quality and competency of the students. Therefore the planned desired learning outcomes and the degrees that students actually achieve have become key concerns for most educators.

Cultural influences on the teaching and learning process are no doubt complex. Based on a literature search and personal contacts, Watkins (2000) found that Western teacher education has tended to emphasize getting students on task and coping with behavioural problems; however, these seem less relevant in the Chinese context. He pointed out that Chinese
educators see both creativity and understanding as slow processes, requiring effort, repetition, and attention; rather than relatively rapid, insightful processes. Therefore, even though there are common learning outcomes in both Western and Chinese contexts, there may be different relative interpretations and weightings given to similarly worded statements. Watkins’ work reminds us that researchers should be aware of these influences, and further research is needed to understand student learning in non-Western cultures.

Apart from the issue of cultural differences, the perception of learning outcomes varies across disciplines. So far there is no consensus across the diversity of programmes in defining specific skills. In fact, Bolton and Hyland (2003) pointed out that skills are domain-specific, and different disciplines have a different understanding and usage of the same skills. Leckey and McGuigan (1997) similarly noted that different disciplines may value skills differently. They suggest that the “ability to express one’s thoughts” is considered the most important skill within the humanities, whereas engineering may have greater emphasis on knowledge-based skills.

Relatively speaking, studies on humanities have been overlooked by scholars. Davidson and Goldberg (2004) referred to an interview with an economic adviser Jeffrey D. Sachs in 2002, pointing out that Sachs had neglected the importance of humanities when attempting to solve global problems. Among the studies on students’ development and learning outcomes, it appears that most are theoretically based and extrapolate to all disciplines (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Clifford, 1999; Beswick, Chuprina, Canipe, & Cox, 2002). Other studies have concentrated on a specific discipline, such as business and management (Hopkinson & Hogg, 2004; Phillips & Bond, 2004), social sciences (Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004), and medical studies (Robley, Whittle, & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005). Studies on humanities have received relatively little attention. In this project, we will attempt to fill the gap and examine the learning outcomes in humanities from students’ perspectives.

**Quality in higher education in Hong Kong**

The higher-education system in Hong Kong probably did not put significant and collaborative efforts into promoting the use of learning outcomes in tertiary education until the Task Force on Outcome-based Approach in Student Learning was formally established, and a symposium on Outcome-based Approaches in Student Learning, ‘Quality education, quality outcomes – The way forward for Hong Kong’ was conducted in June 2008. The symposium was a successful event because it generated a great deal of interest in the use of an outcomes-based approach (OBA) in Hong Kong, drawing from a wide range of international experience (University Grants Committee, 2008).

Although a systematic approach to adopting an OBA in the Hong Kong higher-education system is still developing, government agencies, such as University Grants Committee (UGC) and the Quality Assurance Council (QAC), have put great emphasis on ensuring quality in the system. Despite the UGC admitting that the primary responsibility for quality assurance rests with the institutions themselves, and academic freedom and institutional autonomy have been given to institutions to develop their services, the role of monitoring and judging institutions’ overall quality still is the remit of the UGC. The following two examples illustrate the situation.

The first example is the quality reviews conducted on the UGC’s eight funded institutions in Hong Kong, which were named Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (TLQPRs).
There were two rounds of TLQPR that were held in 1995–97 and 2002–03. According to Massy (2001), and Jones and Saram (2005), the exercises had the following two major features:

1. an emphasis on education quality work which consists of ‘processes to assure and improve the quality of delivered education’; and
2. a TLQPR template (essentially a 6×5 matrix) that lists five dimensions, or ‘domains’, of education quality work that were subject to review, together with six criteria used in the review exercise.

In both rounds of the TLQPR exercise, a model of Education Quality Work (EQW) was used. The model first dealt with the processes of assuring and improving the quality of three areas of education delivery: curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. In each area, quality improvement in relation to three selected aspects of EQW processes and activities, namely, Design, Implementation, and Resource allocation, were reviewed. It has been recognised that the exercises made significant contributions to higher education in Hong Kong. For example, evaluations provided useful insights into institutions’ commitment to assuring and improving quality, and examples of good practice in developing teaching and learning quality processes were given (Massy & French, 2001; Leung et al., 2005).

The second example of monitoring quality in universities by the UGC is the quality audits, the first being at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 2008 soon after the establishment of the QAC in 2007. With the aim of assuring the quality of programmes at degree level, the role of the QAC is to undertake periodic quality audits in the funded institutions. Based on findings, the audit report covers commendations of good practice, affirmations which recognize improvements, and recommendations for improvement. The exercise has been designed to cover all UGC-funded institutions.

Higher education in Hong Kong, as in many other parts of the world, aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. Therefore, terms, such as ‘excellence’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘accountability’, have been widely adopted by many government agencies and institutions describing targets to improve their service. Apart from the education management perspective, one important perspective is the cultural factor. As a Special Administrative Region of China, Hong Kong is one of the world financial centres in Asia where there are cultural links between the East and the West. In terms of education development, it has its own identity and ways of development.

**Educational aims in Hong Kong**

As far as the aims of education in Hong Kong are concerned, it has been highlighted that the Hong Kong education system should aim to foster student learning in the following areas (Education and Manpower Bureau, 1993):

- an all-round development covering ethics, the intellect, the physique, social skills and aesthetics;
- biliteracy and trilingualism;
- self-learning ability and an inquisitive mind;
- a sense of responsibility towards the family, the community, the country and the world;
- a global outlook;
- the ability to assimilate modern technology and ideas, and to appreciate Chinese values;
• strength of character, a spirit of enterprise, the desire for continuous improvement and the versatility to cope with the changing needs of the community; and
• respect for the rule of law in the pursuit of personal interest.

The five virtues, i.e. ethics, the intellect, the physique, social skills and aesthetics, are commonly used by Chinese people to describe aims of educational policy and practice and they have their cultural roots. The origin of the five virtues may be traced to the School Regulations of 1945 of the Republic of China that highlighted citizen morality, physical health and life skills, which are quite similar to the virtues of ethics, intellect and physique. In 1979 all five virtues were included in the Education Law in Taiwan. Article 1 of Education Law says that the aims of education are based on a balance of ethics, the intellect, the physique, social skills and aesthetics (Li, 2007). In Hong Kong, the Education Commission also adopted a similar set of classifications and principles. The five virtues have been used as targets and as a statement of the aims of education in Hong Kong since 1999 (Education Commission, 1999b).

In terms of the overall development in Hong Kong, various education reforms or initiatives have been put in place, including the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework, a new 3+3+4 academic structure (a new structure providing a separate three-year curriculum for junior and senior secondary students, but a four-year curriculum for undergraduate students), as well as recruiting students of associate-degree level in order to expand the size of higher education from 18% in 2000 to over 65% in 2006 (Chan & Lee, 2007). All these factors constitute a very complex situation in which the underlying cultural factors and the policy intentions have both affected the aims and practice of higher education, in which the learning quality is always being questioned – whether students have really achieved learning in the process.

The study

There is no shortage of research looking into areas of learning but it seems that little literature explores in any depth the desired learning outcomes in the diverse range of disciplines in what can broadly be called ‘humanities’. This project was designed to find appropriate ways to articulate and exemplify desired learning outcomes for disciplines in the humanities in ways that show the uniqueness of each discipline and the commonality across disciplines. The project has been designed to put student voices and student work at the centre of these descriptions and illustrations of desired learning outcomes. Besides being student-centred in its approach, this project design demonstrates the synergy between desired learning outcomes and student assessment work. The term ‘literacy’ has been adopted to encapsulate some of the essence of education in the humanities.

The project has gathered students’ descriptions of the learning outcomes they have attained in their degree studies together with samples of their work that exemplify these attainments. Different languages and media have been included in the project. It was expected that these articulations and exemplifications would be used as a demonstration of what an OBA means in the context of the humanities. This product is expected to be helpful in bringing the student voice into internal department/ programme discussions about OBA and how this can ensure internal quality in the curriculum-change processes.

Bearing such a background in mind, the specific objectives of this study were to:

• identify domain or indicators, through a qualitative approach; and to reflect learning outcomes in humanities, drawing from students’ experiences in a Hong Kong context;
• develop a tool to monitor learning outcomes in humanities; to justify the validity of the model and describe its possible link with other instruments or models;
• review studies of learning outcomes in tertiary education and examine the key issues that affect higher education at national and international levels;
• distinguish the cultural factors that may shape the model of learning outcomes in Hong Kong; and
• highlight the key issues whereby programme leaders may make use of the OBA to raise learning standards.

There is no doubt that the development of domains or indicators of humanities literacy is important because the content of learning in the humanities is specified. Literacy in humanities can therefore be seen as a product of an OBA that helps students develop an integrated set of effective skills for their lives. Humanities literacy underpins many education goals: for instance, developing graduate skills and enhancing employment opportunities. Indicators of humanities literacy can help individual institutions identify the effect of policies to foster humanities literacy development and to know the extent to which their students are able to perform in response to the needs of society. Through the above, it is believed that student achievements can be better monitored and focused on. Furthermore, it was expected that the outcomes of the project would also contribute to the following areas:

• Information, such as website and circulated materials, to illustrate the nature of desired learning outcomes in the humanities and their instantiations in examples of student work. These ‘products’ will be clearly visible.
• A series of ongoing conversations about the nature of being literate in the humanities, and how the products of the project might feed into OBAs and QA in the programmes at faculty level. These conversations could be internal to departments or lead to departmental or faculty-wide activity.

This report has nine chapters. This first chapter introduces readers to the meaning of literacy in humanities, the major issues of learning outcomes, and the recent development of higher education in Hong Kong, as well as the main ideas of this study. Chapter 2 reviews OBA in higher education from an international perspective. It looks at the meaning of outcomes-based education and describes OBA in a global context, highlighting the European model and that of some developed countries such as the UK, the US and Australia. It also covers arguments for and against the use of OBA in higher education. Chapter 3 distinguishes differences between the humanities and natural sciences and focuses specifically on the characteristics of learning outcomes in the humanities. It also discusses the main issues of using learning outcomes and its methodological limitations.

While the first three chapters can be seen as introductory, or as a review of relevant literature, Chapter 4 illustrates the research method, and outlines the strategies and tactics of the study. The chapter describes the qualitative tools and describes the procedures and sampling method. Chapters 5 to 7 are concerned with research findings. Chapter 5 is an analysis of the findings about desired student learning outcomes gathered from individual and focus-group interviews, while Chapters 6 focuses on the actual learning outcomes experienced by the participating students. Based on a set of learning outcomes identified in the study, both chapters highlight the main learning experiences of students in relation to the key questions posed to them: what they wanted to learn and what they have learnt. Chapter 7 uses student work as examples to illustrate learning outcomes in the humanities. The analysis is also based on the identified 16 categories, and attempts to illustrate learning outcomes through students’ assessed work.
The final two chapters move away from the analysis of the findings and discuss the implications of the results. Chapter 8 discusses the issue of the validity of the 16 identified categories and their relationship with other models of learning outcomes and it attempts to explore the possible use of the categorisations for programme development and quality assurance. In the final chapter, the key issues affecting the OBA at programme, institutional, national and international levels will be highlighted and it also outlines the possible way forward for the development of OBA in tertiary education.

Footnote: The terms ‘outcomes-based approach (OBA)’ to education and ‘outcomes-based education (OBE)’ are used reasonably interchangeably in this report, depending on the terms used in literature that is cited.

A similar rationale applies to the terms ‘competence’ and competency’.
Chapter 2: Outcomes-based education in higher education

Outcomes-based education (OBE) has been extensively used in various education systems, such as those in Australia, the UK and the US. The higher-education system in Hong Kong, like many other countries, has recently put great emphasis on OBE. The development of OBE in Hong Kong can be traced to the University Grants Committee (UGC) strategic document which spells out the key roles of the eight UGC-funded institutions. It voices the key role of higher education in Hong Kong – that is to serve as an education hub in the region (UGC, 2004). In this respect, all higher education institutions in Hong Kong are expected to strive for excellent teaching in all areas relevant to the distinctive roles which are specified in the statements they submit to the UGC.

As OBE is a major approach to reflecting student learning quality and institutional performance, there has been a widespread development of OBE in European countries in the last decade. This section will first explore the meaning of OBE and then describe OBE in a global context, mainly focusing on European cooperation and some selected developed countries, i.e. Australia, the UK and the US. Lastly it will outline OBE development in Hong Kong and cover the main arguments against OBE development in higher education.

What is outcomes-based education?

OBE may be defined as a way of revealing what students achieve as a result of learning. It can be seen as an education model that ensures learning effectiveness in the process. It is a student-centred model that can measure the extent of the fulfilment of learning outcomes and reflect student overall successful experience. In a view that learning outcomes are definable, observable and measurable, course providers can describe student learning outcomes in a logical and specific way which reflects overall standards and individual performance.

OBE is without doubt a central purpose of education. According to CQFW, NICATS, NUCCAT and SEEC (2001), learning outcomes are the basis for the award of a credit. OBE can be defined as a statement of learning achievement in terms of what the student will know, understand or be able to do, on successful completion of a module. In course design, a list of learning outcomes can be set for a module and students should satisfy the assessment criteria of the designated learning outcomes in order to earn a credit for the module.

Student learning outcomes can also be defined in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end of her or his engagement in a particular set of higher-education experience (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003). Examples of evidence for student learning outcomes can be found from assignments, portfolios, presentations and examinations. Such information gathered is important to course providers, institutions and quality-assurance auditors. Otter (1992) suggested four approaches for classifying learning outcomes: objectives – the stated intentions of the course; subject knowledge – the knowledge content identified in syllabuses; discipline – as a kind of culture and value system; and competence – what a graduate can do as a result of the degree programme. Thus, when mentioning learning outcomes, intended objectives, subject area, main discipline and occupational competence are related because learning outcomes have a clear role to play in these areas.

From an operational point of view and in terms of the process of learning, the concept of
learning outcomes may be classified into desired learning outcomes (aims), the focus on alignment of the outcomes (process, activities and efforts for achieving the aims), as well as actual learning outcomes (achievements) (Figure 1). Through constant feedback, learning activities and assessment, students gain learning experience and the alignment of the intended learning outcomes, learning activities and actual learning outcomes can be seen as crucial in the process. In recent years, much effort has been concentrated on defining intended learning outcomes, employing either a generic or subject-based perspective. Some key research (e.g. Biggs, 1999, 2003) emphasizes the focus of the alignment that can reveal successful student learning experience in the process.

**Figure 1: Model of an aligned curriculum**

After briefly looking at the definition of OBE and learning outcomes in the process of learning, Table 1 attempts to compare the differences between traditional education and an OBE approach. As illustrated in the table, the traditional approach often employs an input focus and highlights content knowledge. The traditional approach tends to use a teacher-centred approach in which the programme arrangement and teaching priorities are normally pre-determined by the teacher. In the learning process, the traditional approach emphasizes attendance requirement as well as completion of the work as specified by the teacher in order to pass an examination. The traditional education model often uses norm referencing and teachers give grades according to the norm of group performance as a major consideration. The traditional curriculum emphasizes the teacher as an expert, and therefore directed teaching, mass lectures and team teaching can be used as a result. In the traditional approach, a number of lecturers can handle different parts of teaching components, so the curriculum content can be segmented and provided without coordination. In brief, the traditional approach centres on the input and content elements, and the assessment for student performance often refers to norm referencing, instead of the specific actual learning outcomes that students achieve.

The OBE approach is different from the traditional approach in that it primarily focuses on student intended learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes. It is a student-centred
learning model based on criterion referencing, adopting the theory of behavioural science as its theoretical foundation (Allan, 1996). It emphasizes the use of measurable and observable indicators to reflect learning standards and student performance. The focus on the alignment of learning objectives and activities is often seen as important because it reflects the degree of successful learning. Thus, the indicators for student success do not relate only to the summative results, but can be based on the objectives set for students, and measure whether these objectives are matched or not. OBE can use a domain-referencing system to specify learning objectives set for students. Curriculum arrangements for OBE tend to be integrated and linked closely together because the design of curriculum development and learning activities is based on the set learning objectives. In a coherent manner, OBE acts as transparent model revealing student learning outcomes and offers rich information to all stakeholders who are involved in the educational process.

Table 1: Differences between a traditional approach and OBE

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<th>Traditional approach</th>
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<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>• Input and content-focused</td>
<td>• Output-focused</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Teacher-centred</td>
<td>• Student-centred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management strategy</td>
<td>• Attendance requirement</td>
<td>• Student learning outcomes-defined programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Calendar and content-defined programmes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical basis</td>
<td>• Teachers as experts</td>
<td>• Behavioural approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focused on teacher design</td>
<td>• Measurable student learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Norm referencing</td>
<td>• Criterion referencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum content</td>
<td>• Segmented, may be handled in parts</td>
<td>• Integrated, linking with learning objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of education</td>
<td>• Highlight content and teaching resources</td>
<td>• Highlight learning standards and student performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational mode</td>
<td>• Curriculum planning; teaching and assessment can be handled by separate units</td>
<td>• Handling curriculum planning, teaching and assessment in a coherent manner and aware of the focus on alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum requirement</td>
<td>• Emphasizing contact time and student workload</td>
<td>• Emphasizing student performance or clear defined outcome indicators</td>
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The development of OBE in higher education

OBE and its development in European communities

OBE is a powerful tool that helps to shape education development across the world. It contributes to qualifications transparency, and simplifies the process of credit exemption and transfer. Europe has become a major venue for the use of OBE. Such a development can be traced to a major event, the Bologna Process, which can be seen as a landmark of international cooperation for building up a unique European qualifications system. The Bologna Process is a European initiative of creating a European Higher Education Area and is based on international cooperation between government ministries and higher-education institutions from 46 countries (Bologna Declaration, 1999). With the aim of creating the European Higher Education Area by 2010, students are encouraged to choose from a wide range of courses and benefit from the recognition procedure by adopting a system of easily
The Bologna Process represents a radical educational reform. The Bologna Process emphasizes the use of learning outcomes as an indicator for making qualifications more transparent. It also emphasizes the adoption of external reference points and the need for precision and strength clarification when using learning outcomes. For these reasons, a number of research projects have been developed in order to justify the approach and establish some research-based evidence for the strategies employed.

Following the Bologna Declaration, *The Tuning Project*, involving more than 100 higher-education institutions, refers to the use of competences and learning outcomes focusing on educational structures and the content of studies. The Tuning Reports (Gonzaliz & Wagenaar, 2003, 2005) cover four main areas: 1) generic competences; 2) subject-specific competences (skills, knowledge and content); 3) the role of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System as a transfer and accumulation system; and 4) approaches to learning, teaching, assessment and performance in relation to quality assurance and control.

The Tuning project regards learning outcomes as points of reference for curriculum design and evaluation. In the process, a set of learning outcomes were used as a common language for describing the curricula. In terms of generic competences, the following areas are seen as important: capacity for analysis and synthesis, capacity to learn, problem-solving, capacity for applying knowledge in practice, capacity to adapt to new situations, concern for quality, information-management skills, ability to work autonomously, and teamwork (Gonzaliz & Wagenaar, 2003). While Phase One of the Tuning Project addressed the issues of generic and subject-specific competencies for Business Administration, Chemistry, Earth Sciences, Education Sciences, European Studies, History, Mathematics, Nursing and Physics, Phase Two links up with quality assurance and learning-enhancement strategies. The findings of the Tuning Project help build a programme-development model by drawing on a common content, nature and level of learning when using and applying outcomes.

Apart from the Tuning initiative, another noticeable initiative is the DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) project. The project was launched by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with the aim of identifying key competencies for international assessments. The project identified three main competencies, namely, interacting in socially heterogeneous groups, acting autonomously, and using tools interactively (DeSeCo, 2005). As a conceptualised framework, these key competences highlight learners’ interaction with the environment, their engagement with others, as well as how to take responsibility for managing their own lives.

Following the Bologna Declaration (1999), a series of ministerial conferences, namely the Bologna Process, were held every two years in order to review targets set. For example, at the Berlin Communiqué in 2003, the European Ministers met and a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher-education systems, which seeks to describe qualifications in terms of level and learning outcomes, was highlighted. Subsequently, the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI), a working group dedicated to developing systems of quality assurance and accreditation in higher education, was formed. A list of common descriptors of learning outcomes and competencies expected of students upon completing their university studies was proposed afterwards, known as the Dublin Descriptors (JQI, 2004). The Dublin Descriptors are broadly concerned with undergraduate and postgraduate students and offer descriptions for Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate programmes in the following areas:
knowledge and understanding; applying knowledge and understanding; making judgements; communication and learning skills. The Dublin Descriptors have been supported by various quality-assurance agencies, including Scottish, Irish and Danish.

As the European education and training system has been continuously evolving and has been targeted to become “a world quality reference by 2010” (European Commission, 2004), it is likely that the European initiatives and the OBE model that the European Communities have promoted, such as ‘Reference Levels of European Average Performance’ and ‘European Benchmarks’, will have a great impact on higher education across the world.

**OBE development at national and institutional levels**
When the European communities attempted to reach a common agreement in defining learning outcomes and tried to apply OBE in various settings, such as the Dublin Descriptors, the development of OBE at a national level on qualifications frameworks and quality assurance should be noted. As different countries employ different policies, this section will mainly focus on major developments in the UK, Australia and the US.

The UK Dearing Report, formally known as the reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997), emphasizes the importance of including a set of learning objectives or specific skills as a part of any programme that is offered in higher education. The Report recommends that:

Institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop, for each programme they offer, a ‘programme specification’ which identifies potential stopping-off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:

- the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;
- key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;
- cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;
- subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills.

(Dearing Report, Recommendation 21)

At programme level, the Report recommends, with immediate effect, that every newly developed programme in higher education should specify the intended learning outcomes in terms of the above four categories. This recommendation has made a great impact on the education system because academics, education developers and quality-assurance agencies need to ensure such a practice is in place.

In terms of degree standards in a range of subject areas, the Dearing Report suggested the use of benchmark statements to voice the expectations. The Report recommends that the benchmark information should be used by institutions as part of their programme-approval process to set degree (and other award) standards. In addition, it should be used by external examiners to validate whether programmes are within the agreed standards for particular awards. Furthermore, institutions are expected to be explicit about the required standards for awards and to make this information publicly available.

With the purpose of providing a quality-assurance service for UK higher education, the
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 1997. Subsequently the QAA has published benchmark statements at honours level for 54 subjects (at the time of writing) and also a considerable number at master’s level. These statements describe what is expected of a graduate in terms of abilities and skills needed in each subject (Quality Assurance Agency, 2008). One of the important functions of the subject benchmark is that the QAA auditors will use these statements to judge whether the programmes offered meet a reasonable standard (Gosling & Moon, 2002). In this sense, subject benchmark statements serve as official reference points for programme and institutional reviews.

The move in the higher-education system in the UK is not simply about the inclusion of some outcomes-based measures in programmes, but is also about an assurance of quality and how institutions comply with the measures specified, such as level descriptors, subject benchmarks and programme specification. To a certain degree, the development of the OBE model in the UK matches well with the Bologna goal of making higher-education systems more transparent and compatible. The outcomes-based components specified in the UK not only serve as a key reference point to identify programme quality, but they also provide a logical basis for the development of a National Qualifications Framework which covers all the major qualifications in further and higher education, ranging from entry-level certificate to doctoral programme. The UK qualifications framework model has made a vital impact on other qualifications systems in the world, such as those in the Commonwealth (e.g. Australia and Hong Kong), the Middle East, European and Asian countries (Hanf & Hippach-Schneider, 2005).

As far as the Australian system is concerned, there are many outcomes-based elements that are in common with the UK system, such as the development of a national qualifications framework and a quality-assurance agency. The Australian system, however, has its own developmental characteristics. The development of performance indicators to assess the quality of higher education in Australia may be traced to the government-commissioned project led by Professor Russell Linke. His report recommended that quality would be best assessed using multiple indicators that are “sensitively attuned to the specific needs and characteristics of particular disciplines, and which adequately reflect the underlying purpose for which the assessment is required” (Chalmers, 2007; Linke, 1991). The report also suggested that judgments of the quality of teaching must flow from the analysis of multiple characteristics, and involve a range of procedures including qualitative peer and student evaluation. Subsequently three categories of indicators on teaching and learning were identified: quality of teaching; student progress and achievement; and graduate employment.

Chalmers (2007) observed that the concept of quality assurance was moved from a disciplinary orientation to a whole-institution approach, especially when the Government established the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE) to conduct independent audits of institutional quality-assurance policies and procedures, and to advise the Government on funding allocations. Based on performance, institutions received differential levels of funding in which significant funding was to be allocated to universities that could “demonstrate effective quality-assurance practices and excellent outcomes” (CQAHE, 1995). In the reviews, each institution’s goals and strategies for teaching and learning were examined and a wide range of areas were assessed, including learning outcomes, effective teaching and learning methods, curriculum design and assessment.

Higher education in Australia is a performance-based model. Apart from research, the measures closely link with the learning and teaching component. Since 2000, performance-
based funding has been applied to undergraduate programmes based on the following five key performance indicators: subject evaluation, retention rates, student progress rate, graduate employability, and outcomes on the national ‘good teaching’ scale of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), in which each indicator is considered as having equal weighting in terms of the funding allocated (Sharma, 2004). With a similar function to that of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was set up in 2000 by the federal government of Australia to carry out quality audits for all Australian universities (Woodhouse, 2006). These quality-assurance exercises on the one hand critically examine the relationship between teachers and learners who engage in higher education generally, and on the other hand they establish a ‘whole institutional’ approach to quality assurance. Fitting well with the global trend of quality assurance, Australia has created its own unique performance-based policy that contributes to the global development of OBE (Vidovich, 2002).

Unlike Australia and the UK, the federal government of the United States is not directly involved with the operation of institutional audits in higher-education institutions, site visits or determining standards for reviews. The federal and state governments often act as funding agencies and the responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with accrediting organizations. The accrediting organizations are private, non-governmental, non-profit organizations that play a significant role in ensuring standards in US higher education. The US accreditation system is more than 100 years old and serves the following purposes: assuring programme quality; qualifying programmes that access federal funds; easing transfer of courses and programmes among universities; and engendering employer confidence by accrediting the status of an institution or programme to employers (Eaton, 2003). To perform its accrediting role in higher education, all accreditation organizations are required to meet specific standards and to be recognized by either the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) or the United States Department of Education (USDE), a federal agency.

The OBA in higher education in the United States relates to funding, accountability and quality assurance. Ewell (2005) described that the development of OBE in US higher education links with accountability and standardised examinations – either administered for the purpose of grounding overall judgements of quality, or derived from the many licensing examinations administered to govern individual entrance into professional practice. As examples of the latter, the Report of the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education created a learning profile for each state, and six individual states administered standardized examinations to students enrolled in public institutions as part of their wider accountability schemes. These initiatives can be considered as an outcomes-based measure operating at state level. Furthermore, like the implementation of the CEQ in Australia, statistical indicators of student learning outcomes, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), are often used as a part of the larger accountability framework in the US.

Using a performance-based funding approach, the US federal government plays a crucial role in funding institutions that target performance areas as laid down by the government agency, such as alignment between the mission of colleges and their outputs, the improvement of colleges’ management systems, and improvement of specific measures or benchmarks (Sharma, 2004). These performance-based measures, to a certain degree, link closely with the concept of OBE.
While addressing the issues of accreditation and student learning outcomes, Ewell (2001) outlined three dimensions of policy change which relate to the task of assuring the quality of student learning outcomes: prescription of outcomes – the extent to which an accrediting organization specifies particular learning outcomes; units of analysis – the extent to which an accrediting organization is either concerned about individual student attainment or concerned with overall institutional effectiveness; and focus of review – the extent to which the review examines direct evidence of student achievement or is exclusively directed to the adequacy of institutional or programme process for assuring levels of student attainment. Student learning outcomes in the US thus relate to a variety of operational performance, covering institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes demonstrating competencies.

In brief, various governments or accrediting organizations have a particular set of guidelines, policies or standards of using student learning outcomes. In Australia and the US, these measures explicitly link with government funding systems. Therefore the better-performing institutions tend to have an advantage of winning better awards. In the UK and the rest of Europe, various sets of outcomes-based procedures and mechanisms have been introduced. A great deal of these works relate to the use of learning outcomes as an international or national strategy to justify the formation of qualifications frameworks, to assess programme quality and to evaluate overall institutional performance.

Enacting learning outcomes in higher education
The use of learning outcomes has been widely adopted in all fields of curriculum design. Putting student learning outcomes into perspective, the OBE model affirms that curriculum planning better begins with what students should learn, not what the content should cover or what the teaching should be. The uses of learning outcomes in curriculum design can be traced to the work of Tyler (1949) and Bloom (1956). These theoretical works have contributed to the classifications of learning objectives in the field of curriculum development. As Tyler (1949) pointed out, the real purpose of education is not to have the instructor perform certain activities, but to bring about significant changes in the students’ pattern of behaviour, and it is important to recognize that any statement of school objectives should be a statement of changes to take place in the students. Working in the cognitive domain, Bloom (1956) identified six categories of educational objectives: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation, known as Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain. That work applied the use of learning objectives, and has made a significant contribution to the field of curriculum development for over half a century.

In recent times, substantial efforts have been made to incorporate learning outcomes into the educational process. There are at least three noticeable aspects, namely, national initiatives, quality-assurance systems and outcomes-based instrumentation.

National initiatives – The UK and Australian Qualifications Framework are examples where the government makes a tremendous effort to clarify formal qualifications offered in the country. In the UK National Qualifications Framework, five levels of descriptors have been classified to represent the five main types of qualifications, including Level H standing for undergraduate degree with honours, Level M for master’s level and Level D for doctorate level. For every level, detailed descriptors are introduced to describe the levels of achievement that the learners complete. Such an initiative not only helps the public to understand the achievements represented by higher-education qualifications, but also standardizes the qualifications system for comparing with other systems.
In the UK model, all undergraduate programmes include the key skills items as indicated by the Dearing Report and such recommendations suggest that programme design at higher-education level should be more standardised. Besides this, the subject benchmark and programme specification are also areas in which the QAA has laid down clear statutory guidelines for institutions to follow. While subject benchmarks deal with the quality of subject matter, programme specification is concerned with a concise description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher-education programme, and the means by which these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated.

The work of Gosling and Moon (2002) outlined a coherent approach to the design of modules in higher education, and contains the following five main components: level descriptors, learning outcomes, assessment criteria, assessment procedures and teaching strategies. Based on their model, level descriptors guide standards and ensure that learning-outcome statements clearly relate to a particular higher-education level. Then learning outcomes relate to essential learning whereby students must demonstrate their achievement by meeting the assessment criteria at threshold standard. Both learning-outcome statements and the nature of the assessment tasks guide the writing of threshold assessment criteria.

Quality assurance – In the past, many universities had autonomy to design programmes and they faced few challenges from national bodies on the quality of their programmes. With the advent of statutory quality-assurance agencies, this situation has changed. The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established in 1997, while the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was set up in 2000 and the Hong Kong Quality Assurance Council (QAC) in 2007. Universities need to be externally reviewed against certain standards laid down by these agencies. In the UK, level descriptors, subject benchmarks and programme specifications are common areas that the QAA requires course providers to follow. Although there is no formal requirement that a programme must match a certain kind of criterion, the QAC reviewers use the submitted statements from institutions as evidence and as a reference point to examine the performance of each individual institution.

Outcomes-based instrumentation

Nusche (2008) reviewed the current practice of learning-outcomes assessment and summarised the characteristics of 18 instruments designed to measure higher-education learning outcomes across higher-education institutions on a regional or national level. Using a typology of cognitive outcomes, referring to knowledge and skills outcomes, and non-cognitive learning outcomes, indicating psychosocial development, attitudes and values, Table 2 shows the major outcomes-based instruments used in various countries.

Table 2: Learning outcomes instruments in some selected countries (adapted from Nusche, 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Test name, introduction date</th>
<th>Type of outcomes assessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA), 2000</td>
<td>• Generic skills: critical thinking, problem-solving, written communication (the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is currently considering modifications such as the addition of basic skills, management skills, IT skills, research skills).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Domain-specific knowledge and skills: (Not yet included but ACER is currently considering the possibility of testing elements within various broad Field</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Survey/Assessment</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), part of the Graduate destination survey since 1993</td>
<td>• Generic skills: problem-solving, analytic skills, written communication skills. Non-cognitive outcomes: teamwork skills. Student satisfaction with the following: Teaching, Goals and standards, Workload, Assessment. • General competencies: confidence in tackling unfamiliar situations, ability to plan work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Graduate Destination Survey (GDS), 1972</td>
<td>• Occupational competencies: employment outcomes approximately 4 months after graduation: availability for employment, sectors of employment, average annual salaries, graduates’ job search activities. Further study activities, such as mode of study (full/part-time), levels of study, fields of education, and institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE), 2002 (replaced the “First Destination Supplement”)</td>
<td>• Occupational competencies: employment and further study outcomes six months after graduation: how many graduates are in employment, the types of jobs they go into, and how many go on to further study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), 1988</td>
<td>• Generic skills: writing (objective and essay), reading, mathematics, science reasoning, critical thinking, curricular content drawn from all fields.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), 2006 (replaced the ETS “Academic Profile” test, 1992-2006)</td>
<td>• Generic and domain-specific skills: reading and critical thinking are measured in the context of humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences. Writing, mathematics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Tasks in Critical Thinking, 1992 (discontinued)</td>
<td>• Generic and domain-specific skills: inquiry, analysis, communication skills. • Performance-based tasks set in the context of broad disciplines (natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Major Field Tests, 1990 (based on the GRE Subject Tests)</td>
<td>• Domain-specific knowledge and skills that are considered most important within each major field of study: factual knowledge, ability to interpret material including graphs, diagrams, and charts based on material related to the field. Available for 15 undergraduate disciplines and for MBAs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), 2002</td>
<td>• Generic and domain-specific skills: critical thinking, analytic reasoning, written communication, ability to use information. • Competencies: real-life tasks such as preparing a memo or policy recommendation by using different types of documents and data that must be reviewed and evaluated. • Performance-based tasks set in the context of broad disciplines (natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, arts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA and Canada</td>
<td>National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 2000 (in</td>
<td>• Non-cognitive outcomes: information on student engagement: how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from courses, extracurricular activities,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Australia, there are three major instruments used for detecting various levels or stages of learning outcomes: Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA), Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and Graduate Destination Survey (GDS). The GSA was introduced in 1999 as a test of generic skills. The test covers four domains: critical thinking, problem-solving, interpersonal understandings and written communication. Critics argue that testing for generic skills in higher education does not achieve effectiveness because it is out of context of problem-solving in the discipline skills taught to students and omits the skills that universities teach (Clerehan, Chanock, Moore, & Prince, 2003). However, supporters may defend such testing by claiming that it provides an impartial measure of student performance regardless of programme or institution academic standards (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).

The CEQ aims to determine what graduates thought of the programme they have completed, including their attitudes towards the skills they acquired, and the quality of teaching provided. The questionnaire is based on a theory of university teaching and learning in which students’ perceptions of curriculum, instruction and assessment are regarded as key elements of learning outcomes (Ramsden, 1992). The CEQ has been run on an annual basis by higher-education institutions in Australia since 1994 and provides comparable student learning outcomes at institutional and subject-based level analysis (Universities Australia, 2006). The use of the data aims not only to improve quality of learning and teaching in universities, but is also a national diagnostic strategy for “the purpose of assisting the public to develop informed judgements, opinions and choices” (Australian Vice-Chancellor’s Committee and Graduate Careers Council of Australia, 2001). This means that the findings of the survey are publicly available and they serve as indicators for programme quality. There are three core scales in the CEQ that are asked by all Australian universities, namely the Generic Skills Scale, the Good Teaching Scale, and the Overall Satisfaction Item. The remaining scales are optional, and are only asked by some universities.

The Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) in Australia and the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) in the UK are instruments that are applied to students after graduation and both serve a similar purpose of measuring student occupational competencies. On an annual basis, these instruments provide statistical information, such as the number of graduates in employment and the number in further study.

In the US, a number of instruments consist of elements to detect generic and domain-specific skills, such as writing, mathematics, and critical and analytical reasoning. These tests are: the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, Tasks in Critical Thinking, Major Field Tests, Collegiate Learning Assessment and Graduate Record Examination (GRE). These tests tend to measure student academic performance and provide statistical data for comparisons. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), unlike the above instruments, attempts to gather information from students for improving undergraduate education at institutional level. Covering items on student behaviour and their perceptions towards the institution, the questionnaire provides information in three broad categories: institutional actions and requirements on curriculum; student behaviour (such as how students spend their time); and student reactions to the
institution (e.g. overall quality of experience rating). In terms of overall quality rating, the NSSE serves a similar function to CEQ, for both assess overall quality. One must bear in mind that whereas the CEQ poses the question as ‘overall I was satisfied with the quality of this course’, NSSE asks ‘how would you evaluate your entire education experience at this institution?’.

**OBE development in HK and arguments against OBE**

Following the world trend of OBE development, the UGC in Hong Kong has taken various initiatives to promote OBE. The establishment of a working group and recent OBE conferences can be seen as examples of engagement. More substantially, the QAC with its mission to ensure the quality of UGC-funded programmes plays an important role in accelerating the development of OBE.

Unlike other practices, the QAC did not give much information about subject benchmarks, level descriptors or programme specifications, nor a clear link between higher-education institutions and the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework. It seems that OBE in Hong Kong tends to operate through explicit promotion and quality audit. Furthermore, autonomy is given to higher-education institutions to decide on their own practice. As the recommendations given by the QAC audit reports do not have any statutory authority, the government tends to adopt a promotional and pervasive nature in which higher-education institutions are often allowed their own ways of dealing with their quality-assurance issues.

At the time of writing, Hong Kong does not have a system of defining learning-outcome qualities, such as subject benchmarking. There is also a lack of common agreement on level descriptors and programme specifications, as well as any clear relationship between higher-education programmes and the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework. For this reason, much work in these areas seems to be needed. As a whole, compared with other systems, the development of OBE in Hong Kong tends to adopt a laissez-faire approach and institutions have full autonomy to decide to what extent they will participate in developing their OBE model.

Although the functions of OBE are multi-dimensional and the development of OBE has been fast-growing and affecting higher education in a number of ways, there is opposition to OBE, and the introduction of OBE has been subject to heavy criticism. The resistance to change is due to a number of reasons. First, some critics argue that OBE is a top-down strategy that leaves little room for teachers to develop their independent thinking and creativity. Critics argue that “OBE policy dictates and controls the social educational possibilities of students in terms of what they should be like on graduation” (Capper & Jamison, 1993) and “OBE has a negative impact on the freedom of learners and educators because it does not allow the necessary space for its learners and educators to become creative” (Fakier & Waghid, 2004). For creativity, the policy of OBE is criticized for having too much control over the education system. Such critics argue that OBE limits educational choices, values and opportunities in the process. In addition, some teachers have complained that they have been overloaded with work and they need to spend extra time and effort dealing with work such as writing objectives. A few pointed out that it is difficult to demonstrate learners’ competence with the correct amount of breadth and depth. Furthermore, it is difficult to restrict assessment to a few learning outcomes to measure student success because human learning is complex, and knowledge and skills are complicated.

Although there are arguments against OBE, the development of OBE is still steadily in
progress and has become even more influential in higher education globally. Table 3 briefly summarises the main arguments for and against OBE.
Table 3: Arguments for and against OBE: A summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Arguments for OBE</th>
<th>Arguments against OBE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>Qualifications transparency</td>
<td>• Simplifies a system of credit accumulation and transfer</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>Standards and quality assurance</td>
<td>• Links with national qualifications framework and institutional reviews</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>• Links with institutional missions and visions</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/ Department</td>
<td>Standards and quality assurance</td>
<td>• Clear standards for students and quality-assurance procedures</td>
<td>• Imposes standards on teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Restricts teachers’ independence, creativity and enthusiasm</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficult to demonstrate with accuracy a specified body of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficult to have breadth and depth of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Individual profile</td>
<td>• For learning and the purpose of graduation, students better understand their own achievements and areas for improvement</td>
<td>• Requires a great deal of time and care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Staff overworked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Skills are complex and it’s difficult to identity student potential and intellectual processing skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Difficult to reflect individual differences and progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>• Adopts a behaviourist approach to measure student learning outcomes in terms of what is achieved</td>
<td>• Higher-education learning cannot be constricted and reduced to a series of learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
<td>• Widely-used learning outcomes instruments, such as CEQ and NNSE</td>
<td>• Lack of large-scale evidence of OBE success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of OBE Impact on Higher Education

OBE is a global issue, especially in Europe and some other developed countries. In these countries, such as Australia, the UK and the US, an OBE working mechanism has been established and there is significant impact on higher education. The following three areas may be seen as important.

International cooperation and governmental initiatives
The governments of the European Community have made good efforts to build a system for credit accumulation and transfer by using an outcomes-based model. Similarly, various governments have developed their own National Qualifications Framework. For example, in the UK, articulated outcomes-based statements have been used to describe the main types of qualifications offered in the country and all course providers need to check whether the courses offered are in line with the statutory requirements of level descriptors, subject benchmark and programme specification. OBE in this sense links closely with the centralised government agency for building a standard in higher education.

Curriculum changes and reform
Unlike the traditional model that emphasizes content and is teacher-centred, OBE focuses on the alignment between learning objectives, learning activities and assessment. By adopting such a system, learning outcomes become transparent, student-centred, criterion-referenced and performance-based, rather than norm-referenced and having a teacher-centred approach. To achieve this, a change of practice and curriculum design in order to develop observable and measurable objectives and focus on alignment, seem unavoidable.

Quality assurance
In Australia and the US, when the quality-assurance agency conducts institutional audits, they often refer to the use of national outcomes-based measures as a part of evidence. These measures, such as CEQ in Australia and NSSE in the US, are often operated on a large scale and they have become increasingly influential for revealing student learning experience and institutional performance. Therefore a mechanism of developing an OBA with suitable outcomes-based measures at institutional level can be seen as important, and the effectiveness of developing such a system is often subject to pilot and review.

In brief, the development of OBE is fast growing and it often links up with quality-assurance matters. There are a lot of advantages of adopting OBE. For example, at international level, the OBE model helps qualifications transparency and is good for credit accumulation and transfer; at programme level, it provides clear standards for student learning and set targets for teaching. Although critics may argue that OBE restricts creativity and autonomy, the international efforts in using OBE as a basis for qualifications recognition and various national initiatives for building qualifications frameworks and quality-assurance mechanisms seem to confirm its significant status in higher education.
University education has received continuing attention in the past decade, especially in the context of raising standards, developing skills for students, and its role in shaping the future work force (Lam, 2007). One of the most significant roles of higher education is therefore about how to contribute to the economy of society by enriching student experience. It is through consolidating general knowledge and specific skills that students develop their expertise. The following section will first briefly address the issue of academic disciplines in relation to humanities and will then look at generic learning outcomes and different classifications of learning outcomes in the humanities, as well as review the major issues in the implementation of an OBA.

**Discipline differences: Reviewing some ‘classic’ studies**

Debates on the nature of academic disciplines have been ongoing. Defining an academic discipline is not an easy task because it deals with a complex issue. The defining process often depends on a precise description of characteristics and structures of knowledge domains. In addition, it is about the attitudes, activities and cognitive styles of groups of academics who represent a particular discipline (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

In this section we review a number of studies done some time ago. They have been influential, though they are now a little ‘dated’.

To determine how academics view their own fields of study, Biglan (1973) conducted a study on subject majors in different academic areas. In his study, 168 faculty members from the University of Illinois made judgments about 36 fields of study and 54 scholars at a small college judged similarly in 30 areas. They were asked to rate each area they had judged using the following bipolar adjectives: (a) pure – applied, (b) physical – nonphysical, (c) biological – non-biological, (d) of interest to me personally – of little or no interest to me personally, (e) traditional – non-traditional, and (f) life science – non-life science. The results show that scholars perceived three main characteristics of academic subject matter. The first dimension distinguished hard sciences, engineering, and agriculture from social sciences, education, and humanities. The second dimension was about application to practical problems in which the areas of education, engineering, and agriculture were distinguished from hard sciences, social sciences, and humanities. The third dimension was concerned with life systems in which scholars distinguished biological and social areas from those that deal with inanimate objects.

Using techniques such as non-metric multidimensional scaling and factor analysis, two main dimensions could be plotted, namely **pure–applied** and **hard–soft**. Figure 2 shows these two dimensions and four quadrants. According to Biglan, hard science is about disciplines such as engineering and agriculture that are different from soft science, including humanities, social science and education. Apart from the two dimensions, the four different groupings are unique. The upper right quadrant links with humanities and a small number of social-science disciplines. The upper left quadrant deals with applied studies covering education and business. The lower right quadrant contains science and mathematics while the lower left quadrant refers to engineering and computer science. Such a classification provides a useful framework for studying the cognitive style of scholarship in different discipline areas.
Kolb (1981) studied the relationships between individual learning styles and academic disciplines. In his Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), the model of individual learning characteristics is based on cognitive development and cognitive style. The theory defines four phases in the process of learning from experience: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualisation (AC) and active experimentation (AE). Individual learning styles in the theory are defined by a person’s relative reliance on these four learning modes. The framework is holistic and consists of affective, perceptual and behavioural as well as cognitive strategies (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1991).

Based on a sample of 800 practising managers and graduate students in management, Kolb (1976) found that learning style variations exist in terms of undergraduate educational experience. Figure 3 shows the average scores on a Learning Style Inventory given for various undergraduate majors by the participants. It can be seen from the Figure that the top right quadrant is labelled divergers and the humanities subjects tend to fall into this group. In the model of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory, the dominant learning abilities of Divergers are Concrete Experience and Reflective Observation. Students are often imaginative and they like to generate ideas. Such learners have broad cultural interests and tend to specialize in arts, psychology and personnel management.

Convergers have the opposite learning strengths from Divergers and they are located in the bottom left of the quadrants. Their dominant learning abilities are Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation. Such virtues are often found in engineering and nursing.
professions. This group of professionals are likely to be problem-solvers and good at dealing with things in a practical way.

Situated in the bottom right quadrant, Assimilators have the dominant learning abilities of Abstract Conceptualization and Reflective Observation. They tend to be less interested in people but more concerned with abstract concepts. They are more likely to be pure scientists and mathematicians. Accommodators have the opposite strengths from those of Assimilators and they are located at the top left quadrant. These students tend to rely on information provided by others and such learners are typically interested in business.

Figure 3: Learning styles and undergraduate majors

Compared to Biglan’s (1973) study, there are a lot of similarities of subject matter in different academic disciplines. According to Kolb (1981), of the twelve disciplines common to the two studies, nine are in identical quadrants. This supports a claim that there are significant disciplinary and learning-style differences in the learning experience of students when undergraduate majors are considered. According to Kolb, the nature of disciplines is correlated with learning style and there is a clear difference between students of humanities and natural sciences. While humanities students tend to be people-orientated and concerned with the meaning of life and human relationships, science students apply themselves to abstract knowledge and systematic thinking. However, it is important to remember that these studies focus on broad generalizations, and also are now several decades old.
**Generic employability skills**

Influence on the academic discipline chosen is not only derived from disciplinary foundations or learning style characteristics alone; it is often affected by other complicated factors, such as the skills needed or requirements set by potential employers. As the official Department for Education and Employment response to the final report of the National Skills Task Force emphasizes, skills and learning must become the key determinants of economic prosperity and social cohesion. For this reason, education and skills help shape the opportunities and rewards available to individuals, and higher skills bring better prospects and higher earnings (DfEE, 2000).

In relation to the job skills required by employers, various reports have addressed the issues. Table 4 shows the categories of job skills identified in four different countries, namely, the US, the UK, Australia and Hong Kong. Based on different official or institutional sources, Communication, Thinking Skills and Adaptability, and Group Effectiveness are common job skills that are required by all cited reports, while Development and Influencing Skills are extremely popular. These categories to some degree contribute to the formation of student learning outcomes or graduate skills assessment.

> Table 4: Job skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning to learn</td>
<td>Foundation skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy, numeracy, computer skills, written business communication</td>
<td>Numerical competency, information technology literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic basics</td>
<td>Reading skills, writing skills, computational skills</td>
<td>Numeracy</td>
<td>Communication skills, verbal reasoning, presentation skills</td>
<td>Oral communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Speaking skills, listening skills</td>
<td>Communication skills, verbal reasoning, presentation skills</td>
<td>Problem-solving skills, problem solving, logical and orderly thinking</td>
<td>Chinese language proficiency, English language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking skills and adaptability</td>
<td>Problem-solving skills, creativity skills</td>
<td>Problem analysis and solution, conceptual ability</td>
<td>Problem-solving skills, creativity and flair, logical and orderly thinking</td>
<td>Analytical and problem-solving abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>Self-esteem skills, motivation and goal-setting skills, personal and career development skills</td>
<td>Academic achievement, comprehension of business processes, time management skills</td>
<td>Work attitude, technical skills required for the job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group effectiveness</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills, negotiation skills, teamwork skills</td>
<td>Team working</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills, teamwork skills</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing skills</td>
<td>Organizational effectiveness skills, leadership skills</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td>Management skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From a cross-cultural perspective, Table 4 provides valuable information on what employers want their employees to have. It can be seen that there are a lot of common items. This means that the general job skills required are quite similar from one place to another. However, as a matter of fact, the skills required may be different from one discipline to another, depending
on the occupation type. The Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2002) pointed out that many establishments preferred their managers and administrators to work on enhancement of management skills, their professionals and associate professionals on IT skills, and their clerks and their service workers and shop sales workers on language skills (Economic Analysis Division, Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, 2003). Table 5 shows the most popular types of skill to be enhanced, by occupation.

Table 5: Most popular types of skill to be enhanced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation category</th>
<th>Most popular type of skill to be enhanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers and administrators</td>
<td>Management skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>IT skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate professionals</td>
<td>IT skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerks</td>
<td>Language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service workers and shop sales workers</td>
<td>Language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft and related workers</td>
<td>Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills for the workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plant and machine operators and Assemblers</td>
<td>Job-specific skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary occupations</td>
<td>Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills for the workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census and Statistics Department (2002)

It is clear that different occupations have their specific role to play. Therefore language skills for clerks and service workers, and management skills for managers have a particularly high priority. Similarly, various employers’ skills surveys have identified the main skills lacking by occupation (Learning and Skills Council, 2006). These surveys provide valuable information to policy makers, as they show the proportions of main skills lacking in a particular type of occupation. This exercise thus helps to indicate the needs of the labour market and to balance the needs and demands of human power resources. As education and training link closely with the labour market, job skills are often seen as a significant component of either general learning outcomes or subject-specific learning outcomes.

**Generic learning outcomes**

A learning outcome may be defined as a statement of what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do at the end of a period of learning and of how that learning is to be demonstrated (Moon, 2002). A learning outcome approach can be seen, to a certain extent, as a response to the needs of society in terms of manpower and workforce development. It is a way to identify learning standards and subsequently becomes a plan for improvements. Responding to the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, the Higher Education Quality Council (1996) tried to identify attributes common to all graduates. The use of a learning-outcome approach has potential advantages for higher education in terms of increased flexibility, quality and learner motivation (Otter, 1992). By making the learning outcomes explicit, this helps to facilitate processes like credit accumulation and credit transfer. Subsequently both students and administrators can easily identify whether a learning outcome is being achieved or not. In addition, when the specification of outcomes is clearer, it tends to be easier to gain qualities and motivate students to measure their own achievement in relation to their own learning goals.
In terms of carrying out generic skills at an institutional level, there are no shortages of developmental models. One example is from the University of Sheffield where a Personal Skills Unit was established to develop student personal skills in the following eight areas:

### Table 6: Personal skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Skills</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Social</td>
<td>Working in a team, networking, sharing responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Intellectual</td>
<td>Identifying and solving problems, analyzing and evaluating data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-managing</td>
<td>Being organized, responsibly planning own workload</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Communication and linguistics</td>
<td>Active listening, ability to communicate to a variety of audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Technical</td>
<td>Keyboard skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Adaptive</td>
<td>Dealing with ambiguity, adapting concepts, skills, materials to new situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Creative</td>
<td>Ability to think laterally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. General</td>
<td>Setting priorities, working to deadlines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Eggins (1992)

Drawing from a wide range of skills considered to be desirable attributes of higher-education programmes, the personal-skills model highlighted four orienting areas, namely, communication, teamwork, managing and organizing, and problem-solving. Putting forward such a conceptual model and using a ‘guidance for practice’ approach, it was reported that a great deal of support was gained within the University and an internal understanding of desired learning outcomes of programmes was achieved (Bradshaw, 1992).

Similarly, Alverno College, a small private women’s Catholic college in Wisconsin, in the United States, has adopted a liberal learning perspective, highlighting the following eight competency areas:

1. **Communication** – focuses on student presentation as sender and on response as receiver.
2. **Analysis** – is about critical thinking and how to gain knowledge and understanding in the process of examining, searching, comparing, dissecting and synthesizing.
3. **Problem-solving** – is about how to ask critical questions, make an educated guess and propose alternative solutions.
4. **Valuing** – is about decisions on what is good, what ought to be done and what is worth striving for.
5. **Social interaction** – is about the ability to deal with others, which helps personal and professional success.
6. **Taking responsibility towards the global environment** – is learning to manage one’s life systems effectively within the context of the global environment.
7. **Effective citizenship** – is about living in freedom and developing responsibility for self and society.
8. **Aesthetic response** – demonstrates aesthetic responsiveness and is about learning to perceive, analyze and evaluate aesthetic effects.

(Bradshaw, 1992)

Emphasizing competencies and the development of skills, Alverno College tried to integrate a model of competencies into the curriculum. Likewise, universities in Australia also highlight
a wide range of skills or abilities that should be dealt with in tertiary education. One of the examples is from Macquarie University, which emphasizes the importance of gaining generic skills. It was recognized that generic skills can be used within a wide range of working environments that graduates operate in throughout their life (Fraser, 2001). The generic learning outcomes identified consist of the following six aspects:

1. foundation skills of literacy, numeracy and information technology;
2. self-awareness and interpersonal skills, including the capacity for self-management, collaboration and leadership;
3. communication skills for effective presentation and cultural understanding;
4. critical analysis skills to evaluate, synthesize and judge;
5. problem-solving skills to apply and adapt knowledge to the real world; and
6. creative skills to imagine, invent and discover.

(Macquarie University, 2001; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004)

To a certain extent, the models selected above from the University of Sheffield, Alverno College and Macquarie University have points in common. They all try to build up a reasonable coverage of generic skills for all their students and help them develop the skills required. They also serve as indicators to show the learning outcomes which are fundamental in tertiary education. While the models used were mainly for the operation at institutional level, the Tuning project is an international project that has important implications for world education. The project identified the following 30 areas of competence for generic learning outcomes under the sub-headings of instrumental competences, interpersonal competences and systemic competences. They are:

Instrumental competences:
- Capacity for analysis and synthesis
- Capacity for organization and planning
- Basic general knowledge
- Grounding in basic knowledge of the profession
- Oral and written communication in their native language
- Knowledge of a second language
- Elementary computing skills
- Information management skills (ability to retrieve and analyse information from different sources)
- Problem-solving
- Decision-making.

Interpersonal competences:
- Critical and self-critical abilities
- Teamwork
- Interpersonal skills
- Ability to work in an interdisciplinary team
- Ability to communicate with experts in other fields
- Appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism
- Ability to work in an international context
- Ethical commitment.
Systemic competences:
- Capacity for applying knowledge in practice
- Research skills
- Capacity to learn
- Capacity to adapt to new situations
- Capacity for generating new ideas (creativity)
- Leadership
- Understanding of cultures and customs of other countries
- Ability to work autonomously
- Project design and management
- Initiative and entrepreneurial spirit
- Concern for quality
- Will to succeed.

(Gonzalez & Wagenaar, 2003)

It can be noted that the list of 30 areas of competence proposed by the Tuning Project was much more comprehensive in content than the models suggested by the University of Sheffield, Alverno College and Macquarie University. For the competence levels or outcome indicators described above, although they vary from place to place, there are many common elements that relate to the job skills as required by potential employers as described in the previous section.

Learning outcomes in the Humanities

The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable defined humanities as learning or literature concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy (Knowles, 2005). White (1997) described the discipline of humanities as follows:

... philosophy, history, and literary studies offer models and methods for addressing dilemmas and acknowledging ambiguity and paradox. They can help us face the tension between the concerns of individuals and those of groups, and promote civil and informed discussion of conflicts, placing current issues in historical perspective. They also give voice to feeling and artistic shape to experience, balancing passion and rationality and exploring issues of morality and value. The study of the humanities provides a venue in which the expression of differing interpretations and experiences can be recognized and areas of common interest explored (p. 263).

Thus, the discipline of humanities covers a wide range of areas, including historical analysis, rational thinking and artwork creation. As for fields of study, the humanities emphasize appropriate analysis of the key issues and an expression of experiences as opposed to the quantitative explanation of the sciences. In terms of subject areas, it covers a significant number of academic areas, such as History, Anthropology, Archaeology, Literature, Languages, Linguistics, Philosophy, Ethics and Religion.

Humanities students, like other university students, need to study generic skills as part of their courses, as required by many course providers. By nature of disciplines and learning styles, humanities students are often described as reflective observers and have a strong interest in people (Kolb, 1981). Like many subjects, all humanities subjects have generic learning outcomes that may be in common with others, and often each humanities subject has
its own subject-specific learning outcomes. Based on the benchmarking documents of the UK Quality Assurance Agency, Table 7 outlines the key learning outcomes of three selected subject areas: philosophy, religious studies and English, and then looks at the patterns of similarities and differences between them.

Table 7 summarizes the main learning outcomes for philosophy, religious studies and English. They were adapted from the Honours degree benchmark documentation of the Quality Assurance Agency, UK. In the table, two sets of learning outcomes are outlined: generic learning outcomes and subject-specific learning outcomes. Under generic learning outcomes, it can be seen that the items are identical to the models described in the previous section on generic learning outcomes, and that many of them focus on themes like logical reasoning, analytical ability, communication and general IT skills. Although these generic learning outcomes are shared by all subjects, they have an order of priority and link closely with a specific subject. For example, the philosophy subject lists listening to complex presentations and reading technical and non-technical material first, while the English subject lists advanced literacy and communication skills and capacity to analyse, and the religious studies subject prefers empathy and a more imaginative insight. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that some identified generic learning outcomes could be more relevant to some specific subjects.

For the subject-specific learning outcomes, variations and subject differences can be easily identified, even though all selected subjects fall into the category of humanities subjects. For example, the philosophy subject centre on identifying underlying issues, precision of thought and expression in analysis, while the religious studies subject aims at understanding how people have thought and acted in particular contexts. The English subject puts great emphasis on critical skills and understanding of texts, concepts and theories relating to English. The specific learning outcomes are different because of the nature of the disciplines. While addressing the topic of faculty culture, Clark (1963) wrote:

> It is around the disciplines that faculty subcultures increasingly form. As the work and the points of view grow more specialized, men in different disciplines have fewer things in common, in their background and in their daily problems. They have less impulse to interact with one another … (quoted from Becher, 1989, p. 123)

There are significant differences between disciplines and every field of study has its own identity and culture in terms of educational values, approaches to learning and teaching, as well as lifestyle (Gaff & Wilson, 1971). These differences lead to the development of academic tribalism, tradition and territories, as pointed out by Becher and Trowler (2001). It is interesting that while the measures of specific learning outcomes contribute to the diversity of subject disciplines, the dimension of generic learning outcomes leads to a direction of unity that assumes that every subject or programme can play a part.
Table 7: Learning outcomes in the humanities: Philosophy, religious studies and English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Religious studies</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Listen attentively to complex presentations</td>
<td>• Empathy and imaginative insight</td>
<td>• Advanced literacy and communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read carefully a variety of technical and non-technical material</td>
<td>• Self-discipline</td>
<td>• Capacity to analyse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use libraries effectively</td>
<td>• Self-direction</td>
<td>• Ability to engage in processes of drafting and redrafting texts to achieve clarity of expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reflect clearly and critically on oral and written sources</td>
<td>• Independence of mind and initiative</td>
<td>• Capacity to adapt and transfer the critical methods of the discipline to a variety of working environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Remember relevant material and bring it to mind</td>
<td>• Capacity for reflexive learning</td>
<td>• Ability to acquire substantial quantities of complex information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Marshal a complex body of information</td>
<td>• Ability to work with and in relation to others</td>
<td>• Competence in the planning and execution of essays, presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Construct cogent arguments</td>
<td>• Ability to understand, interrogate and apply a variety of theoretical positions</td>
<td>• Capacity for independent thought and judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Present a clear and well-structured assessment of relevant considerations</td>
<td>• Ability to comprehend and develop intricate concepts in an open-ended way</td>
<td>• Skills in critical reasoning and analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject-Specific Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Religious studies</th>
<th>Critical skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Articulacy in identifying underlying issues</td>
<td>• Ability to understand how people have thought and acted in particular contexts</td>
<td>• Ability to articulate knowledge and understand texts, concepts and theories relating to English studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Precision of thought and expression in analysis</td>
<td>• Ability to read and use texts both critically and empathetically</td>
<td>• Sensitivity to generic conventions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sensitivity in interpretation of texts</td>
<td>• Appreciation of the complexity of different mentalities, social behaviours and aesthetic responses</td>
<td>• Responsiveness to the central role of language in the creation of meaning, and sensitivity to the affective power of language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clarity and rigour in the critical assessment of arguments</td>
<td>• Sensitivity to the problems of religious language and experience</td>
<td>• Rhetorical skills of effective communication and argument</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to use and criticize specialized philosophical terminology</td>
<td>• Appreciation of both the interconnectedness of and internal tensions within a system of beliefs and practices</td>
<td>• Command of a broad range of vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to abstract and analyse arguments</td>
<td>• Basic critical and analytical skills</td>
<td>• Bibliographic skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to construct rationally persuasive arguments</td>
<td>• Ability to employ a variety of methods of study in analysing material</td>
<td>• Awareness of how different social and cultural contexts affect the nature of language and meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to move between generalization and appropriately detailed discussion</td>
<td>• Capacity to give a clear and accurate account of a subject, marshal arguments in a mature way</td>
<td>• Understanding of how cultural norms and assumptions influence questions of judgment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to consider unfamiliar ideas and ways of thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Comprehension of the complex nature of literary language and an awareness of relevant research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Honours degree benchmark statements for philosophy, religious studies and English, Quality Assurance Agency (2007)
After having selected some subjects within humanities, i.e. philosophy, religious studies and English, as examples of distinct differences in generic learning outcomes and subject-specific learning outcomes, attention is shifted to the disciplinary domain differences between humanities, science and social sciences. Using history for humanities, business for social sciences and mathematics for science, and based on the benchmarking documents, Table 8 outlines their key generic learning outcomes and subject-specific learning outcomes.

It can be seen from the table that although there are domain differences, the patterns shown are quite similar to those in the previous table, in that each major set of generic learning outcomes links closely with its disciplinary area. For example, self-discipline, self-direction and independence of mind link with history while the cognitive skills of critical thinking relate to business, and general study skills and ability to learn independently closely link with mathematics. Seemingly, the generic learning outcomes identified are likely to be more relevant to certain subjects than to others.

Despite clear domain differences, the patterns appearing in subject-specific learning outcomes in the three subjects selected do not differ much from the humanities group as shown in the previous table. This means that all subjects have their own identities, structures and territories, so it is reasonable to assume that all subjects, whether within the category of humanities or not, have their own underlying theories or practice that are consistently different from other categories of field of study. In other words, in terms of an OBA, subject differences clearly exist. Domain differences, i.e. differences between humanities, social sciences and science, should have a clear effect on the structure of knowledge but their differences shown in the subject-specific learning outcomes are likely to be similar to the patterns shown in the humanities subjects.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Mathematics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Self-discipline</td>
<td>• Cognitive skills of critical thinking, analysis and synthesis</td>
<td>• General study skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-direction</td>
<td>• Effective problem-solving and decision making using appropriate qualitative skills</td>
<td>• Ability to learn independently using a variety of media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Independence of mind, and initiative</td>
<td>• Effective communication</td>
<td>• Ability to work independently and pursue the solution of a problem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to work with others, and have respect for others’ reasoned views</td>
<td>• Numeracy and quantitative skills</td>
<td>• Time management and organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to gather, organize and deploy evidence, data and information</td>
<td>• Effective use of communication and information technology</td>
<td>• Adaptability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Familiarity with appropriate means of identifying, finding, retrieving, sorting and exchanging information</td>
<td>• Effective self-management, interpersonal skills, ability to conduct research into business and management issues</td>
<td>• Ability to transfer knowledge from one context to another</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Analytical ability, and the capacity to consider and solve problems</td>
<td>• Self reflection and criticality including self awareness, openness and sensitivity to diversity in terms of people, cultures, business and management issues</td>
<td>• Numeracy skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structure, coherence, clarity and fluency of oral and written expression</td>
<td>• Intellectual integrity and maturity</td>
<td>• General IT skills and the ability to use the internet to obtain information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intellectual integrity and maturity</td>
<td>• Imaginative insight and creativity</td>
<td>• General communication skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Imaginative insight and creativity</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to work in teams, to contribute to discussions, to write coherently and to communicate results clearly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Knowledge of ethical issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Specific Learning Outcomes</td>
<td>• Ability to understand how people have existed, acted and thought</td>
<td>• Markets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ability to read and analyse texts and other primary sources</td>
<td>• Customers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Appreciation of the complexity and diversity of situations, events and past mentalities</td>
<td>• Finance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understanding of the problems inherent in the historical record</td>
<td>• People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Basic critical skills</td>
<td>• Operations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intellectual independence</td>
<td>• Information systems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Marshalling of argument</td>
<td>• Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Business policy and strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Pervasive issues, e.g. sustainability, globalization</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Honours degree benchmark statements for history, business and mathematics, Quality Assurance Agency (2008)
Approaches and reflections
Indeed the concept of learning outcomes can cover course objectives, subject knowledge, disciplines and occupational competence (Otter, 1992). At programme-design level, the use of learning outcomes provides a mechanism for describing learning goals either to be achieved or that have been achieved. They closely relate to assessment criteria. Through assessment, student learning is monitored. At subject knowledge level, there is no doubt that every subject has its own ways of structuring learning outcomes and prioritizing knowledge and skills. Depending on the depth and breadth of knowledge or skills, the learning outcomes at subject knowledge level vary. As far as disciplines are concerned, each individual subject tends to have its own specified learning outcomes that are often unique and have specific logic or priorities. This can be a sort of within-group subject difference, such as history being different from English within humanities. This is also about between-group domain differences, such as humanities being different from science. However, in terms of competences, all graduates need to meet the occupational standards set by their employers.

Apart from the differences in student learning outcomes at programme, subject and discipline level, there should be an awareness of the differences between humanities and the sciences. According to Erdle and Murray (1986), students are more likely to view their humanities professors as exhibiting interpersonally orientated actions than natural science professors. In addition, natural science professors often take more task-orientated action than humanities professors. Many students thought that humanities professors were more concerned with rapport, interest, interaction and expression, while science professors tended to put more emphasis on organization, pacing and use of graphs.

When students viewed their ‘superior teacher’, significant differences between humanities and sciences were found in their perception. Feldman (1976) evaluated over 220 articles and found that humanities students tend to emphasize ‘the ability of the teacher to encourage thought’ and to be ‘intellectually and personally challenging’. While describing science professors, students put greater emphasis on the ‘importance of explaining things clearly’ and on the ‘instructor’s preparation and organization of course material’. Thus, there is a clear difference between humanities and natural sciences in students’ perception of their professors’ attitudes and interest and in the particular ways they teach.

There is a widespread increasing tendency to use learning outcomes at tertiary level, in particular in countrywide initiatives, such as in Australia, the UK, the US, and international efforts, e.g. the European Community. However, some critics take a conservative attitude and challenge the misuse, especially for those managers who use them as a way to monitor performance. It was noted that misuse could damage education, because of the spurious nature of learning outcomes (Hussey & Smith, 2002).

Writing learning outcomes is quite complex work. It relates to the identification of module aims and the translation of level descriptors into subject descriptors before considering writing objectives. After writing learning objectives, the process of module development then links with setting up threshold assessment criteria and development of testing (Moon, 2000). Theoretically speaking, the developmental process of writing learning outcomes in curriculum development is logical and systematic.

However, the main challenges of developing learning outcomes in the humanities are in methodological issues – the way to ensure their justification of relevance and reliability. An accurate measure of learning outcomes is crucial, in particular to make a comparison across
different groups or to assess a specific group over a period of time. The US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings’ Commission on the Future of Higher Education examined four central issues in American higher education: access, affordability, quality and accountability (The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006). The report recommends that:

- The results of student learning assessments, including value-added measurements that indicate how students’ skills have improved over time, should be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly.
- The collection of data from public institutions allowing meaningful interstate comparison of student learning should be encouraged and implemented in all states. (p. 24)

Emphasizing transparency of cost, price and student successful learning outcomes, the report recommends that taking student baselines into account, student achievement should be measured by institutions on a value-added basis. It was also recommended that this information should be made available to students, consumers and policy makers and should act as an understandable way to measure the effectiveness of colleges and universities. Having a view different from the Spelling report, Banta (2007) argued that

Standardized tests of generic intellectual skills do not provide valid evidence of institutional differences in the quality of education provided to students. Moreover, we see no virtue in attempting to compare institutions, since by design they are pursuing diverse missions and thus attracting students with different interests, abilities, levels of motivation, and career aspirations.

A simplistic way of analyzing student learning outcomes may be misleading if caution is not exercised in the nature of groups and other factors that may contribute to outcomes, such as the ways of ensuring accuracy and relevance to disciplinary differences. Instead of using a method of comparing student learning outcomes at national level, he suggests the use of student electronic portfolios and disciplinary-based measures. Whilst electronic portfolios measure a much longer period of generic learning outcomes, disciplinary-based measures ensure a degree of relevance and standard of learning. By using these approaches, the accuracy of the measurement and the relevance to the subject matters would be improved.

Similarly, Goldstein (1992) addressed the use of statistical information for the measurement of educational outcomes in schools, and he points out that those policy makers who use statistical learning outcomes should be aware of their limitations. He argued that tables of ‘raw’ test and examination scores certainly carry information about student achievement but provide very little information about the average progress that students make. He also suggested that the only secure way of doing this is to increase our knowledge about what does promote high achievement and about the measures that should be applied at personal, social or institutional levels. In this respect, the production of national league tables could be a misleading diversion from more constructive activities. Reporting statistical educational outcomes in a single format of league tables may have dangerous social consequences and could mislead the public.

Therefore, institutional and national standards should be clearly defined while attempting to use learning outcomes on a large scale with the purpose of informing the public. This approach normally aims to compare institutional and programme performance that is different
from its role in curriculum planning and development. In response to national enquiries on the future of higher education, Schray (2006) put great emphasis on the issues of defining student learning outcomes and providing valid and reliable assessments. At institutional level, these standards should be defined based on institutional missions and the input of employers and other stakeholders. Student profiles and international standards should be considered, so that a common format can be determined for the purpose of establishing transparency to students, parents and employers. As far as valid and reliable instruments are concerned, instruments developed should be relevant and be able to provide valuable information for improving programme quality. The learning-outcome measure may to a certain extent link with other measures, such as graduation skills or labour-market requirements, to provide an overall profile of students.

In recent years there has been a growing consensus on the need to measure student learning at various levels: programme, institutional, national and international. In order to provide concrete evidence for development, a systematic research-based approach should thus be adopted. As one of the initiatives to understand what humanities students want to know and what they actually have learned, this study uses a qualitative approach contributing to such an area.
Chapter 4: Research strategies and tactics

In this chapter the general intentions which informed the nature of this study are outlined. There is also an indication of the methods we employed to collect the data which form the basis of chapters 5 to 7. In line with our intention to look at a range of factors having a bearing on the formation of learning outcomes in the humanities, we have reviewed a wide range of literature, which is important in the sense that it has significantly affected the formation and development of an OBA in tertiary education. The key themes revealed in the literature review may be summarized as follows:

- There is a clear trend that the European community wants to build a qualification transfer and accumulative system so that students can continue their studies even if they leave their home area and travel to other countries. Due to the nature of transparency, the use of an OBA in the curriculum is very popular in the international community.

- The outcomes-based learning approach provides a great deal of assessment information to programme planners and their assessors. The quality-assurance agency or accreditation agency therefore often demands that the curriculum structure at degree level should include outcomes-based elements, such as covering some key or cognitive skills as part of the learning outcomes of a course.

- As the international development of an OBA becomes popular and widespread, in particular in the states of the European Community, the US system and the Australian educational system, many educational institutions or establishments then have to consider developing their own system and try to realistically relate student learning outcomes to their own missions.

- Using an OBA, the learning outcomes are expected to be observable and measurable. It is believed that an accurate and effective use of the data can help improve institutional and programme quality. Thus, seeking a systematic way of gathering the data and interpreting them as they relate to each set of individual institutional circumstances seems to be crucial.

- There are clear disciplinary and learning-style differences between humanities and natural science subjects. Students of humanities no doubt have a particular field of knowledge to explore that can be seen as unique or special. But similar to other disciplines, the learning outcomes in the humanities closely link with the following factors: generic employability skills set by the markets, subject-specific knowledge standards set by programme providers, and institutional missions set by senior university officers.

Bearing all these backgrounds in mind, our study in the first instance focused on the identification of the desired learning outcomes. In particular, we are concerned with students’ perceptions of what can be broadly called the ‘humanities’ and university education. We intend to explore what students want to learn during their university years, covering in general what they would expect for a university graduate and a humanities graduate as well as what they would expect for a graduate in their own field of study.
A second focus of the study was on the actual learning outcomes, in which students described the learning outcomes they had achieved. University students obtain a great deal of experience while studying and this can be observed at three levels: overall university education, humanities education and the student’s own field of study. By knowing more about actual learning experiences, we can have a better grasp of learning patterns and characteristics of students for the benefit of in-depth evaluation.

A third focus was on student assessment. An examination of students’ assessed work can reflect what students learn and achieve. Thus, collecting and studying examples of student work helped to understand typical aspects of learning outcomes and how they relate to a whole raft of learning outcomes in the humanities.

Research strategies

The research design grew out of the issues reviewed above. The general methodology of the studies consists of the following two main dimensions: outcomes-based learning studies and grounded theory.

Outcomes-based studies

In the first place, we were interested in learning outcomes in the humanities and are particularly concerned with desired learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes of humanities students. Debates on the benefits and drawbacks have been ongoing (Maher, 2004) but the trend in the last decade emphasizes its application to higher education. The UK Dearing report and the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency and its use provide clear evidence of the changes. Otter (1992) set out a study to test how far it is possible to describe the outcomes of learning in higher education. The study extended over a period of two years, involving 93 institutions, and was presented at a consultative conference. The samples were formed of three different groups of people, covering some 700 students, 19 academic staff and a number of employers. The findings of the study suggest that it is possible to describe learning outcomes of higher education explicitly, but they cannot be expressed in simple terms due to the complex and changing environment. In addition, the descriptions cannot be expressed as a single set of national standards, since higher education exists to meet the needs of a variety of groups and embodies a range of different culture and value systems. Furthermore, the project report claims that it is necessary to develop processes within each institution to link outcome definitions with quality assurance, since the authority to define the purpose of degree programmes rests with institutions. Thus, the project helps to clarify the use of learning outcomes in higher education and explicitly figures out the role of individual institutions in the context of developing learning outcomes for their students.

In terms of implementing learning outcomes in higher education, various initiatives have put great effort into linking with aspects of teaching and learning and assessment in order to put the theory of outcomes-based curricula into practice. The Leaning Outcomes and their Assessment (LOTA) project was based on the Open University in the UK and examined ways of using learning outcomes in course planning and delivery (Dillon, Reuben, Coats, & Hodgkinson, 2007). In response to the issue of aligning the intended learning outcomes of a course, it is suggested that assessment activities should be devised with the course learning outcomes and they should identify clearly which outcomes are being addressed. From a slightly broader perspective, Vaughan and Woolf (1994) reported on the progress of Wolverhampton University and addressed the issues of management and curriculum. Their report attempted to draft a policy at institutional level for course development through
learning outcomes, and described the size of module changes and the practical issues concerned, such as a framework for assessment and personal competences. All these projects as well as some others, such as McDaniel, Felder, Gordon, Hrutka, and Quinn (2000), Fellwock-Schaar, Krochalk, and Cruise (2007), and Kift (2007), try to outline their efforts of promoting outcomes-based learning at institutional level and demonstrate characteristics of using an OBA based on their own unique experience.

Indeed, every institution has its own characteristics which they may want to work specifically on. Berdie (1967) observed that college expectations and perceptions in a complex university are not homogeneous, and students in different divisions of the university differ in this respect, just as they differ in academic ability and achievement. Therefore, students in each institution are different, and academic disciplines represent one set of key factors in which staff and students’ academic orientations, expectations and perceptions can differ significantly. Addressing the issues of learning outcomes, Pike and Killian (2001) noted that academic disciplines do make a difference. Based on a survey of 2,000 students and their responses to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, they found that the reported learning differences rest on disciplinary content, rather than Biglan’s pure and applied topology. Thus, discipline differences can be seen as a key variable in terms of structuring learning outcomes and the discipline, such as the humanities or natural science, should be examined separately due to their natural differences.

Apart from theoretical considerations, the recent development of higher education is clearly a key input of an OBA. In Hong Kong, the establishment of the Quality Assurance Council in 2007 and the symposium on Outcome-based Approaches in Student Learning, ‘Quality Education, Quality Outcomes – The Way Forward for Hong Kong’, both marked outcomes-based learning as a way forward for Hong Kong higher education (UGC, 2008). Prepared for the University Grants Committee, Ewell (n.d.) highlighted that an OBA in Hong Kong should clarify the following aspects: what model of learning outcomes is already used in Hong Kong and whether there are any ways such applications could be extended; and what areas of university study might benefit particularly from applying learning-outcomes concepts and approaches to the teaching and learning process. Ewell pointed out rightly that adopting a learning-outcomes perspective and emphasizing demonstrated student achievement has proved beneficial in many higher-education settings, but these gains have only been achieved through deliberate and balanced approaches that keep the ultimate goal of improving student learning clearly in mind. Bearing these issues in mind, this study attempts to take an evidence-based approach to collecting the data and reflects on the possible development of using an OBA in education.

At the time of writing, it seems that there is neither an agreement on the classification of learning outcomes in the humanities nor an applicable framework that can link up with theory and practice. In addition, there were no data available in the form and quantity required. One of the best ways to generate the data, as perceived in this study, is to carry out individual and focus-group interviews to understand the genuine experience of students, and to collect student assignments as examples showing learning outcomes at various levels. Thus, this study adopts a qualitative approach and was designed to collect the following data sets: individual interviews, group interviews, and examples of students’ assessments.

**Grounded theory for interview analysis**

Grounded theory is derived from a systematic analysis of data and can generate theories regarding social phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The theoretical base of grounded
theory is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is concerned with human behaviour influenced by social interactions. It is a theory of understanding human behaviour and people’s social settings, and an approach to enquiry about human conduct and group behaviour (Goulding, 2002). The origins of grounded theory emphasize the need to get out in the field, the importance of theory grounded in reality, the nature of experience for the subjects and researcher as continually evolving, the active role of persons in shaping the world through the process of symbolic interaction, an emphasis on change and process, and the interrelationship between meaning in the perception of subjects and their action (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1988).

We identified qualitative methods, specifically grounded theory, as a research strategy because grounded theory can be treated as a way to deduce data and to attempt to generate theory from observation. In this study it is particularly used to understand the interview data and to provide an explanation of the learning-outcomes categories and the relationships among them. We believe that the method is most appropriate for exploring students’ perception of their desired and actual learning outcomes because it is an under-researched area and the application of grounded theory is useful in this situation.

Grounded theory has the following key features: iterative study design, theoretical sampling and system of analysis (Kennedy & Lingard, 2006). An iterative study refers to cycles of simultaneous data collection and analysis, and the analysis informs the next cycle of data collection. Theoretical sampling is the means to uncover issues explored. Using questioning methods, the researcher tries to compare respondent-perceived concepts and find out their relationships (Lingard, Albert & Levinson, 2008). Theoretical saturation occurs when there are repeated patterns in the sampling process. For data analysis, grounded theory highlights constant comparison for the purpose of discovering similarities and differences between data sets.

According to grounded theory, there are four stages in the analysis: codes, concepts, categories and theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, the codes stage is to identify anchors that allow key points of data to be gathered. Secondly, the concepts stage collects similar codes that allow the data to be grouped. Thirdly, all broad groups of similar concepts are used to generate a theory, and lastly a collection of explanations will be used to explain the subject of the research. According to Glaser (1978), the grounded theory method, although uniquely suited to fieldwork and qualitative data, can easily be used as a general method of analysis with any form of data collection: survey, experiment, or case study. Furthermore, it can combine and integrate them and help conceptualise specific data-collection methods.

The project

Sample
The research was conducted at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). In this qualitative study, the processing samples of the study consisted of 57 students or graduates who came from a variety of humanities disciplines. In the samples, 32 were undergraduate students, 23 were postgraduate students and two were alumni. Table 9 shows the academic background of the participating students; they came from 13 programmes in the Faculty of Arts. It can be seen from the table that students of Cultural Studies and Fine Arts (ten participants each) participated more than students of other subjects. Then there were eight students whose major subject was English language and literature, and seven students with a Chinese language major. In the samples, we have students who took double majors, i.e.
majors in Religious Studies and Philosophy. The samples also included three students whose minor subject was in humanities but they had a major in other disciplines, i.e. Business Administration, Food Studies, and Journalism. In order to understand their experience of mixing two disciplines, i.e. humanities and social sciences, these three students were included in the samples.

In total, 23 individual interviews and 11 focus-group interviews were conducted. There were 34 participants in the group interviews. The focus-group interviews had two subject-specific groups, namely, Linguistics and Chinese, and the others were interviews in a mixed-group format.

Table 9: The distribution of participating students involved in individual and group interviews across different majors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major subject taken by students</th>
<th>Number of individual interviews</th>
<th>Number of individuals participating in group interviews</th>
<th>Total number of students for interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>1+1 minor ***</td>
<td>1 minor ***</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Language &amp; Literature</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td>2+1 minor ***</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Studies</td>
<td>2 double major * +2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language &amp; Literature</td>
<td>4+(1 minor) **</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese Studies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(2 minor) **</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics (including previous programme of Modern Languages &amp; Intercultural Studies)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4+(4 minor) **</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theology</td>
<td>(2 double major) *</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
* Two students had double majors, i.e. Religious Studies and Philosophy, and they were counted only in the Religious Studies column, to avoid double counting.
** All students are recorded once on the major subject they took regardless of their minor subject. The numbers shown in brackets are minor subjects, and they were not counted in the total number.
*** Three students took Business Administration, Food Studies, and Journalism as their major subject but two of them took minor subjects in Anthropology and one in Cultural Studies. The participants were counted in order to understand their experience of having a mixed academic background.

The students involved were students who were nearly at the end of their degrees, plus postgraduates and recent alumni from the Faculty of Arts. The interviews focused on obtaining feedback about the description of students’ desired and actual learning outcomes. Examples of student work were also collected.
Procedure and instruments
The Faculty of Arts at CUHK had endorsed the project and individual departments had given their full support to the project. In the beginning, all the third-year undergraduate students and postgraduate students who studied in a humanities discipline – subjects such as cultural studies, languages, anthropology and music – were invited by email through the academic departments they studied in. In addition, alumni were also invited to participate in the study. Advertising posters were displayed in various departments and across the main campus. A website was set up to introduce the project and to recruit the participants. As student participation was entirely voluntary, in order to compensate their time spent on the research interviews, a fee of HK$50 per hour was given to the participating students as an incentive.

All participants signed a consent form for their words and their work to be used in publication – in print and on the web. In this report, pseudonyms are used; on the companion website, students’ identities are noted. Students regarded this as an opportunity to showcase their best work and were quite relaxed about their identities being revealed.

Students/participants individually completed a background information form and provided some basic information regarding their chosen major for their studies, their reasons for choosing the courses, and their intention of further studies in the humanities. Then they worked in a group of three to four (discipline-specific/mixed disciplines depending on the number of students in each discipline) discussing questions regarding their views on the criteria for excellent academic work, and the qualities of a professional in their field. Overall, the questions were all about the perceptions of their personal development and the influences of humanities education on them.

After clarifying and comparing the lists from the small groups, the students/participants individually noted the qualities of most significance to them personally.

The discussion covered three main areas:
- Learning outcomes that all university graduates should have
- Learning outcomes that all humanities graduates should have
- Learning outcomes related to the specific major that the interviewees studied.

The six key questions were:
1. What do you think are the important qualities that every university graduate should have?
2. What do you think are the important qualities that every humanities graduate should have?
3. Considering your major, what do you think are the important qualities that every graduate should have in this field of studies?
4. What are the actual learning outcomes you have achieved from university education (including the impact from subjects other than humanities, such as extracurricular activities)?
5. What are the actual learning outcomes you have achieved from humanities education/courses?
6. Considering your major, what are the actual learning outcomes you have achieved in this field of studies?

The importance of qualities was noted according to the number of times a quality was
mentioned in their conversations or from their own priority listings. As mentioned earlier, we collected information from final-year students, postgraduate students whose undergraduate degree was in humanities and also recent alumni. The focus throughout was on positive information, and we attempted to avoid sinking into “grumbling”. As the project officer was not employed by any department in the Faculty of Arts, students/participants appeared to express their views freely without feeling the need to hide anything. During the discussions, students/participants were usually actively involved and enjoyed sharing their opinions.

As in group discussions, students/participants were asked to give their own background information referring to their majors, interests, intention of further studies, etc. Then the facilitator (project officer) asked them the same questions as used in the group discussions. Interviews were slightly different from group discussions as the participants could speak more within the same limit of time. In the interview, the facilitator could guide the interviewee better, and perhaps stimulate the participants’ thinking more. As a result, more in-depth interviews could be carried out, and the information gathered was more descriptive when compared with that from the group discussions.

**Analysis**

As noted earlier, the analysis of this study was principally based upon grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the essence of grounded theory is that researchers do not impose preconceived frameworks or theories on the data; rather, theory emerges from the data, and so is grounded in it.

In doing this initial search for grounded themes, use was made of the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to ensure that emerging themes were consistent with the whole sense of the experience. Following the constant comparative method implies that the analyst makes continuing reference to the whole context rather than looking at isolated quotes. The result is that quotes selected as indicative of themes have their meaning referenced against the sense of the whole interview. The constant comparative method is, therefore, a guard against taking isolated comments out of context, and a strategy for ensuring that the true underlying meaning of parts of an interview is identified.

In our study, detailed notes were made during each group discussion and individual interview. In addition, the interviews and some of the major group discussions in the group interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. These data were analyzed to examine the number of times a specific quality was mentioned. The process required several iterations.

The process of reading and re-reading the material allowed us to label the responses and then organize them into like categories, consistent with the phases of coding (open, selective and theoretical) as suggested by Glaser (1992). Open coding of the transcripts referred to the initial stage of constant comparative analysis before delimiting the coding to a core category, while selective coding meant to cease open coding and to delimit coding to those only relating to the core variable. Through constant comparisons, theoretical coding yielded the conceptual relationship between categories and their properties as they emerged.

At the end of the project, it was found that there was sufficient data for saturation to be reached, where no new categories or themes emerged on reading further sets of detailed notes or listening to further tapes. As a summary, Figure 4 shows an outline of the overall methodology of the study.
In our final analysis, the following core categories of learning outcomes emerged: Personal traits, Language ability, Knowledge, Rational thinking, Adaptability, Self-direction, Process of learning, People-oriented value, Research skills, Problem-solving, Communication skills, Accomplishment/ Measure of success, Interest, Professional skills, Social responsibility, and Society awareness. These categories may not be unique but it is believed that they do cover the central thrust of each comment from the student interviews. The details of the findings will be presented in the next chapter.
Chapter 5: What do students of humanities want to learn

This is the first of three chapters which present the outcomes of the analysis of interviews and focus groups with the participating students. The three chapters cover the main topics which these students considered important in describing the nature of desired and actual learning outcomes for university students. This chapter focuses on the results of desired learning outcomes, chapter 6 on actual learning outcomes, and chapter 7 on assessment examples.

Grounded theory was used to reveal what students of humanities want to learn and what they have achieved. The design of this study and the data collected revealed how undergraduate and postgraduate students experienced learning in Hong Kong. At the beginning of our studies, we set up research questions to investigate both desired learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes. For the desired learning outcomes, the key discussion areas are:

- the important qualities that every university graduate should have
- the important qualities that all humanities graduates should have
- the important qualities that every graduate should have in their field of study

Based on the collected qualitative data, this section will first describe the key trends and the main features of a wide range of student experience by describing each of the 16 categories in detail. Then, the students’ replies to the above three research questions will be explored.

Key desired learning outcomes in humanities

As the nature of our studies is primarily concerned with the concept of learning outcomes, it is therefore possible to define learning outcomes based on the characteristics of the revealed data sets. As illustrated in the previous section, the data-collection methods of this study were interviews and focus groups. After examining the special features of the responses to the three key research questions, the revealed themes of the desired learning outcomes can be re-organised in order to show the overall major patterns of the desired learning outcomes. The major desired learning outcomes perceived, as summarized from the data sets of interviews and focus groups, fall into the following 16 broad categories, namely:

1. Personality traits
2. Language ability
3. Knowledge
4. Rational thinking
5. Adaptability
6. Self-direction
7. Process of learning
8. People-oriented values
9. Research skills
10. Problem-solving
11. Communication skills
12. Accomplishment/Measure of success
13. Interest
14. Professional/life skills
15. Social responsibility
16. Society awareness
A more detailed description for each type of qualified learning outcome is in Table 17. After developing a list of the main categories in relation to the desired learning outcomes, a system of coding was then be developed by using the above categories and applied it to the data sets generated from interviews and focus groups. When calculating participants’ responses in the data sets, frequency tables were drawn to provide information about the overall patterns of the desired learning outcomes.

Figure 5 is a grouped column chart showing two adjacent columns representing different student numbers for desired learning outcomes.

![Figure 5: Desired learning outcomes](image)

While one column represents the total number of students who acquired specific desired learning outcomes, the other one stands for the cumulative number of all students who desired the learning outcomes. The tall columns, such as ‘knowledge’, ‘rational thinking’ and ‘personality traits’, which are located on the left, have high numbers of students, while the short columns, such as ‘accomplishment’, ‘research skills’ and ‘interest’, that are situated on the right, have comparatively low numbers of students. This means that those high frequency categories, such as knowledge and rational thinking, were likely to be very significant areas in which students desired, based on the frequency numbers shown. Despite having a comparatively low frequency level, the ‘accomplishment’, ‘research skills’ and ‘interest’ categories attracted a certain group of student responses. Such responses reveal that students as a whole tend to have a wide range of desired learning outcomes. High frequency numbers tend to indicate that the majority of students desired in certain categories while low frequencies do not mean that they have little attraction to students. Such learning outcomes were just less frequently mentioned by the students but may have a strong influence for some.

In the following section, pseudonyms are used.
**Knowledge**

As identified in the previous section, knowledge is a term that many students mentioned. In the data sets 51 out of 57 participants (90%) referred to general and academic knowledge as their most desired learning outcome. In the minds of many students, knowledge was described as fundamental and vital. George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, emphasized its necessity in the curriculum and said:

> Basically, graduates have to have a basic knowledge of all things and theories. They should know the important aspects of each subject. If I am literate in philosophy, I should know the methodology and I may need to follow a philosopher.

James, another postgraduate student of Religious Studies, also confirmed its status in higher education and said:

> Students in higher education should process deep and broad professional knowledge.

George and James both indicated that gaining knowledge is a fundamental goal in tertiary education. Anthony, another undergraduate student doing a major in English language, emphasized the relationship between knowledge and major studies. He said that

> Students should have knowledge in the subject of their major studies which is above average when compared with that of other people in society.

Indeed academic knowledge in the major subjects is vital and most students have a strong interest in their major subject studied. Understanding culture is another way of gaining knowledge. Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, believed that

> Literate humanities students should be familiar with both Chinese and Western culture.

She also thought that

> Humanities students should not just focus on obtaining a qualification, but also possess the urge for knowledge and intellectual curiosity.

As indicated by the participants, knowledge, despite covering a wide range of learning methods, is one of the most important desired learning outcomes that links up with culture and professionalism. It may be treated as a link to Chinese feelings about the value attached to being knowledgeable.

**Rational thinking**

Forty-nine out of 57 participants (86%) referred to rational thinking as one of their desired learning outcomes during interviews. Rational thinking is important in tertiary education and students generally acknowledge that it is one of the vital means of learning. The concept of rational thinking can involve different areas – for example, cognitive and moral development. Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies indicated that

> Humanities students should have the ability to judge right and wrong, and to
distinguish between true and false. We should not blindly believe in public media’s reports. We should know how to analyze things and develop critical thinking.

While Susan emphasized that humanities students should be able to distinguish between right and wrong, Caroline, an undergraduate student taking a major in Chinese language and literature and a minor in English, had a different perspective and thought that logical and analytical thinking are important:

Before I studied Humanities, I thought it was a romantic discipline with only creative writing. However, that is totally the opposite to the real practice. In fact, Humanities highly demand logical and analytical thinking. We can’t just rely on our feelings, but also need to have evidence to support our thoughts.

As a student of language and literature, Caroline knew very well that students should not only concentrate on romantic literature, but also develop abilities in building up logic power and reasoned thinking. In line with Caroline, Edward, an undergraduate student of Anthropology, said that

Humanities students have developed a thinking method that is different from other disciplines. For example, in the Article 23 issue\(^1\), other students discussed the context and details, whereas Humanities students discussed whether the policy was needed or not. Another example is the issue of setting up a new college in CUHK; other students discussed the benefits of the situation whereas humanities students were concerned more about the effects of the new college on students.

Obviously, university is a place where different thinking methods are acknowledged. Edward had interests in applying thinking skills for solving problems, e.g., how to link learning with policies and practices. Such an approach is not only logical, but it relates to the improvement of the real social world. For many students of humanities, the application of thinking skills in a real social context is no doubt one of the key concerns.

**Communication skills**

Forty-nine out of 57 students (86%) referred to communication skills as a desired key learning outcome. There is no doubt that good communication skills benefit all social encounters. As George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, said:

Humanities students should possess communication skills, e.g. skills in presentations, be expressive, and be able to translate ideas in-depth and comprehensively … For humanities graduates, the best thing is to be able to present … Having convincing means of expression is very important for humanities graduates. You should be able to use what you have learned and reflected on. … You should be able to translate things. For example, I should be able to tell others, and others should be able to understand. The first thing is

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\(^1\) Article 23 is a security law proposed by the Hong Kong government. The law aimed to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Chinese government. But it allowed police to arrest people at any time without court warrants or evidence and an organization banned by the Chinese government can be banned in Hong Kong at any time. The proposed bill resulted in massive demonstrations and subsequently failed to pass in the legislative process.
about convincing. Secondly, it is about comprehension. I should give you a holistic and complete picture, not partial facts. Humanities students should learn about people. They don’t learn about information and machines. So, it helps them become people-centred.

As George said, good presentation skills, convincing ability for expression and strong comprehension ability all are important areas that humanities students should have. Jennifer, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies also said:

Humanities students should have communication skills which include skills in persuasion.

Similar to Jennifer, Karen, an undergraduate student taking a major in Linguistics and a minor in German and Gender Studies, said:

[University graduates] should be careful and be able to communicate with others with good manners.

Like language, verbal and non-verbal communication skills do have a powerful role in linking people together. Many students do want to develop such skills, including presentations and persuasion. The acquisition of such skills is often considered as a good learning outcome that the students want to develop.

**Personality traits**

Forty-eight out of 57 participants (84%) referred to personality traits as one of their desired learning outcomes. The term personality traits here mainly means personal character, creativity and sensitivity. As Carol, an undergraduate student doing a major in English, said:

Humanities students should be more creative than non-Humanities students.

Humanities students are different from non-humanities students and some have their own special characteristics. As Ben, an undergraduate student of Music, also said:

I think personality is important for a university graduate. This is what every university degree needs to nurture … Some music students are quite sentimental, which I think is needed. We need to have a romantic temperament and interest.

Humanities students should have a special character. May is an undergraduate student of Translation doing a minor in French and Japanese Studies and she said:

In terms of personality, they should have a sense of responsibility and be polite.

It seems that for some humanities students the importance of being polite, creative and romantic is indicated. In addition, Humanities students study a wide range of knowledge and their work closely relates to the welfare of people, and subsequently they may be more sensitive to people’s needs and feelings. As George, a postgraduate student taking a major in Religious Studies and Theology, pointed out,

[Humanities students should be] able to observe every nuance of human life and
are sensitive to people’s feelings.

In the minds of many students, humanities is not only a subject to learn, it is about personal invention and creation. It is therefore important to explore how to build relationships with others and how to be sensitive to others’ needs and feelings. In other words, many students thought that desired learning outcomes should relate to creativity and sensitivity, and help develop human harmonized relationships.

**Language ability**
Quite similar to the category of communication skills, language ability is popular: 40 out of 57 students (70%) referred to language ability as their key desired learning outcome. There is no doubt that language ability is important. As George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, said:

[Language ability] is very important, especially the global language of English. For people in China or Hong Kong, you also need to be proficient in Chinese, because everything is in Chinese. So language is a must. Language is ultimately important to humanities students. Science students know everything in their own terms … But for humanities students, you have to be proficient in language.

Like George, two other students thought that it is important for Hong Kong students to learn more Chinese and English. Lucy, an undergraduate student of Translation said:

People always think that humanities students should have better Chinese and English language ability … It is because we have more opportunities to use language. Some students would also learn a second language. I think there is a tough requirement of Chinese and English for humanities students.

Not only having an opportunity to learn languages, students should attain a certain level of achievement, as May, another undergraduate student of Translation, said:

They need to have language ability, although they may not be at expert level. University graduates in general should achieve a standard level of Chinese and English. They need to be “bi-literate and tri-lingual”.

As emphasized by the students, language ability is important in Hong Kong and university students should be competent in managing bi-literate (western and eastern) cultures and tri-lingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) language skills.

**Professional/ life skills**
Professional skills can mean a lot of things, e.g. ranging from attitudes to co-operative or organizational skills. Thirty-nine out of 57 students (68%) referred to professional skills as a desired learning outcome. As Catherine, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, indicated:

Working attitude is very important. We should show persistence.

General virtue or good behaviour are without doubt important, and May, an undergraduate student of Translation doing a minor in French and Japanese Studies, also said:

They need to have courtesy, which is needed when interacting with people. I
think this is very basic, something that everyone should know, but lots of people neglect it.

While some students are strong in one thing, others may have their personal weaknesses and want to improve some skills. Charlotte, an undergraduate of Cultural Studies, said:

A skill I want to have, but fail to have in reality, is organisational skill and the ability to co-operate with others within a group.

While Charlotte emphasized organisational skills, Tracy, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, wanted to improve her co-operative skills. She said:

University graduates should understand how to co-operate with others in both paid work and when studying.

Correct attitudes, good organization and co-operating with others all are important areas in developing professional skills. In recent years university education has gradually become more professionally orientated, and the acquisition of such skills has thus become important.

People-oriented values
Thirty-five out of 57 participants (61%) referred to personal values as a desired learning outcome. Personal values here means caring about people and valuing human life. Karen, an undergraduate student doing a major in Linguistics and a minor in German, for instance, expressed the opinion that we have to care about our own needs. She said:

Humanities students should place their concern on fulfilling their intrinsic needs rather than focusing only on external things or materials, e.g. money. We should also have the ability to be introspective.

Whilst intrinsic needs can relate to a lot of things, James, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies, focused on moral principle, and said:

I won’t make any moral judgment based on economic terms. I do not want to discriminate against any religion and I try to be sympathetic to all religions. For example, on the incidence of Muslims’ violence, I think I can make a fair critique.

Under a moral principle, learning, to a certain degree, is associated with the development of an appropriate values system. Learning in this sense is not simply putting things together, but developing a thorough approach to understanding the materials and then making an accurate judgment. The judgment therefore should be sympathetic and logical. Looking at the issue from a cultural perspective, Edward, an undergraduate student of Anthropology thought that

Humanities students need to view things from a humanities perspective – for example, focusing on a cultural context. … Many Humanities students look at the development of human values, morality, ethics, such as how things affect society, and how to allocate resources. They care more about human feelings.

According to Edward, students of humanities should develop a passion for society, and should try to play a role in upholding human values and morality. Setting a path for
righteousness and being sensitive to cultural issues are also important for students of humanities.

**Adaptability**

Adaptability can be described as being open-minded and viewing things from multiple perspectives. Thirty-three out of 57 students (58%) indicated adaptability as a desired learning outcome. When Sarah, an undergraduate student of Fine Arts, discussed the qualities of university students, she said:

Their [university students’] views should be widened because they read more books and do more thinking.

Often students are expected to have a broad horizon and gain more knowledge and skills. As Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, also said:

*Humanities students should be open-minded and be able to accept different opinions.*

Apart from viewing things from a different perspective, a thorough approach would also help. As Edward, an undergraduate student of Anthropology, said:

*Humanities students should be able to view things thoroughly; for example, when analyzing a temple, we should not only view it from a historical background but also from the people’s perspectives, ethics, etc.*

The concept of adaptability here, as a student learning outcome, thus is about flexibility, open-mindedness, wide perspectives and a reasonable depth of analysis.

**Social awareness**

Social awareness is about the ability to understand the needs and culture of society and then to respond with an appropriate action. Thirty-three out of 57 students (58%) referred to social awareness as a desired learning outcome. Karen, an undergraduate student doing a major in Linguistics and a minor in German and Gender Studies, responded:

*Students from my major should be able to apply language knowledge to discover cultural issues and relate the subject of linguistics to cultural studies. I have obtained both local and international exposure during the courses.*

While Karen emphasized language and culture, May, an undergraduate of Translation doing a minor in French and Japanese Studies, pays attention to broad and international perspectives. She said:

*They should show common sense in every aspect. They should have certain knowledge of everything and should not be ignorant of the things happening around them. They should have broad knowledge of every social issue. They need to have an international perspective. That is the weakest thing for many Hong Kong university students. It is because many of them like reading gossip news. They should not neglect the things happening in society.*

Ben, an undergraduate student taking a major in Music focused on his major subject and said:
Humanities students should be closely attentive to current issues and social affairs. They should be sensitive to the social context. … From the Ethnomusicology course, I learnt to explore the cultural development of modern music.

Some students expressed the view that the context of university learning should closely relate to contemporary social issues. Even in music, some learning content has reflected culture and the real life of people. Learning, as many students perceived, relates to people’s real life and is closely associated with different social contexts.

**Process of learning**

Learning here is about motivation and lifelong learning that the students perceived. Thirty-two out of 57 students (56%) referred to learning as one of their desired learning outcome. Emily, an undergraduate student doing a major in Chinese Language, said:

> I have the intention of continuing my education because I think what I have learned is not enough. The more I have learnt, the more I have realized my knowledge is insignificant and not enough, comparatively speaking.

Students always take a lifelong learning view because they think that the knowledge that they have is never enough. Teresa, an undergraduate student of English, also said:

> University graduates should have an ability to learn and develop lifelong learning.

As described, learning has no limitations and is continuous. Many students believed that developing an approach of lifelong learning is vital. A few expressed the view that personal motivation is the key – like Diane, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, who said:

> University graduates should have the motivation to learn.

A few thought that university students should pursue a motivation to learn whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic. Keeping a continuous manner and a lifelong approach, learning then becomes meaningful and substantial. Some students perceived this as important and one of their desired learning outcomes.

**Problem-solving**

Problem-solving means how to tackle a problem. Twenty-eight out of 57 students (49%) referred to problem-solving as a desired learning outcome. For many students, knowing how to solve a problem and applying learned knowledge in practice is important. As Bridget, an undergraduate student of Translation doing a minor in Japanese Studies, said:

> Humanities graduates should know how to apply knowledge in daily life.

Karen, an undergraduate student of Linguistics, also has a similar idea and she focused more on culture, language and social problems:

> To be literate in humanities, students should be able to apply language knowledge, to explore cultural issues and to relate aspects of linguistics to
cultural studies. They should also put the knowledge they have learnt into action and detect social problems.

Anthony, an undergraduate student of English, emphasized the use of knowledge and said:

Students should know how to apply and utilize learnt knowledge from studies. I have improved a lot in understanding how to solve a problem.

Another student, Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, had similar experience, but focusing on arts and painting, she said:

Humanities students should know how to apply knowledge in daily life; e.g. applying art history while painting Chinese paintings.

Many students are keen to know how to apply theories or knowledge they have learnt and some feel that it is an important issue. Students often question how to put their learnt knowledge into practice. Ways of utilization are therefore often seen as an important element of outcome-based learning.

**Self-direction**
Twenty-two out of 57 students (39%) referred to self-direction as one of their desired learning outcomes. As Linda, an undergraduate student taking a major in English, said:

Students should have self-understanding and have a goal in life.

Similar to Linda, Jack, a postgraduate of Fine Arts, and Mark, an alumnus of Fine Arts, also said:

Jack: University graduates should have a clear studying goal and a clear career path.

Mark: University graduates should have a clear life goal and know what they want to do.

Thus, it is generally acknowledged that university students should be clear about what they are doing and should have clear life goals. Generally speaking, they want to be independent and develop self-learning capacities and abilities. Like many students, students of humanities want to be self-learners and they want to apply learning as well as solving problems in life. Elizabeth, an undergraduate student of Cultural Studies, said:

I think that when you learn a lot of things, you have to understand how to manage them. In society, there are many problems you have to face. Society changes continuously and the issues you face change too. Thus, you have to find your own position in society and have your own standpoints. When you are in society, you should be well-prepared.

There is no doubt that university students receive many challenges and they need to learn how to adapt to different situations and be prepared. Knowing personal life goals and how to be self-directed are without a doubt one of the desired learning outcomes of some students.
**Social responsibility**

Social responsibilities are about fairness, equal opportunities, and social justice. Twenty-two out of 57 students (39%) referred to these issues as a desired learning outcome. Some indicated that a university student should uphold principles of fairness and protect fundamental human values. As Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, said:

> Humanities scholars should be able to make an impact on others. For example, Professor Y actively participated in social campaigns which in turn affected students who were involved in social campaigns, and this changed points of view in society.

Some students think that they should learn to take part in social campaigns. Their involvement will have a beneficial effect on society and help students develop social responsibilities. As Edward, who is an undergraduate student of Anthropology, said:

> We should have social responsibilities. We are responsible for explaining, educating, and assisting people who have less knowledge. We should also participate in social campaigns and make a contribution to our society.

Edward indicated that university students have a social duty in society and they should develop a target of making a contribution to society. In line with Edward, George, a postgraduate student of Theology Study and Theology, said:

> Students should work for the welfare of people around us and help them to grow up in life and be competent. We should challenge evil and contribute to society. I learnt to fight for those who are in unfair situation, e.g. waiters who are exploited by their boss.

University students should learn to contribute to society and raise awareness of unfair situations. In many societies, university students play a significant role in social participation. In Hong Kong, the social movement of students is widely recognized and often has a significant impact on society. During interviews, many students indicated that they have a key role to play in the area.

**Interest**

Interest is about personal orientation or appreciation. Nineteen out of 57 students (33%) referred to interest as a key desired learning outcome. As Jenny, a postgraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature, said:

> I think this subject (Chinese Literature) is very interesting. There is unlimited knowledge to explore.

While Jenny was interested in Chinese Literature, Hannah, an undergraduate student of Cultural Studies, felt that

> To be literate in humanities, students should love and respect their major field of study.

There is no doubt that many students like their own major fields of study. Others may like culture or a wider social environment. Julie and Clare are examples:
Literate in humanities means that students should have an interest in cultures. They should know how to appreciate arts and the world. (Julie, undergraduate of Fine Arts, with French as a minor subject)

University graduates should have an interest in their surroundings and have a broad view. They should like reading and have an interest in culture. (Clare, postgraduate of Linguistics)

Although culture is a wide area, when you are interested in a particular subject, you often have a lot of energy to deal with it. Therefore if you have a lot of interest in a subject, although a particular subject may be difficult, a student with an interest in the subject may not feel tired when working on it. Some students may motivate themselves to study if they are keen to learn the subject. Interest in a particular subject may lead to creating a more active participation and subsequently attract more student participation.

Research skills

Research skills are about the abilities of organizing and implementing a good piece of research. Fourteen out of 57 students (25%) regard research skills as a desired key learning outcome. While talking about the qualities of humanities students, Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, expressed the opinion that

Humanities students should know how to support their arguments with theories and evidence.

Also within the context of humanities, Hannah, an undergraduate student of Cultural Studies, to a certain degree agreed with Susan, and said:

Humanities graduates should be able to collect information and develop research methods. They should have an ability to organize data.

Besides Humanities, students need to learn research skills in their major subject. As Adam, an undergraduate student of English said:

In order to specialize in linguistics, students need to know how to construct research and to develop a method for data collection. Specialized in literature may need to know another method of doing research. They have to know about theories and have to have an interest and passion for understanding different literature.

Some students thought that research skills are important, from reviewing a piece of literature to developing a sound research methodology. Many of them found that, no matter whether in humanities or not, nor what major subject they study, they should acquire skills in a competent way.

Accomplishment

Accomplishment here means academic achievement and rewards. Surprisingly students seemed to talk little about these aspects when interviewed. Out of all categories, accomplishment received the most unpopular responses, in that only 11 out of 57 students (19%) referred to award or achievement as a desired key learning outcome. Here are some
examples:

A fine arts specialist should have some recognition and awards. (Diane, major in Fine Arts, minor in Psychology)

A person who is literate in humanities should be successful academically. (Bridget, undergraduate, major in Translation, minor in Japanese Studies)

A person who specializes in fine arts should have some quality publications and be recognized. (Catherine, postgraduate, Fine Arts)

Though not mentioned much by the students, awards and recognition are important indicators for achievement. A successful experience is always rewarding and can often have a continuous and long-term effect on our life. While some students want to mention it, some may not.

Other views
As described, learning outcomes can relate to a number of things and it is not a simple matter. Linking them with a concept of competence or quality, George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, said:

The graduate should be competent enough in their study area. If they study sociology, they should know the basics of sociology. If a person has an undergraduate degree, he should know the basics of that, and be able to put that into practice. He should have something more than a working knowledge. Another thing for the graduate is the need for ethics, which is not only acquiring knowledge and information. It is the need to acquire wisdom; wisdom is something more than knowledge. They should be concerned about people. They should work for the welfare of other people. As a graduate, you should also grow up in life; you should also help your friends or other people to grow up in life … Qualified graduates have to be competent, and also help others to be competent.

The concept of competence reflects that students have to achieve certain standards in order to be recognized as good students. The approach links well with many educational systems that offer training and examining procedures to ensure a good quality of education. Such a concept seems to be different from Susan’s ideas. Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, thought that university students may not have any kind of quality but experience. She said:

I don’t think university students have any special quality. I just think that they have more opportunities than others to study new things and gain knowledge compared with those who have not studied at university. They have more academic knowledge than others and they have done more reading. At university, students gain knowledge that non-students may not know. In terms of virtues, they might be better, but it is not absolute. Some people think that university graduates have better qualities. I don’t agree with this. I think this is wrong because university students are over-graded but others are downgraded. I think that university graduates should know what they are doing. I think that university graduates may not reach a certain level, but they need to accumulate
life experiences through knowledge learned, books read, or further education, and then they will gradually improve. I think that is the way. It is not the things you have mentioned – that after studying at university, you will then have something. Instead, we need to accumulate experience, not to just simply count the time of university learning over a few years.

From a philosophical and developmental point of view, Susan agreed that university graduates should gain knowledge more than others who do not have tertiary education. She argued that university education is a process and an experience. Students learn to experience during the process and gradually develop their own ways of thinking and gain valuable experience. University education in this sense is continuous and is a kind of life-long approach that links up with our later stages of life. Though learning is experiential, it is of a cumulative nature and the competence level to a certain degree can be assessed. As learning in this sense is specific, measurable and experiential, the next chapter will explore the key components of what students of humanities learn from their personal experience.

Desired learning outcomes as applicable to university graduates, humanities graduates, and major subjects of study

During interviews, there were marked similarities when students were asked about the qualities needed by university graduates and humanities graduates. In spite of the similarities in the responses, the following analysis will handle these two questions separately in order to show how the students directly responded to the questions. The most typical responses will be selected and analysed in order to reveal the major themes of the qualitative responses.

Learning outcomes that all university graduates should have

Language and knowledge

Students always give a wide range of replies when asked to indicate the qualities needed by university graduates. Their responses are often based on their personal experience, attitudes and value systems, that may or may not directly relate to the subjects they studied. Referring to the demands of society, Samuel, an undergraduate student whose major subject is Theology and minor subject is History, gave a typical reply. He emphasized that language and knowledge are key issues and there is a mission in university education. He said:

Language ability is very important. … In terms of training, I think we need to have an all-round education, and not be restricted to the major subject. … Out of all the factors, I think the most important is language, because communication needs language, and speaking and writing are important. Hong Kong society now requires ‘bi-literate and tri-lingual’. It means nothing if you are only good at Chinese. In the case of meeting a foreign customer, you cannot use Chinese any more, so every industry needs English. Therefore, languages cannot be separated from our life.

This quotation serves to introduce language and knowledge as the first key cluster of learning outcomes for university graduates. A university student should have language skills, and be knowledgeable, with a sense of responsibility and a mission to contribute to society. These are no doubt important elements as part of the learning outcomes of university graduates. As the education system in Hong Kong emphasizes language ability in Chinese (Cantonese and Putonghua) and English, the possession of the ability often leads to better opportunities for
gaining better jobs or places to study. Therefore, many students considered language competence, and being knowledgeable and responsible as key important elements of university education. These students also believed that making a contribution to society is a reasonable expected quality for university students.

As far as language is concerned, Teresa and Ben also shared a similar view. Teresa, an undergraduate student doing a major in English, said:

Competence in language should include the abilities to read and write in Cantonese, English and Mandarin.

Teresa’s view is quite typical because Hong Kong is a place that uses Chinese and English as official languages. Since the Hong Kong sovereignty handover in 1997, the language education policy of Hong Kong Government is to enable the Hong Kong people, particularly students and working adults, to be biliterate (in written Chinese and English) and trilingual (in Cantonese, Putonghua and spoken English) (SCOLAR, 2003; Poon, 2004). The ability to use the three languages well thus becomes very important. Ben, an undergraduate student taking a major in Music, elaborated more on this point and said:

Hong Kong is an international city. People expect a degree holder to reach a certain level of language proficiency. Both Chinese and English are very important, especially Chinese (Putonghua) as we have more interaction with mainland China. Oral skills become more important because they dominate the working context. … Humanities students should have a high level of language ability. Unlike the Academy for Performing Arts which concentrates on techniques, we should have better language abilities because we also need to write theses.

Language proficiency on the one hand helps us link up with the people in mainland China and the international world; on the other hand it is an essential element for preparing oral and written presentations during students’ studies. As many students commented, it is one of the most important elements of desired learning outcomes in university education in Hong Kong.

Independent thinking and personal judgment
The second major quality for university students that many perceived was about thinking ability or thinking skills. Learning how to think and making correct judgments are, without a doubt, important things in life and are one of the main aims in university education. Sophie, a postgraduate student with a major in Chinese Language and Literature, expressed that the following opinion:

I think a university student should have the ability to think independently and make decisions. Apart from the knowledge generated from different courses and the independent thinking ability developed from a student’s own profession or a specific course, the university offers a kind of learning method. When we learn this set of professional skills, a similar independent thinking ability can apply to other situations. I think this is very important. This is not just restricted to a specific area, but is also important in our daily life and other working contexts. For example, as academics, we should not only follow what others say, but we need to analyze the situation. It is also very important how we use knowledge.
Through discussions, presentations and reflections, university students are always taught to develop arguments and establish their own principles based on available evidence. When student confidence is being nurtured in a secure and protected educational environment, they then gradually develop a professional and independent thinking ability, and subsequently carry out appropriate actions. The acquisition of this skill is important in university education. Caroline, an undergraduate student taking an English major and an English minor, emphasized the relationship between independent thinking and personal responsibilities. She thought:

We need to have critical and independent thinking. We need to know how to distinguish between right and wrong. I think we need to take responsibility, and that is very important. For example, when you have a position, you need to be responsible for the consequences that occur and never step backwards. We need to commit to our work and have responsibilities.

Caroline made very good points on personal responsibilities, determination and commitment that university students should have. University students should not only possess critical thinking or independent thinking abilities, but also a kind of committed attitude, a determination to step forward to express right or wrong, a sense of responsibility for bearing consequences: all are important qualities for university students. Emphasizing the importance of reflection, Jenny, a postgraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature said:

As a university student, you would have expectations of yourself. During these three years of study, you should have learnt something. I think as a human being, we should have the ability of reflection. We often ask ourselves to view things calmly and objectively, but we may not make it at the last moment, and fail to keep to the principle. But it is important to make a habit of reflection after a situation.

Jenny thought that having an objective manner and developing an ability for reflection are important qualities in a university education. Her idea matches well with the theory of reflective practice that has been promoted and applied to a wide range of academic and professional disciplines. With a firm grasp of the principle of reflective practice, students become reflective practitioners who can respond appropriately and flexibly to different situations. The dynamic views expressed by the students contrast the common perceptions of school education in Hong Kong that may sometimes be viewed as passive, static and unresponsive.

Quality of university education and society
The third major quality for university students lies in the ways of taking up responsibilities or duties to respond to the needs of society and then making a reasonable contribution. Sarah, an undergraduate student of Fine Arts, highlighted a caring attitude for society and the essential component of developing family ethics in university education. She said:

A person should know how to care about society, have concepts of family ethics, distinguish between right and wrong, and have a sense of responsibility for people and things. These are the things we should have. But this does not mean that we can get all of these from university training. It is not because of a lack of training in the university – it depends on whether students have learned it or not.
As a traditional Chinese concept, university relates to learning virtues, caring for people and targeting goodness. Sarah’s views are close to traditional Chinese thinking and emphasize family ethics and caring for society. As she said, although there were provisions for university students on the issue of how to become a good person, some may not be able to absorb the principle, as that depends very much on personal circumstances. However, universities can provide a place for students to learn and grow. Adam, an undergraduate student of English, outlined a challenge for university students:

I think it is about personal development and graduates should know how to face the challenges of society after graduation. We have to have our own standpoints for facing and dealing with different social problems. This is a challenge for me because a graduate of humanities has disadvantages when seeking a job in the business world. Apart from seeking a job, there are challenges in the value system. I think personal development is about internalization. It integrates the things that you learnt in the three years of your study, and these become your personal values, and then you learn how to face society.

Taking a view of internalizing the knowledge learnt during the university years, Adam emphasized the importance of building up a value system that can help us face the challenges of society. The value system that has been learnt and developed in the university years is a powerful source to overcome difficulties and can subsequently help us make a significant contribution to society. The statements by both Sarah and Adam pointed out that there is an important link between university education and society. One of the university missions thus relates to the degree of contribution made to society and the quality of university education, as perceived, closely relates to the fulfilment of such a mission.

Learning outcomes that all humanities graduates should have
When asked about the qualities of humanities graduates, the student replies were very similar to their answers to the question about the qualities of university graduates, as set out in the previous section. Typical examples of these are:

The training in humanities puts great emphasis on writing. Therefore, students should be competent at writing and logic. (Sharon, undergraduate, major in Translation)

He/she (the graduate) should have a certain level of Chinese and English. Besides that, he/she should have good comprehension and analytical ability. (Charlotte, undergraduate, major in Cultural Studies)

I think the most important thing is to have an open mind and an ability for self-reflection. The requirement for communication skills, including interpersonal skills, should be greater … Polite manners are necessary, and caring for society is a basic requisite. Everyone should have these manners, not only university or humanities graduates. (Ruth, undergraduate, major in Translation, minor in Philosophy)

If they are graduates of humanities, I think they should have caring attitudes towards people. I think it is very important to have social awareness and a caring attitude on social issues. (Elizabeth, undergraduate, major in Cultural Studies)
However, the humanities students tended to emphasize the following two aspects when the qualities of humanities graduates were considered. First, many students of humanities distinguished their own identity from science and engineering graduates – that they have their own ways of contributing to society. As Sharon, an undergraduate student of Translation, pointed out,

The research area of humanities is different from science and engineering areas. Science and engineering graduates tend to work or research more on technological aspects. Through this, they make a contribution to society. Of course, graduates of humanities can also make a contribution to society by research, but they work on different aspects.

Echoing Sharon, Samuel, an undergraduate student doing a major in Theology and a minor in History, said:

… Compared with engineering or science, graduates of humanities or arts do more writing assignments, so relatively speaking, we have better language ability. Students of humanities should have a clear goal. I think this is important because humanities discipline mainly teaches us to ‘refine ourselves; harmonize our family; govern the nation; bring peace to the world’. These are very fundamental.

With an academic background of Theology and History, Samuel believed that students of humanities have a particular mission. He quoted the old Chinese saying of ‘Refine oneself; Harmonize family; Govern the nation; Bring peace to the world’. This means that when one’s personal life is cultivated, one’s family will be regulated and then one’s state will be well governed; and when all the states are well governed, there will be peace and tranquillity throughout the world. Samuel thought that humanities graduates have a particular mission. Their ways of contributing to society are specific and often different from those of science graduates.

The second aspect that many humanities students referred to is culture. Unlike students of science disciplines, students of humanities put particular emphasis on cultural differences and social issues. Adam, an undergraduate student of English, said:

I think that science or engineering discipline focuses more on technical learning techniques. But graduates of humanities work more on social issues. We consider social values and cultural differences, and how to apply them in writing. Through the knowledge we have learned, we should be able to reflect this in assignments for personal growth or development.

Humanities graduates tend to study social values and cultural differences, while graduates of science have a greater tendency to work on technical knowledge or skills. Students of humanities thus are often sensitive to cultural issues or personal development. Along a similar line of thought, George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, explained the nature of humanities:

Humanities is a subject which involves the facets of human life. We have sociology, philosophy, and anthropology which all involve study of human society and human beings. So humanities involves the cultures of society, the
linguistics or the languages of society. So humanities should promote a holistic development. Learning about cultures, music and civilization all one way or another contribute to our well-being. The reason why people study philosophy is that it teaches them how to orient their life. Humanities basically teach that. Whereas sciences apply to things. Science is basically that you design a computer, so your work can be made easier, but humanities go beyond that. It contributes to well-being, thinking, orientation, and how to live in society. Humanities teach me who is my neighbour. A student graduated from humanities should be open. Humanities basically teach a lot of things, lots of new ideas and values. Humanities teach values.

George rightly pointed out the nature of humanities – that they consist of a wide range of disciplines covering a lot of knowledge, ideas and values. Their contribution to human life may be described as holistic and value-laden. While George linked the concept of humanities with a number of disciplines, Alice, an undergraduate student of Translation doing a minor in German Studies, focused on the major subject she took:

I think culture is symbolic. Other disciplines may be more technical or factual. But the cultural things we learnt are very difficult to measure. I think a humanities graduate should pay more attention to cultural issues, such as being aware of the decline of minority cultures and the integration of mass cultures. As students of translation, we pay more attention to these issues.

There is no doubt that culture is an important issue, and also includes a lot of perspectives. Sensitivities towards cultural differences and their ways of changing constitute a major difference between graduates of humanities and those of science. In the context of Hong Kong and Chinese culture, humanities students need to pay much attention to establishing their own cultural identity. Sarah, an undergraduate student of Fine Arts, pointed out:

The first thing is good language ability, including Chinese and English, for the subject of arts. Students need to have knowledge of Chinese and world history, and learn from it. They should also learn the culture of Hong Kong and be familiar with the culture in China, as well as the world culture. I think they should have certain knowledge in the area of arts, music, history and literature. I do not expect them know how to draw a picture or play the piano, but they should have a basic understanding in these areas. In terms of personality, there is no difference between a graduate of humanities and a graduate of any discipline. I think they should love reading and literature.

Linking the gap between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese communities and building a link between the East and the West, students of humanities have a vital role to play. An understanding of the basics of art, music, history and literature are also basic elements for humanities students who may want to put more effort into studying. In summary, when responding to the question about the qualities of humanities graduates, apart from the generic learning outcomes associated with university students, which the previous section illustrated, humanities students tend to distinguish their own identity from that of graduates of science, and figure out the concept of culture that they need to particularly concentrate on, which is vital for learning as a student of humanities.
Learning outcomes that graduates should have, related to their major

Students were asked about the meaning of being literate in the major subject they were studying. Depending on the nature of their studies and their own experience, students had different views. The following examples indicate that their answers to some degree relate to the generic learning outcomes as identified in previous sections. As Caroline, an undergraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature doing a minor in English, said:

Students of Chinese language and literature I think have to have a certain level of language ability, including speaking and writing. Their language skills should be better than those of students of other disciplines. I think their writing should be clear and smooth. When reading, they should have better comprehension and reading ability. In terms of speaking and listening, they should have Cantonese and Putonghua. At this age, a student of Chinese language should possess Putonghua because Putonghua is a compulsory subject.

Caroline was studying Chinese and English, so she emphasized the importance of the ability to use languages when the question about the learning outcomes in her major subject was asked. Similarly, students of other disciplines often referred to the characteristics of their study when asked about the meaning of being literate in the major subject, as every major subject has its own strengths and particular focus. The following quotations are examples:

Charlotte was an undergraduate student in Cultural Studies. She thought that students of Cultural Studies should possess independent thinking, critical thinking and an ability to distinguish between right and wrong. She said:

In cultural studies, the influential theorists have a good understanding of issues and have critical and independent thinking. This is very important in cultural studies because the important task of cultural research is to deal with unfair situations. If someone follows only other thinking, only following the mainstream, he/she would need to study more on cultural studies.

George is a postgraduate student in Religious Studies and Theology. He thought that Theology relates to the daily experience of people and is about past and present. The subject links with language, culture, social and religious tradition, customs and value systems. He emphasized that theology graduates should know about the problems society faces and the world faces. As he said:

Literate in theology, basically, they not only understand the past, they should also understand the present. They should learn from people. Theology is not something which just involves taking information from books. It is taught more from people, from their daily experiences. Theology can learn from history, church history from the doctrines, and some other disciplines like missions and ethics, and also from people. To be literate in theology, I would expect them to be knowledgeable in church history, missions, doctrines, and also people. For example, if I studied theology in India, I should know which categories of people I am going to serve and be involved with. Concerning the context, it is not only the text, by which I mean books, that is important. Theology in India and China is different, because the society is different. Among those people, how can I translate and express these pieces? I should know that. We don’t influence or disturb people’s sentiments and their values. In order to know my
people, I should know their language, culture, their social and religious traditions, customs and religious practices. One should help people to appreciate, acknowledge and value. Another thing in theology is to focus on how to address problems, issues or challenges facing society. I would expect theology graduates to say something about that. They should know what the problems are that are facing society, what problems are facing the world.

Sharon was an undergraduate student of Translation. She thought that Translation is a difficult subject. The learning of translation is about the ability to use language with a reasonable speed and creativity. Students need to be sensitive and flexible as well as be aware of cultural differences. She said:

At the beginning I thought translation was only about translating between words. But it is not that simple: it is very difficult. You have to have a certain level of language ability and a quick speed. Because when you do interpretation, i.e. oral translation, you have to translate it simultaneously, and this requires quick responses. You have to be sensitive to words, be flexible and creative, as translation depends on context. For example, in a movie translation, we have to consider the cultural context in Hong Kong, and translate the English names into the names of Hong Kong celebrities or cartoon characters. Up till now, there has been a lack of agreement on terms of translation; thus, it all depends on interpreters’ points of view.

Jo, an undergraduate student of Accounting doing a minor in Anthropology, thought about personal characters and being educated when asked the meaning of being literate in Anthropology. She thought that Anthropology students concentrate on methodology. Through data collection, they can develop the ability to interpret theories. As she said:

Literate means well-educated, technically speaking. We need to learn how to interpret theories. In anthropology, there are many technical terms and we need to learn some basic terminology. In anthropology, we value field work. Thus, we would have better interviewing techniques because it is important for us to interview directly the person involved and collect the data in a straightforward way. We also need to know how to write an essay and collect the data we want.

The responses from the students relating to the major subject vary depending on the characteristics of each discipline; e.g. a language person may emphasize language ability while an anthropologist may highlight the participatory method of observation. However, the interview and focus-group student responses to a certain extent can be integrated because most major learning outcomes or core skills expressed are transferred and constantly experienced by most learners, subject to degree of effect. Therefore the next section will classify the key learning outcomes in humanities and try to illustrate their main concepts.
Chapter 6: What have the humanities students learnt

This chapter attempts to outline the learning outcomes of participating university students. This chapter will describe the characteristics of actual learning outcomes experienced by the students. Apart from the desired learning outcomes revealed in the previous chapter, the following three research questions were used to explore their actual learning outcomes:

- the actual learning outcomes that you have achieved from university education
- the actual learning outcomes that you have achieved from humanities education
- the actual learning outcomes that you have achieved in your field of study

Based on the collected qualitative data, this section will first describe the key trends and the main features of a wide range of student experience by using the 16 categories suggested in an earlier chapter. In addition, the students’ replies to the above three research questions will be explored.

Key actual learning outcomes in humanities

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the major desired learning outcomes can be classified into 16 broad categories. After examining the features of the responses to the above three key research questions, it is believed that the actual learning outcomes can also be grouped in a similar way.

Figure 6 is a grouped column chart showing two adjacent columns representing different student numbers for actual learning outcomes.

Figure 6: Actual learning outcomes
While one column represents the total number of students who acquired specific actual learning outcomes, the other one stands for the cumulative number of all students who achieved the learning outcomes. The tall columns, such as ‘knowledge’, ‘rational thinking’ and ‘society awareness’, which are located on the left, have high numbers of students, while the short columns, such as ‘self-direction’, ‘accomplishment’ and ‘social responsibility’, that are situated on the right, have comparatively low numbers of students. This means that those high frequency categories, such as knowledge and rational thinking, were likely to be very significant areas in which students achieved, based on the frequency numbers shown.

Despite having a comparatively low frequency level, the ‘self-direction’, ‘accomplishment’ and ‘social responsibility’ categories attracted a certain group of student responses. Such responses reveal that students as a whole tend to have a wide range of actual learning outcomes and that different students could make different choices. High frequency numbers tend to indicate that the majority of students achieved in certain categories while low frequencies do not mean that they have little attraction to students. Such learning outcomes were just less frequently mentioned by the students but may have a strong influence for some. For this reason, the following section outlines the qualitative student responses in order to show the actual meanings of student experience.

Knowledge
After a few years of university education, many students felt an increase of knowledge. Catherine, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, felt:

My knowledge of fine arts has increased – aspects such as art history and painting techniques.

While Catherine gained knowledge about art history and paintings, Jack, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, learnt about creating sculpture. He said:

I have gained knowledge and training in arts. I know how to create sculptures by using all the main techniques.

It was common for students to acquire knowledge and attain achievements during learning. A great deal of students highlighted that they learnt certain subjects in a deep and meaningful way. Emily, an undergraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature, had an experience of deep learning and she linked the learning materials with a wide academic area. She said:

I got to know the topic in greater depth from different articles. … Now I know more about the poet, his background, his work, and the history of literature.

Many students have a deep learning experience of gaining knowledge during university education. In the interviews, 49 out of 57 students (86%) responded that knowledge is one of their actual learning outcomes.

Rational thinking
Critical thinking, logical thinking and analytical skills are some of the main aspects of actual learning outcomes. Charlotte, an undergraduate student of Cultural Studies, experienced that deep learning associated with meaning and context. She said:
I learnt to read texts in greater depth and to analyse the dynamic structure of texts or phenomena, and view things from a variety of perspectives.

While Charlotte learnt to deal with texts in a deep way and view things from multiple perspectives, Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, learnt to be analytical and to apply what she had learnt in daily activities, such as watching TV and films. She said:

In one course, namely ‘Media and gender representations’, we analysed an Asian TV drama. We found that it was totally different from what we thought. Before group analysis, I thought TV drama was only for fun. After studying, I realized that patriarchy remains, even in western drama. Now when I watch TV or films, I will always analyse it and try to apply what I have learnt in my daily life.

It is generally accepted that university education is about thinking. Learning how to think is without a doubt a core skill in university education. In the learning process, students learn to be critical and objective, and to make sensible decisions. James, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies said:

I would objectively analyse things and understand the actual intention of an issue before making any judgment.

Analysing things with an objective manner and thinking relevantly and appropriately are important learning outcomes of university education. Learning to think in the right way would help deal with difficult situations and help to make appropriate decisions. In the samples, 49 out of 57 students (86%) regarded rational thinking as one of their key actual learning outcomes.

**Society awareness**

Society awareness is about social concerns and paying attention to the social needs and demands of society. As university students, many are concerned about social changes happening in society. Charlotte, an undergraduate student of Cultural Studies, is an example. She said:

I realize that a great deal of global issues relate to me, and my awareness of social issues has increased; for example, globalization, gender and race, and the low working class in society.

In the modern age the world has become smaller because of advanced communication technology and convenient transport systems. Globalization could mean a close connection between people in the world. In this scenario, students pay special attention to the social issues around them. While Charlotte increased her awareness on social issues, Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, believed that social participation is important. She said:

I care about social issues. But I don’t have enough courage to participate in a social campaign. That’s why I appreciate Professor X. I think I don’t have the power to do so. I think it would be great to get involved in a campaign.

Some students voiced their concerns about campaigns. But few have enough courage or
commitment. Susan cared about social issues, but she felt a lack of courage and energy. Despite some feeling that they may be unable to change the world, many have a strong feeling of connection. George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, put emphasis on a link between social consciousness and spiritual development. He said:

I have become more socially conscious. I am able to look at other places and people, and am able to look beyond myself. ... Another thing that I have learnt is gender consciousness. In theology, many things are defined by reference to men. God is thought to be a man; God is father. So by studying theology, one realises that God is not only man; there is no gender for God. God is beyond gender. There is no hierarchy in God. God created male and female. There is absolute equality in God’s creation. One thing that I learnt from Hong Kong is that women can walk anywhere freely without any restriction. There is absolute freedom. I need to understand women’s experience. We should not impose men’s values on women. We should not impose patriarchal values. There should be comprehensiveness. There should not be any hierarchy. There should be equality and justice. Theology has taught me a lot of things.

George admired gender equality in Hong Kong and was committed to promoting equality and justice. He was socially conscious and wanted to apply what he had learnt from theology in daily life. He thought that theology is more than a subject to be studied. It is a part of a values system that is close to people and relates to fundamental human values. It can be about equality and justice. In the sample, 46 out of 57 students (81%) regarded society awareness as an actual learning outcome.

**Communication skills**

Communication skills are vital to build understanding among human beings and they are essential techniques for students to learn. Charlotte, an undergraduate student taking a major in Cultural Studies, pointed this out:

I have learnt communication skills and explanation skills from group work, e.g. in my final year project.

Through group work and activities, Charlotte gained communication skills and learnt how to illustrate situations and explain concepts. Emily, an undergraduate student doing a major in Chinese Language and Literature, said:

I think the core learning outcome for me is to deal with different types of people using different methods. I have developed my presentation and interpersonal skills during my recent years of study.

Emily learnt interpersonal and presentation skills during her university education. She seemed to be enjoying her life when dealing with different types of people. Many students considered that communication skills are important. Carol, an undergraduate student of English, referred to her training experience in England and said:

We had a study tour in England learning communication skills. There was a course about communication, customs and cultures. From the course, I learnt that we should not subjectively criticize others’ behaviour because different cultures have their own customs. I learnt that we should not be prejudiced.
towards others by our first impression. I think the university has given us a lot of experience in different settings.

Communication skills often relate to verbal and non-verbal skills and different cultures may have their own cultural codes, signs or ways of expression. Therefore it is important to grasp the skills during university education as pointed out by Carol. In the samples, 43 out of 57 students (75%) referred to communication skills as an actual learning outcome.

**Language ability**

Similar to communication skills, language ability is an important area. As explained in an earlier chapter, the ability to use Chinese and English languages is important in Hong Kong society. Some students in the sample indicated that they had made a significant improvement during their study at university. Charlotte, an undergraduate student taking a major in Cultural Studies, said:

In my major, the use of English and Chinese is quite flexible. Students can choose to use either of them to do their assignments, as long as the language is consistent. Through presentation practice, my Chinese oral skills have improved. My English writing and reading skills are better because most reading I did was in English.

While Charlotte has better oral skills in Chinese and better writing and reading skills in English, Carol, an undergraduate student of English, said:

I have learnt writing skills, such as argumentative and analytical skills in writing. I have learnt how to analyse, discuss and conduct research.

As a language student, Carol focused on specific skills she learnt in her language course. Mastering a language at a certain level of competency may not be an easy job. Jo, an undergraduate student of Accounting doing a minor in Anthropology, thought that students of humanities should have more opportunities to develop language skills. She said:

My language ability has improved. Humanities students should have better reading and writing skills in English because they come across a lot of articles and reading materials. I think they are trained to be competent in reading and writing.

Many students have made a great improvement in their language ability. Many students considered that mastering language skills was an important task for them. In our samples, 37 out of 57 students (65%) regarded language ability as an actual learning outcome.

**Personality traits**

Good personal qualities are important at all levels of education. Relevant personality or character changes thus can be perceived as a key learning outcome in tertiary education. Students who possess positive personality changes may become friendly, mature and sensitive to others’ feelings. During university education, Carol, an undergraduate student of English, became extrovert and sociable. She said:

[I have become] more creative: for example, I can translate words using different ways of interpretation. My personality has changed. I have become
more outgoing and I like socializing with others.

Carol became creative, outgoing and sociable during her undergraduate studies. Other students might become dynamic, enthusiastic, humble, self-controlled or confident. Despite experiencing pressures, Emily, an undergraduate student taking a major in Chinese Language and Literature, experienced ways of increasing confidence in the learning process, and learnt to manage emotions. He said:

From the tutorials and the process of writing my final year project, I have learnt to be conscientious and know how to manage my emotions. My EQ and decision making have improved. I can defend criticisms and control pressures in life. My confidence has increased.

Emily learnt important things, such as conscientiousness, confidence and management of emotions during her university years. As well as Intelligence Quotient (IQ), Emotional Quotient (EQ) is always important. Ruth, an undergraduate student doing a major in Religious Studies and a minor in Philosophy, recognized the importance of developing an outgoing and sociable character. She said:

I have learnt to detect other people’s needs and feelings. Now I am talkative and extrovert.

University education can be a time for change. Many students showed a pleasant personality and a wide range of good characteristics at the time, and developed an attitude of eagerness to learn. In this study, 38 out of 57 students (67%) developed good personality traits as part of their achieved learning outcomes.

**Adaptability**

Adaptability is about flexibility and open-mindedness. Students learnt how to adapt to different situations and make a judgment taking into consideration multiple perspectives. Diane, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts taking a minor in Psychology, said:

I have learnt how to view things from more perspectives and consider the art subject from a philosophical perspective.

Similarly, Tracy, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, had also learnt to appreciate things from different perspectives. She said:

I have learnt how to appreciate different types of people and things, including their shortcomings. I have also learnt to appreciate art from different perspectives including the creative aspect.

While some students learnt to be flexible and had divergent thinking, some students experienced a new perspective on the subject matter. As Ben, an undergraduate student of Music, reflected:

Before my studies [at the university], my world view was very narrow. The Humanities courses have helped me to accept new ideas. For example, I used to think an erhu [Chinese two-string fiddle] was not suitable for performance because of its weak sound. Now I try to increase its tone level and use it. I try to
use different instruments for performance.

Whilst Ben had a change of interest in playing the erhu, George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, changed his view on religion. He said:

I have a better understanding towards other people and religions. In the past, I thought Christianity was the only way to reach God. Now I know how to appreciate and respect religions. By understanding other religions, I have learnt good things from them.

Students learnt to adapt new knowledge or skills, from many different disciplines. Such adaptability was often seen as a part of actual learning outcomes. In the samples, 35 out of 57 students (61%) regarded adaptability as an actual learning outcome.

**People-oriented values**

People-oriented values are concerned with matters such as caring about people and valuing one’s life. Ben, an undergraduate student of Music, underwent a change in his value system. He became caring and sensitive to people around him. He said:

The experience changed my personal values. I started to appreciate things that I had not liked. I learnt how to appreciate people and things around me.

Like Ben, Jo, an undergraduate student doing a major in Accounting and a minor in Anthropology, had a similar experience. She felt that she had achieved good personal development in valuing others. She said:

I value lifestyle, morality and having a proper character as a university student.

Building a good values system is vital during study and many students benefited from it. George, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology, learnt to develop a friendly character and show heartfelt appreciation. He said:

I appreciate people. People are different. I know that they are not like me. I have learnt to understand, appreciate, and value people and make friends with them. These are basic things I have learnt from studying theology.

George learnt to develop a good relationship with people through his theology study. He also tried to develop a caring character by appreciating others. In the samples, 31 out of 57 students (54%), with varying degrees, have a similar view. They thought that caring for others and appreciating others are a part of their actual learning outcomes.

**Process of learning**

University is a place for learning. Many students do well in their studies and appreciate what they have achieved. In our study, some mentioned that they learnt self-motivation. Others developed better insights towards mastering materials or made good progress during study. Tracy, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, was an example. She said:

I learnt to become independent and learn without seeking help from others. I am eager to achieve continuous improvement.
Tracy became independent and was eager to improve herself in a continuous manner while Jo, an undergraduate student of Accounting taking a minor in Anthropology, said that she liked reading books in humanities, rather than those books of her major study. She said:

Humanities disciplines nurture student learning. I liked reading books in humanities more than those on business. I do not have any motivation to read books on business.

It is common that students learn the things they want to learn, and which they find interesting. Many students found that the subject matter attracted them and they discovered ways of learning in the process. Charlotte, an undergraduate student of Cultural Studies, commented that:

Cultural studies have taught us ways of learning. The programme introduces you to different methodologies. Although it may not be in depth, it provides students with direction.

Learning can take place in various settings. Sarah, an undergraduate student of Fine Arts, said:

I read extra books most of the time and I think we do not really learn much from lectures.

Learning often appears in various settings. In the samples, 28 out of 57 students (49%) mentioned learning or its process as one of their acquired learning outcomes.

**Professional/ life Skills**

University education often offers professional training to students. Training is often of a generic nature and sometimes includes a subject-based dimension. Emily, an undergraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature taking a minor in English, said:

From the tutorials, I learnt co-operation with different people.

Emily learnt co-operation with others, while Karen, an undergraduate student of Linguistics doing a minor in German and Gender Studies, learnt leadership skills. She said:

I learnt leadership and teamwork skills. I also learnt time management and organizational skills from my studies.

Apart from having a generic nature, professional skills may sometimes relate to a particular subject. Amanda, an alumnus of Fine Arts, said:

I learnt an ability to appreciate and criticize art.

Professional/ life skills can mean different things for different subjects and it is a vital element in teaching and learning at university level. In the samples, 30 out of 53 students (65%) regarded professional skills as an actual learning outcome.

**Research skills**

The understanding of research methods can help students to do better academic work, such as
projects or assignments. Some students of particular disciplines may have their own emphasis on certain aspects. For example, anthropology students may deal with more interviewing methods while language students could do more contextual analysis. Students generally claimed that they learnt research skills in a particular way. Rebecca, a postgraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature, shared her experience of learning about research and also distinguished the differences between graduate and undergraduate studies. She said:

I think the biggest difference between graduate and undergraduate studies is self-learning in the graduate school. This is because if you follow a professor to do a piece of research study, s/he may not teach you how to write a thesis or find information. Indeed, you have to tell your professor what you have found and how to analyse the results. I have got some insights into this kind of learning. You do not simply listen to what a teacher says. Such a learning style has gradually influenced me. I no longer just get knowledge from teachers, but discover knowledge myself.

Students are often given opportunities to learn and they are encouraged to learn a wide range of skills. Tracy, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, shared her learning experience:

I have learnt to conduct research in Humanities and know how to search and sort materials for a study, e.g., how to use the library resources to collect reference materials.

Like Tracy, a lot of students have a similar experience in learning general research skills, such as collecting, managing and analysing information. Rachel, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, is another example. She said:

From research experience, I have learnt more than basic theories. I have improved my skills in coordinating, gathering and sorting information.

There are a wide range of skills in research, and students generally felt that they had learning opportunities. In the samples, 32 out of 57 students (56%) regarded research skills as an actual learning outcome.

Problem-solving
Problem-solving skills are often of a generic nature and can be used for nearly all disciplines. For some disciplines, such as medical doctor training, there has been a historical development of adapting problem-based learning as a major model of learning. However, students may pick up the skills in different contexts. Catherine, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, pointed out:

I developed the ability to handle both academic and non-academic matters by using problem-solving skills.

While many developed the ability to use these skills, some had the joy of satisfaction in applying it. Adam, an undergraduate student of English, said:

In my third year I started to realize that I could apply the knowledge I had learnt from one subject to another subject. I noticed that I was able to apply what I had learnt in my daily life. This is what I had never thought about.
It is so valuable when students achieve improvements that they had not anticipated. Emily, an undergraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature, had developed a sense of awareness in handling problems. She said:

My ability to understand problems is stronger than before. During lectures, you can learn other points of view by listening to the teacher’s analysis. During tutorials, we can hear and collect different opinions from students. This helps me consider things from different angles.

Understanding the nature of a problem from various perspectives and dealing with it in an efficient way are no doubt important. According to the data, 28 out of 57 students (49%) regarded problem-solving as an actual learning outcome.

**Interest**

Acquiring interest is often regarded as a vital link to motivation. Having a particular profound interest in an academic area would indicate a learning status. Tracy, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts, liked reading books on humanities. She said:

The studies simulate my interest in Humanities. I have developed my interest in reading, artwork and understanding how to write. I have learnt to appreciate arts from different perspectives and to generate my own points of view.

Tracy developed an interest in her artwork through reading and often showed her appreciation of different kinds of artwork. She tended to view things from a multiple perspective. Like Tracy, Ben, an undergraduate student of Music, went to the library often and he learnt to appreciate things and this generated an interest in films.

In my leisure time, I go to the library and read something that does not relate to my major, for example, films. I think I have learnt to appreciate and develop my interest in films during my study at the university.

While students tried to develop all sorts of personal interests, some liked humanities subjects more than their major. Jo, an undergraduate student of Accounting doing a minor subject of Anthropology, is an example. She said:

I would continue reading humanities books. But I do not have an interest in reading books about business. In accounting, I would not read anything that was not related to the course – nothing other than textbooks. But I like reading books about anthropology or culture.

Jo did a major in Accounting and a minor in Anthropology, but she liked reading books on Anthropology rather than Accounting or Business. The subject of Humanities became her personal interest and attracted her. Compared with Accounting, Anthropology tends to be an empirically-based subject with a social concern orientation that often generates a great deal of interest in young people. Jo is an example of someone showing an interest in humanities, despite having a major in another discipline. When considering the entire sample, 20 out of 57 students (35%) regarded interest as an actual learning outcome.
**Self-direction**

Self-direction is about visions in life and being willing to face challenges. They are indicators showing student independent thinking and the ability to cope with life events and to target future goals. Many students showed a mature attitude in this area. Kevin, a postgraduate student of Journalism doing an undergraduate minor in Cultural Studies, is an example. He said:

> After completing these studies, I realized my weaknesses and wanted to use the knowledge I had learnt for my future career.

While Kevin wanted to make a good use of what he had learnt for his future paid work, Ben, an undergraduate student of Music, maintained a positive attitude and tried to challenge himself to take up some impossible tasks but not to give up. He said:

> I am beginning to try different elements in music and have the courage to try something that most people think is impossible to do, and I think I would not give up easily.

Keeping a positive attitude and not giving up is a vital virtue in life. Some students did show clear visions and personal goals. Bridget, an undergraduate student of Translation doing a minor in Japanese Studies, is a typical example.

> I have had more opportunities to communicate with others during my studies in Translation. I think I can achieve my personal goals.

If a student has clear personal goals and vision, it is likely that s/he would have a greater chance of success in life. In the samples, 16 out of 57 students (28%) regarded self-directed skills as an actual learning outcome.

**Accomplishment**

When talking about learning outcomes, it is easy to link up with issues about academic achievement, recognition or personal satisfaction. In a similar way some students referred to their successes when a question about learning outcomes was asked. Tommy, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, said:

> I am satisfied with good performance on my project, particularly about the research process and presentation experience.

Good performance is often seen as an important learning element in Chinese culture. Ben, an undergraduate student of Music, was proud of his own performance and he said:

> I enjoy my performances and like sharing music with others. It is amazing that I can present a piece of pop music using a traditional instrument.

While some students enjoyed their personal performances and were satisfied with their own learning experience, some used high marks or outstanding performance to reflect their personal success. Jack, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts taking an undergraduate minor in Studio Arts, said:
I got opportunities to join competitions and exhibitions. I won recognition and awards through my artworks. My examination results always reflect my success.

When talking about learning outcomes, some students sometimes referred to their academic successes, professional recognition or awards. In the samples, 12 out of 57 students (21%) regarded ‘accomplishment’ as an actual learning outcome.

**Social responsibility**

Social responsibility is an ethical and ideological concept. It may be viewed as the degree of contribution made by individuals to society and how individuals uphold positive values in society. While talking about social responsibility, Emma, an undergraduate student of English, said:

> I would contribute to society by doing social service.

Like Emma, Karen, an undergraduate student taking a major in Linguistics with a minor in German and Gender Studies, was also an active person involved in society. She said:

> The Humanities courses have motivated me to make a contribution to society and to some degree I will help to alleviate social problems.

While some students prepared themselves to make a contribution in society through active participation or involvement, James, a postgraduate student of Religious Studies, put emphasis on equal opportunities and ways of developing a caring and just system. He said:

> I learnt sympathy for all religions. I do not have any prejudices towards them. I have an ability to understand different cultures and am sympathetic to problems. For example, I think I have a fair view when judging the violent incidents happening in the Islamic community.

Possessing a fair view is important in humanities because it helps build a fair culture in society. While James tried to develop his character of social justice, others might think of participating in society in a practical way – for example, serving or volunteering in relevant services. Thus, university students seem to have a certain responsibility in society. In the samples, 8 out of 57 students (14%) viewed social responsibility as an actual learning outcome.

This section has addressed 16 broad categories of learning outcomes that students of humanities experienced. They represent a wide range of experience and different students have different interests. The next section will analyse the students’ replies to the main research questions asked. By looking at their direct responses, actual learning outcomes of students in relation to university graduates, humanities graduates, and major fields of study are highlighted.

**Actual learning outcomes for university graduates, humanities graduates, and by major subjects of study**

**Actual learning outcomes for university graduates**

University students gained many valuable experiences during their study. When they were asked about what they had achieved during the course of their study, they often shared a lot of
Samuel, an undergraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology doing a minor in History, is an example. He shared a wide range of learning outcomes he had achieved. He said:

Because all my writing is in Chinese, I have improved my Chinese a lot. It is not enough because there is still room for improvement. I have gained experience in dealing with emergency problems and organizational skills. Another thing I learnt is about communication skills, e.g. to be tolerant, accommodating and considerate. I have had exposure to a lot of things. Though it is not obvious, I have widened my views. I have learnt to express myself to different types of people. My personality has changed, though it may not be obvious. I believe that everyone will undergo some changes during these years.

Samuel had improved a number of things during his university education. While Chinese language writing, communications skills, organizational ability and problem-solving skills may be viewed as technical and professional, patience, considerateness and personality changes tend to be internal and personal. There is no doubt that university education offers different kinds of training and valuable experience to a great deal of students. Like Samuel, Ruth, an undergraduate student of Religious Studies taking a minor in Philosophy, learnt a lot of organizational skills and showed significant improvements during her years of university education. She said:

Open-mindedness and critical thinking are two important things. After studying at university, we should have a deep understanding or thinking on the things around us. We should have a proper attitude in discussions. When you think you are right, you need to say so and insist. During three years of university education, I learnt organizational skills by leading activities. I think my language ability is not as good as before. This may be caused by the religious studies I am doing. But I have improved my communication skills and know how to present myself clearly.

Ruth learnt a wide range of virtues and professional skills, such as open-mindedness, critical thinking, communication skills, language ability, careful consideration of work and presentation with confidence. Taking an undergraduate major in Music, Ben described how he developed a lot of interest in contemporary music and showed his enjoyment in music. He said:

My experience [of learning music] has increased. In the past, I would not look at music-related matters, and refused to listen to fashionable music. Now, I accept all areas of music education and force myself to develop a general understanding of all types of music. This has an impact on my personal values. I remember that when I first went to university, I was a bit narrow-minded. Although I play western music, there was something in western music I did not like, types of music such as contemporary music. But during my learning at the university, I began to develop an interest. This has had an impact on me and I have begun to like something that I did not like, because my boundaries have expanded.

From the above conversation, we can see that Ben had been fully involved in music and exposed to a rich musical environment. He thought that he had learnt a lot during his
university education and there has been a great impact on his personal values system. University education indeed means a lot to many students. Sarah, an undergraduate student of Fine Arts, said:

The most important thing I have learnt is to organize and handle information. This is a recent valuable experience that equips me to make decisions, and that is very important to me. Although there are things that are impossible to do, I would insist and would not give up. I would try to find a solution for impossible situations. I learnt Chinese and western art and history. I learnt to apply and combine different techniques and concepts from Chinese and Western painting, and to create artwork by linking both cultural elements. I can apply what I learnt from Chinese and western painting to modern ink painting. Also, I learnt communication skills, because we needed to criticize other paintings. Sometimes if you are too straightforward, you may hurt others. But if you do not say it directly, the person may not make any improvement. In the fine arts major, I learnt to appreciate and respect other works. Before I studied fine arts, I didn’t know that there were so many Chinese artworks that are worthy of appreciation. This is what I did not learn from secondary education. After I had studied fine art, I found that there are many types of art, such as painting, utensils, jade articles, calligraphy and ceramics. These things increased my curiosity and imagination.

Like her peers in other disciplines, Sarah had a wide range of interests during her university years. Besides generic skills, such as organizational skills, communications skills and patience, she particularly valued her learning experience in arts. That developed her curiosity, passion and creativity. She also learnt to appreciate and respect others. Indeed their university years offered a very rich memory to students and many students enjoyed a very wide range of learning activities and experience.

**Actual learning outcomes for humanities graduates**

Different students had different experiences when the question on achievement in humanities was asked. This section outlines actual learning outcomes in the case of humanities graduates based on some typical student responses. Susan, a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies, said:

I think my experience has increased. During my undergraduate studies, I read a lot of novels that were about human nature. For example, in English literature, Shakespeare wrote “to be or not to be” in Hamlet. This is not simply a drama, but reflects a lot of human nature and conflicts. For knowledge, I won’t memorize it intentionally; in fact, I learnt the lines rather unconsciously. I have improved my English. In the past, I had no critical thinking. I tended to obey and follow others because I didn’t like to think. Now I know how to criticize by using logic, and I care about social issues.

Humanities education helps us broaden our horizons and develop our full potential. Susan read and learnt many things, particularly about the understanding of human nature through English literature. Her critical-thinking skills have also improved during her university education. In the past, she was a person who did not want to think, but now, as she said, she knows how to criticize and consider things around her. Such a change is meaningful because she learnt not only from the classical literature, she has applied learning to life and made a
Ruth, an undergraduate student of Religious Studies doing a minor in Philosophy, is another person who had a great change in life when studying humanities. She said:

[In humanities, I have learnt] open-mindedness and critical thinking. They help me clarify my personal goals and values. I have a strong personality now and often insist on my own standpoints. I think this is good because I used to request nothing. Now I have learnt to give my own comments and opinions. I can easily notice the limitations of an issue rather than its strengths. I learnt critical thinking and am sensitive to possible failures. I have made improvements in my academic research skills, especially the techniques for conducting field trips. Before, when we went on a field trip, the teacher used to guide us. Now I know how to do my own research and interviews, and know how to collect information.

Like Susan, Ruth has made improvements in developing critical-thinking skills and she has also developed clear life values and targets. This is a clear difference in her life because she now has her own opinions and can stick to things and work for them. She also has a sense of sensitivity and is capable of conducting research. Clearly she has become a different person and now achieves significantly and is developing confidence in her work. These situations are clearly different from the time before she took a major in humanities.

Sarah was an undergraduate student of Fine Arts. When she responded to the question about what she had achieved in humanities, she said:

I have improved my language ability in both Chinese and English. My personality has changed and I can calmly handle various issues now. I think I made improvements after I changed to do fine art history in the second year. I became more mature. For example, I think more. Before I start a discussion with others, I will do some research first by checking out evidence and information. I think we will succeed if we persuade others to use reasoning and back it up with evidence. I realized that we can’t just study fine arts. We need to know more about subjects in general education, e.g. philosophy, culture and literature. Actually, besides humanities, we need to know some science subjects. In my first year, I took a general education course from a science discipline, which was about marine life. From this course, I discovered the beauty of coral. Because of this, I painted coral in my later study. I realized that besides humanities, I need to learn from other disciplines too. I need to develop an interest for everything. Besides knowledge in humanities, we also need to know other things, such as science and social science.

Sarah mentioned a wide range of skills and areas in which she has learnt, such as acquiring bilingual language, a change of personality, how to prepare well for discussion, ways of persuading people and integrating different academic disciplines. She highlighted general education as a way to integrate the main knowledge of different disciplines. Learning outcomes thus link up with disciplines such as arts, science and various philosophical thoughts. Sarah enjoyed her learning process and acquired a profound interest and curiosity in such an integrated discipline.
Students of humanities often learn a wide range of subjects. Sharon, an undergraduate student of Translation, said:

Apart from my own major, I studied other disciplinary courses that inspired me. For example, I had never thought that studying films could become a course; it is one which interests me a lot. In fact, films are complicated because the images are closely related to society. We can study this subject in great depth, no matter whether at philosophical or cultural levels. At this age, you do not have to do much travelling, and you can see things from different perspectives.

Apart from Translation, Sharon studied other disciplines and she was interested in doing research into films. She thought that learning was no longer limited to a university setting and that university is a place of exploring issues or knowledge from multiple perspectives. While Sharon saw things from a wide perspective, Emily, an undergraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature, put emphasis on the major subject she was studying, even when the question on humanities was asked. It is quite common for many students to respond in this way because students often have a strong identity with their major. Emily said:

Before I studied Chinese Literature as my major, I thought it was very romantic and that it would all be about appreciation and creative writing. However, after I had finished studying, I found that that is totally opposite to the reality. Not only does the course not require any romantic sense, it demands strong logical and analytical thinking. I think the course nurtured well my logical thinking because I did not have any ability in that area. When we wrote a thesis, we couldn’t just rely on feelings and do whatever we wanted. We had to support it with lots of evidence. This is a skill that I did not have, but I have learnt it recently.

Emily gave a typical answer in that she linked the question on humanities with the major subject of her study, namely Chinese Language. During her university years, she learnt to consider evidence and develop logical thinking. Studying Chinese Language covered a wide range of areas, including logical reasoning and classical Chinese literature. Emily’s views linked well with the question on major subjects. The following section will deal with actual learning outcomes in the major subject that the students in the sample undertook.

**Actual learning outcomes in fields of study**

While the previous section dealt with actual learning outcomes in humanities, this section outlines typical student experience in the major subject they studied. Charlotte, an undergraduate student of Cultural Studies, shared her experience and reflected:

From cultural studies, I learnt to read things that should not be superficial: to look at things in depth and check out the structure behind. I learnt to read various texts in depth, to analyse the structures of texts or phenomena, and to view things from a variety of perspectives. What I mean by reading in depth is to learn to ask questions and not stop at one answer, and to express findings in creative ways.

Charlotte learnt to deal with contents and meanings behind them. She tried to ask the right questions and to make good use of investigation techniques. Charlotte wanted to develop herself as a logical and reasonable person. She was interested in exploring things from different perspectives and kept nurturing her creativity. There is no doubt that logical
reasoning, good organization and seeing things from multiple perspectives can help maintain an appropriate way of assessing learning experience, and they are crucial in daily life. Apart from such a methodological approach, Samuel, an undergraduate student of Religious Studies and Theology doing a minor in History, tended to link the actual learning outcomes with his philosophical thought. He said:

After studying theology, my experience tells me that Christianity is true. Other religions may not be wrong, but they are not true. This is the result of my studying. Other things may not be wrong, but you are the one who is right. Only the Holy God is true and others are untrue. This is what theology taught me. My spiritual character has improved. I have become more extroverted, as we had to conduct interviews during field trips. Communication skills were needed. In knowledge, you can attain things such as knowledge of the bible, church history or ethics. Since I have taken some courses from religious studies, I have gained knowledge about other religions and the traditional culture of China, such as Taoism worship and funeral customs. I have also gained knowledge about different cultures.

Samuel enjoyed his spiritual growth and tried to have an open mind on different religions. He learnt more religious knowledge, and traditions in different forms of religion. He has also committed to a Christian faith and has gradually become an extroverted person. The learning experience of Samuel did not restrict his access to academic knowledge. His spiritual life and academic professional skills seem to be quite balanced as he has learnt to develop better communication skills and accept other people’s points of view. From a different discipline, Susan is a postgraduate student of Cultural Studies. She focused on research skills. She said:

In the past, I spoke nonsense things, but now I have changed and become logical. I know how to do research through the internet, to find information and answers. This is self-learning. Like the work I am doing now, there is a lot of information. But information is not enough. I know how to collect more and select the right information to use. I think it is very important to learn how to find information and to do a piece of research.

From a lack of understanding to becoming knowledgeable, Susan did well on developing her research skills. She is now capable of searching for information from a lot of materials and formulating ideas when resources are limited. While Susan learnt to do a good piece of research, May, an undergraduate student of Translation doing a minor in French and Japanese, highlighted her experience in language and culture. She described:

Apart from two foreign languages, I learnt the cultures behind them. Because when you learn a language, you learn its culture too. I know more about Japanese and French cultures and I am aware of other cultures too. Because I have two more languages, I know more friends from other countries. Before I studied at university, I knew only Hong Kong people. I am interested in culture and I want to know more about cultures and thoughts from other countries.

May, a student of translation, was not only interested in learning languages. She was fond of cultures. She recognized that learning about a culture would have an impact on language learning and eventually would lead to a better understanding of the people. Through learning a language, May motivated herself to study cultures although translation may predominantly
be of practical use and a skilful orientation.

Like May, Sharon, another undergraduate student of Translation, acknowledged that her learning experience grew in a better way. She reflected:

> My understanding of the subject was superficial. I thought that an excellent interpreter should know a lot of languages, and be able to quickly translate languages. In fact, a lot of things were unexpected. My knowledge has now broadened.

Responding in the interviews, many students said that they had learnt a lot of things. This is a common experience and May was an example. When students talked about their major field of study, they often showed enthusiasm as well as a very strong identity with their subject. They often voiced a certain level of deep learning they had achieved. Emily, like many others, listed a number of achievements in her major. She said:

> Generally speaking I learnt to understand teacher requirements. I learnt to cooperate with others through tutorials. We have to face people with different personalities during tutorials. Some people are lazy while some are hard-working but demanding. We have to deal with these types of people. In life, a lot of people think that students of Chinese Language and Literature have a narrow career path and an old style of thinking. We have to learn to live with these opinions and learn to have EQ and confidence. Otherwise someone will put you down. I have learnt to apply theories in daily life – for example, the *Universal Awareness* that I learnt from the course. Chinese poetry of the Song Dynasty (宋詞), was not only written for the people at the time; as people after that time we can understand their feelings. Even for people elsewhere, once we understand the texts, we then develop passion and feeling.

Indeed there were a lot of things that Emily has learnt. Her learning experience was not restricted to the Chinese language. In terms of aspects of generic learning, she learnt to be sensitive to teacher requirements, co-operative with others, patient and confident in her career in Chinese study, as well as trying to apply historical facts in a practical or meaningful way.

Overall, the participating students gained a wide range of learning experience. Their responses on actual learning outcomes relating to their major vary, depending on their individual experience and the characteristics of disciplines; e.g. a language student may emphasize language ability. However, most students are likely to have achieved a very wide range of learning experience. While some learning outcomes seem to be transferable, others may be inter-related. In this chapter, 16 categories of actual learning outcomes have been identified based on the qualitative analysis of the data. Such student-centred analysis provides a new framework and perspective for understanding outcomes-based education in higher education, in particular for the possible planning for students of humanities at university level.
Chapter 7: Learning outcomes and assessment – Examples from humanities

In order to clarify what students were gaining from their studies, those humanities students who participated in the research interview were invited to provide at least one assignment that best represented their attainments during their studies. Seventy pieces of student work were subsequently collected in the exercise, including essays, poems, calligraphy, photographs and artwork. Different languages and different media were included in the assessment collection, and this helps illustrate student descriptions of qualities by the examples shown. The collection of study work is not necessarily meant to be representative, though it is likely that a piece of work with a high grade was normally chosen. In the student work, attention has been given to the indicators that reflect the foundations for a whole raft of learning outcomes in humanities.

Based on the 16 learning outcomes categories suggested in an earlier chapter, the collected assessment data was classified. In order to illustrate the learning outcomes in greater depth, two assignments for each category were selected, with the exception of Personality and Accomplishment categories, which provided only one example due to a lack of relevant cases. This means that there are 30 assignments in total in the analysis. Although the examples quoted may relate to a variety of learning outcomes, one type of learning outcome for each assignment will be selected for the purpose of illustration. Based on these assignments, the following section will describe how they relate to a specified type of learning outcome.

The examples

Knowledge
Knowledge is a very general term that may mean facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education (Soanes & Stevenson, 2005). Without a doubt almost all submitted assignments to a certain degree relate to a kind of specific subject knowledge or a kind of generic knowledge that can cover many different disciplinary areas.

In order to reflect knowledge as a part of learning outcomes, the first selected assignment was about Chinese traditional eremitism that was presented by Mary who studied for her BA in Fine Arts. Her submitted work was a final year dissertation entitled A Study of Wu Zhen’s Fisherman Painting (吳鎮漁父圖研究).

Wu Zhen was a famous Chinese artist of the Yuen Dynasty (1280–1345). Mary described Wu Zhen’s main thoughts and demonstrated a good understanding of his work. Mary illustrated the historical background, personal biography, culture and politics well and highlighted the underlying meaning of his artwork. Focusing on Chinese life as a hermit and showing an example of Wu Zhen who lived in seclusion, Mary referred to the artwork of Fisherman as reflecting life as a hermit and the Chinese traditional ideology. The dissertation said:

Wu Zhen, as a hermit, expressed his feelings by his creative art painting, the Fisherman… Through creative thinking, Wu Zhen’s artwork illustrates the

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2 All Chinese names used in the paper follow the Chinese naming system whereby a surname is located before any given names. In this case, Wu is a family name.
meaning of eremitic and reflects a deeper level of eremitism.

The most valuable aspect of the fisherman painting of Wu Zhen is the coordination of poems and painting that leads to harmony and complementary effects and which also reflects the spirit and ideology of hermits …

Figure 7 shows the artistic drawing of Fisherman made by Wu Zhen. The picture seems to tell a story based on the idea that some Chinese preferred to be hermits in the old days. Using a Chinese paint brushing technique, the painting symbolizes Chinese ideology at a particular time and contributes to the understanding of eremitism.

Figure 7: Fisherman

Source: Wu Zhen (1350)

The second selected assignment that demonstrates knowledge was written by Ian, a postgraduate student of history. His assignment was called The Law in the Han Dynasty and the Ethics of Law Enforcement (論漢代之法與執法之倫理因素). Through a review of literature and an analysis of a few classic texts, the assignment looks at the practice of law in the Han Dynasty and deals with the formation of law at that time. The assignment described it as follows:

From an analysis of the excavated literature, at the beginning of the Han dynasty the judge employed a pragmatic attitude when facing suspects. They used rational analysis and an attitude of protecting ethics. … They would consider the process of enforcement and how it was actually used.

Knowledge is a key learning outcome and the artwork of Fisherman and the law assignment both serve as examples to illustrate such a category. These works indicate that, without a doubt, knowledge can encompass a wide range of contexts, and can cover various disciplines.

**Rational thinking**
Rational thinking is about logical reasoning and analytical skills. The first selected assignment for demonstrating rational thinking was by Ruth, an undergraduate student of
religious studies. Her work was entitled From Religious Pluralism to Monism and the Loss of Religion (從宗教多元論至宗教一元論、宗教之失去). Dealing with the possibility of combining all religions into one, the assignment argues that this approach has a lot of disadvantages and the idea is questionable. The assignment affirms that religious people value differences and they do not want to combine all religions into a single format. As Ruth wrote:

Hick’s religious pluralism would not only lead to one style of religion, but also this type would diminish its original religious character. This would restrict the concepts of religion, salvation and transcendence (ultimate realities) and place them in a material world. The one-religion format would then lead to a loss of divinity and even to a loss of its own value.

The paper argues that Hick’s religious pluralism has a lot of limitations and is not an all-round concept.

The second piece of work selected was by Samuel, a student of theology whose work also used rational thinking skills. His work was entitled A comparison of revelation and Chinese tradition (若望《默示錄》與中國傳統的比較), with the purpose of comparing Heaven as described in the Bible and the heaven of the Chinese traditional view. Samuel wrote:

The views of heaven in revelation and in the Chinese view are different but there is a link between them. Most importantly, both encourage people to accumulate kindness and Heaven is the final destination. Therefore, Heaven actually is perfect and everlasting, and is a final destination for all. Through accumulation of kindness, we can then enter the world of Heaven. In different ages, societies, cultures and religious thoughts, the views of the Bible and Chinese traditions have been different.

The assignment tends to use rational thinking and logical reasoning to build up its arguments, although critics may argue that heaven is not a place which is only for kind people because of God’s grace.

**Society awareness**

Society awareness means student attentiveness to social affairs or cultural issues and many students were concerned with the needs of society. Edward, an undergraduate student of anthropology, wrote about protecting the nature of the environment in relation to tree conservation. His assignment was entitled Tree development will be restricted if the attitudes of government and citizens do not change (港官民心態不改，樹木成發展障礙). He wrote:

We should refer to the example of Victoria Harbour when looking at tree conservation. Since the enforcement of Harbour Protection Ordinance, Victoria Harbour has gained a certain degree of protection and avoided land reclamation. Tree conservation uses similar principles, just like for preserving antiques, monuments and Victoria Harbour. Thus, the setting up of relevant legislation and ordinances is urgent.

Edward believed that it is important to protect the environment and we should work more on developing legislation and ordinances.
Focusing on women’s rights in Hong Kong, the second selected example was produced by Alice, an undergraduate of translation. Linking women’s rights issues into the context of ancient China, Alice believed that even though there was only very little western influence, the feminism movement would still be possible in China. She explained as follows:

Some people may ask whether China would have a feminism movement if western ideas had not been introduced. My answer is positive. This is because Chinese women have been oppressed for a long time and the culture has gradually formed. Even though the development of a feminism movement was not adopted, people still understand that there are issues on women’s rights. Like the one in the late Qing dynasty, it is just a matter of time.

Alice was aware of the needs of society. Based on a review of the traditional women’s rights movement in China, she voiced some basic principles in order to promote gender equality and protect women’s rights in China.

Communication skills
Students learn communication skills in a variety of settings. Communication basically consists of verbal and nonverbal skills. Karen, an undergraduate student of linguistics, did an assignment to analyze a musical play, namely, *Credit for talking*. The story of the play was about three young women who had been friends since they were five years old. Accompanied by songs and music, the play took place in a restaurant and the women chatted the whole night. Karen wrote:

I focus on the usefulness of talk; especially for the reason that women’s talk is devalued in many cultures. Some women will talk for fun and solidarity … here it shows how dynamic and complex the talk of women can be. Theatre is more than entertainment. Social values are embedded but they are changeable.

Undoubtedly talking means a lot, not only for women, but for everybody. Communication is always a means of reflecting a wide range of contexts, including experience sharing and attitude development. In the context of learning, Karen values talking as a vital means of sharing social values. This indirectly supports the idea that communication is a key element of learning outcomes.

Another selected assignment was from Jack, a postgraduate student of fine arts, who created piece of artwork, namely, *Link and align*. The artwork shows a bird’s eye view of two roads that join together (Figure 8). The presented artwork symbolizes adventures and opportunities, as well as the current development of China. As Jack wrote:

The same thing happens in China, when it steps onto the international stage, evolves and develops gradually, filling with millions of hopes and possibilities ahead.

A picture sometimes speaks a thousand words. Jack’s artwork conveys a special meaning and his work indirectly reflects that though the message is important, the nonverbal visual image is also a good means of communication.
Figure 8: Link and align

Language ability
Many students agreed that gaining good ability in languages is important to them. In the interviews, as reported in an earlier chapter, many students expressed the opinion that it is important for them to learn three languages in Hong Kong: Cantonese, Putonghua and English. The following two examples, that serve to reflect students’ language ability as a key element of learning outcomes, are from May and Bridget, both of whom were undergraduate students of translation. Both translation works demonstrate a good level of competence, as quoted below:

Examples from ‘The surgeon’ 外科醫生, translated by May
After three and a half hours on the operating table, the patient was still alive and Robert Sandy had done everything he could to save his life. … A few days later, when the Prince was off the danger list, the Embassy tried once again to persuade him to make a change. They wanted him to be moved to a far more luxurious hospital that catered only for private patients, but the Prince would have none of it. ‘I’ll stay here,’ he said, ‘with the surgeon who saved my life.’ … Robert Sandy was touched by the confidence his patient was putting in him, and throughout the long weeks of recovery, he did his best to ensure that this confidence was not misplaced.

病人在手術臺上三個半小時後仍然生存，羅伯特竭盡所能保住他的性命。
…
幾天後，王子脫離危險期，大使館再次勸他換醫院，希望把他轉送去比較豪華舒適的私立醫院，但王子完全不肯。「我要留在這裡。」他說。「這裡有救我一命的醫生。」…
羅伯特受到病人對他的信心所感動，在病人康復的幾個月裡，羅伯特都全力以赴，以證明病人並沒有看錯人。

Examples from ‘The painted veil’, translated by Bridget
‘For God’s sake don’t do that,’ he whispered irritably. ‘If we’re in for it we’re in
for it. We shall just have to brazen it out.’ … She gave him the shadow of a smile. His rich, caressing voice reassured her and she took his hand and affectionately pressed it. He gave her a moment to collect herself. … She shook her head. A frown for an instant darkened his brow; he was growing impatient; he did not quite know what to do. Suddenly she clutched his hand more tightly.

「天哪，別這樣！」他煩躁的低聲說道：「是要面對的，我們就要面對。我們只要厚著臉皮去面對就好了。」……

她朝他微弱的笑了一下。他那深沉、親柔的聲音讓她放下了心。她握住他的手，深情的、緊緊的握著。他讓她冷靜一些時間，然後開腔了。……

她搖搖頭。他皺眉片刻，臉色沉了下來，越來越不耐煩；他也不大知道該怎樣做。她忽然地把他的手抓得更緊了。

Both selected translation texts reach a reasonable level of competence, covering style and accuracy. These reflect the kind of language ability that some students in Hong Kong should be able to develop.

**Personality traits**

Personality relates to how we behave, and what we feel and think. It shows our characters or qualities and indicates what type of person we are. Student work sometimes indirectly reflects their personality or style of approach. The following piece of artwork is an example.

An oil painting, entitled *Desire and liberate*, was painted by Tracy, a postgraduate student of Fine Arts (Figure 9). The painting is of the face of an old person who suffers from depression and the back of his head is on fire. The colours of the picture are mainly red, dark colours and black, that help us to imagine a feeling of cold and pain. The picture is called ‘*Desire and liberate*’. It shows how the old man tries to use a kind of enduring attitude to fight against his pressurized and painful life in order to liberate himself. The picture is chosen because it shows a strong and enduring desire which reflects a personality trait as well as Tracy’s belief.
Adaptability

Adaptability means willingness to change in order to suit different situations. It can also mean open-mindedness and an ability to adjust things to fit different conditions or purposes. A selected assignment entitled Why is she a witch? was written by Adam, an undergraduate student of English. His assignment is concerned with witches and gender. His assignment raised an interesting question – why evil witches are always in the form of demonised females. In reply to the question, Adam wrote:

> It has been suggested that there are different representations of the figure of a witch and they are to a certain degree related to the social construction of femininity or conventional gender roles in relation to power hierarchy. On the whole, gender theories can provide readers with a framework to investigate the figure of a witch presented in different stories, and thus let them be aware of the enculturation of social values with respect to gender.

Raising an open-minded question and providing a logical answer, Adam incorporated gender theories into his paper to support his views. Another piece of work relating to adaptability was from Hannah, entitled Celebrating the Festival of the Dead – Ocean Park Halloween bash. The assignment adopts an open-minded and creative approach to deal with Halloween. Specific attributes of Halloween in Hong Kong have also been covered. As the essay said:

> Why do people pay to suffer? The phenomenon of an increasing number of people joining the event proves the intimate relationship between fear and fun. … Halloween is scary but it is nothing compared with what one witnesses in how the mainstream ideologies eliminate its core value and give it different voices, accommodating the festival of the dead for their own interests. After all, there may be the most horrible and violent scene for the whole Ocean Park Halloween Bash. … Halloween in Hong Kong is an old Western festival of the dead, or more exactly, a festival for cash and temporary fun.
Fear, fun and cash should be together in the festival of the dead, as pointed out by Hannah. Hannah developed her topic with an open-minded approach and attempted to link the three isolated things together.

People-oriented values
Some students pay attention to the welfare of people and care about the needs of others. Many student works reflect such a tendency. Alex, a postgraduate student of cultural studies, presented an essay entitled Lu Xun’s ‘Nora’ writing: Revisiting the gender role of ‘Shang Shi’ (魯迅的「娜拉」書寫: 重讀《傷逝》的性別角色). His writing is concerned with the needs of women at the time and he uses the character of Nora as a reflector. He wrote:

The Women in Lu Xun’s novels live in conflict between tradition and modernization but none of them stands firm in contemporary history as a winner. … In his time, history did not give opportunities to women for liberation. However, Lu’s writings are obviously more concerned with their self-revealing character, their future as well as the nation’s future. In his writing the images of women are a tool against hopelessness. … In the writings, from women writers, although the women described still chose a very depressing way, to a certain degree they achieve a breakthrough for protecting women but distance themselves from a male-dominated nationalistic context. This is something that a male writer, such as Lu Xun, cannot do.

Alex put the work of Lu Xun, a famous Chinese novel writer, into perspective and focused on the underlying cultural meaning of women’s struggles at the time. His work shows awareness of the needs of women and is sensitive to the ways of describing women’s liberation in a Chinese context.

The second piece of work selected was entitled Sick people (病者), written by Susan, a postgraduate student of cultural studies. Her work analyzed the roles of doctor and patient and voiced the disadvantages of patients. The assignment explained:

From the perspective of when a doctor becomes a symbol of authority in society, patients are then likely to have a strong sense of inferiority. While doctors gain a superior position, patients need to obey, as if they were servants. … Some diseases, such as cancers, are sometimes treated as evil and they often scare a great deal of people. This is unfair to sick people because such a labelling effect can destroy everyone living in the area.

Susan was aware of the labelling effect on sick people and tried to protect their interests. She called for attention to patients’ rights. Her work, like Alex’s work, is clearly of a person-orientated nature.

Process of learning
The process of learning here refers to learning behaviour such as active learning, self-managed learning and lifelong learning. The first selected example entitled Beauty and attractiveness (秀色可餐) is a theatre script, emphasizing women’s internal and external beauty. Part of the script reads:
Host: … Inner beauty is very important! Dressing-up may not entirely cover our body defects. In order to be perfect, we must completely change our body! Sugar (a dressing model of a woman) is an ideal example!

Host: Ladies and gentlemen, perfection is not a right only for Sugar. You can become like her; or even better than her! Failure is not everlasting. Let’s have courage and make your dreams come true! Sugar, it seems that you have a lot of competitors waiting for you!

The reason for selecting this example is about its learning style. The method of interactive approach provided students with a creative way to learn. The key message presented was through an interaction between the student and the dressing model. Using an exhibit with an interactive approach, the student tried to encourage others to dream and act in order to develop their physical and internal attractiveness. Through interaction with the model, the student learnt relevant communication and self-management skills in the process.

The second assignment selected was entitled Computer game centre (遊戲機中心). The assignment describes the development of a computer game centre in Hong Kong and points out that lifelong learning is a way for development. It pointed out a circumstance:

With the advent of a knowledge-based society Hong Kong needs life-long learning. Everyone is beginning to study more and more, getting a bachelor’s degree then a master’s degree. In order to add personal values, we should shop in the bookstore using our leisure time and find out what the best selling items are.

Lifelong learning is, without a doubt, important to everyone, including all young people. In the process of learning, we often need to use a variety of skills.

Professional/ life skills
It is common for university education to place great emphasis on students’ professional and life skills. The first selected example was from David and his team, who were postgraduate students of fine arts. They wrote a project report entitled aLife – Star. Web. Eternity. The business plan highlighted that:

The key to success of the business relies heavily on the choice of good timing, the right strategy and market segmentation and a good understanding of the market environment and competition. Hence aLife has got the following key success grounds:
1. Promising advancement of patent technology
2. Strong customer service support
3. Marketing know-how
4. Market factors

Writing a business plan is a practical exercise and it is common in the business world. To learn by modelling the business environment is no doubt an effective way of learning.

The second selected assignment was entitled The life of a guider: An ethnographic view of the ‘Whats, Why’s and Hows’ of a guider’s life, written by Carol, an undergraduate student of English. The assignment emphasizes personal responsibilities, commitments and virtues. The
Human virtues, such as responsibility, motivation, relationship building and time management, are all important and they are vital skills in life. The students’ pieces of work serve as examples that spell out the importance of professional and life skills in higher education.

**Research skills**

The development of research skills is significant in undergraduate and postgraduate education. The first selected example is from Jo, a undergraduate student of Anthropology who presented an assignment, namely, *From Korea to Hong Kong*. The study used interview and observation as its research methods. Jo wrote:

> Interviews are conducted with the residents. … Data gathered is mainly based on the interview with a couple. … Apart from interview, observation is another main method of the research.

Through an analysis of the data, Jo suggested that the traditions of Korea still have a great influence on Korean women. She explained that:

> The powerful gender ideology still prevails in Koreans’ minds. The continuing strength of the traditional definition of Korean women as wives and mothers or bearers of sons undermines attempts to redefine women as workers, leaders or educated individuals.

The second piece of selected work was from Anthony, an undergraduate student of English, who wrote a field report on sociolinguistics. Based on observations his report tends to be technical and statistical. As Anthony stated in the assignment, the purpose of the study was to:

> … find out how Hong Kong males and females use English and Cantonese swear words and taboo words differently, and to investigate how the use of expletives is related to language use, gender, class, age and politeness.

Through a study of eight cases, the study concluded that:

> The vulgarity and intensity of taboo words used varies according to gender, age and class. Men tend to swear more than women because they want to express masculinity and assertiveness. Older people, as well as the lower class, use swear words of greater intensity than younger ones.

Thus, both studies used various sorts of research skills although the nature and content of the two studies are very different. Without a doubt the gaining of the skills is important and
should be treated as a significant part of student learning.

Problem-solving
In life, there are many problems. At various stages of education, problem-solving is a vital skill that students need to learn and develop. The first selected example was from Joan, a postgraduate student of fine arts who wrote an essay entitled *The wedding culture of nude photography* (裸體婚紗攝影的文化解讀). The essay, employing a wide range of perspectives, including humanities, sociology and cultural studies, critically reviewed the nude photography of weddings. The essay reviewed nude photography at weddings and argued that:

> We know fairly well that the mysterious thoughts about the human body and eroticism have never disappeared. If this is the case, so-called globalization and liberation are platitudes and it is hard to imagine whether there is any genuine gender equality or humanistic concerns. Thus, the issues of how to move forward and how to fight these problems become urgent and important.

In the mind of many students, how to move forward is an important issue. While Joan was concerned with nude photography, Edward, an undergraduate student of anthropology, asked the question ‘what is justice?’ in his assignment. The assignment was entitled *Speaking out for the right to silence – Interview with the complainant for a quiet bus* (要為靜音而大聲掙取 - 訪問「靜音巴士」負責人). In replying to the question, Edward quoted what Jill, the interviewee, had said:

> Bus companies have asked passengers not to disturb others, but they have forced passengers to listen to advertisements using the excuse of providing entertainment and information. Increasing the fares is unfair because the public bus franchise does not cover this type of profit making …

> … Due to environmental limitations, many students of the Chinese University travel by the Kowloon–Canton Railway (KCR) every day to the university. But if they think that the TV broadcast in the train is too noisy, they can say so, and can even protest against the situation near the train station.

Many students have an interest in transforming the world and challenging situations of injustice. They try to find the right solutions for any problems that have arisen. Through an interview, Edward wanted to gather people in order to protect justice. He has a clear view of what the problems are and what he wants. Linking with the needs of society, Edward learned how to find way to solve the identified problems.

Interest
Students have a wide range of interests and they have many different academic tastes. Interests often link with motivation and deep learning. Jenny, a postgraduate student of Chinese Language and Literature, presented her assignment entitled *Eileen Cheng’s image of Hong Kong – Hong Kong images of Eileen Cheng* (張愛玲的香港形象 -香港的張愛玲形象). Through analyzing characters appearing in novels, the assignment deals with Eileen Cheng’s views on Hong Kong as well as Hong Kong’s view on Eileen Cheng’s literature. Jenny pointed out that:

> What many Hong Kong people miss is the ‘Old Shanghai’ that existed in the
1930s and 40s. Shanghai was a modern and noble city. It was in the front line and much ahead of Hong Kong. For example, if Shanghai was a rich beautiful lady, Hong Kong was just like a working class woman who chased after her. … In the 21st century, Hong Kong is no longer a working class woman. Hong Kong has been modernized. … It is a miracle that a city without its own identity can become a city like today.

Jenny’s work covered Hong Kong and Shanghai, and she emphasized that they have a very special relationship. Through analyzing the novel, Jenny uncovered the relationship that exists between Hong Kong and Shanghai and she was particularly interested in the formation of Hong Kong’s identity.

The second piece of relevant work was selected from Sharon, an undergraduate student of translation. Her work addressed the question of why foreign language is popular in Japan. Her assignment was entitled Why loanwords are popular – The overwhelming effects of globalization and foreign language in Japanese society and the media (「外來語」為何大行其道？從日本社會及傳媒看全球化下的外來語浮濫現象). She wrote:

For the Japanese, loanwords represent fashion. Japanese people and the media both love new things. Some sociologists believe that the extensive use of loanwords can imply Japanese feelings of inferiority towards their own language. This is a great concern of Japanese society. … With the advent of the 21st century, the development of globalization is fast. Government agents, sociologists and linguists must work hard in order to preserve the special features of our language and culture.

What Sharon is suggesting is about how to avoid the influences that foreign languages have on Japanese society. She was keen to raise the issue of protecting one’s own culture and promoting cultural and national identity. She thought that in order to preserve cultural values and characteristics, everyone should have a responsibility to tackle the problem.

**Self-direction**

Self-direction can be about a clear vision in life, an understanding of personal strengths and a willingness to take on new challenges. The first selected example was from Debbie, an undergraduate student of anthropology. Her essay was entitled Without Fan Palms in Kwai Shing (沒有葵樹的葵盛). Kwai Shing is a residential area which used to have a lot of palm trees but now there are no more in the area. When Debbie thought about her childhood, there were lots of good memories linked with Kwai Shing, like the hallways and climbing frames and all the beautiful moments she experienced there. She said:

Many people who came to Kwai Shing West Estate for the first time would say Kwai Shing was a maze. You could easily get lost when you first entered the estate. Linking every building, the hallways looked like some secret paths as described in Chinese Kung Fu novels. It was difficult to walk there and find the right way. But, when you observed them carefully, you could experience the loveliness of the buildings and could find enjoyment in the area.

In my heart, the climbing frames and the high metal slide are the parts that we cannot forget. They shared part of our growing up. They witnessed the moment
when we proudly climbed to the top and how we fell down onto the rough rocky ground. They went through their hardships but are still standing firm. They were fine for all those years, but when we grew up, we witnessed how they had been eliminated due to a change of time. What a pity now – we can just think of them on the old site.

Debbie knows herself well and has gone through many good times in Kwai Shing. The natural surroundings of Kwai Shing have now become just a part of her memory. Such thoughts always link to her youth as well as her understanding that things will eventually change. Her genuine and self-directed character motivates her to describe the events in detail, to a certain degree reflecting her maturity in life.

The second selected piece of writing was from Bridget, an undergraduate student of translation. Her work was entitled Quaint customs and manners of Japan (日本之奇風異俗). Her learning came from her desire; as she said: ‘I really want to translate something about Japan’. Approaching such a topic by steps, she described:

First, I began looking for books in the library based on this simple thought. … I took references from many Japanese dictionaries and encyclopaedias … and searched for information in a number of collections. In order to do a perfect translation, I repeatedly thought of the original meanings of the passages. … Although I had to think hard in the process, I learnt a lot.

Bridget was self-motivated and was keen to do her best because she repeatedly revised the texts that she translated. Her attitude is self-directed and hard working.

**Accomplishment**

Accomplishment here refers to new ways of thinking, new discoveries and personal satisfaction. The first selected example was from Teresa, an undergraduate student of English. Her work was called From old woman to new woman. The main theme of her work was to voice women’s social and cultural disadvantages. Based on case studies, she questioned the unjust situation and emphasized the importance of searching for their own identity as ‘new women’. She pointed out that:

Women are always the weaker in cultural construction. They face social and economic obstacles … Why should women be like this? There is still a long way for women to go to break masculine/ feminine hierarchical opposition, to find their new identity, be released from oppression, experience their life fully and become new women.

Teresa argued that women are as capable as men and they can choose to raise the spirit and fight for their own freedom. Such a new trend of thinking is different from the traditional view, which overemphasizes their obedient role in the Chinese family. Such a new way of thinking could be considered as adopting an innovative approach for the advancement of contemporary China.

**Social responsibility**

Social responsibility is about how individuals play their roles in society. It is about how to uphold justice and gain righteousness, and about how we pinpoint the needs of society and then respond with appropriate actions.
The first selected example was from Elizabeth, a student of cultural studies. She wrote a dissertation entitled *Revealing peace – The pros and cons of helping the poor and globalized capitalism* (和平的啟示 - 扶貧與全球資本主義正、反、合). Drawing on cultural and economic principles, Elizabeth wrote:

Following the trend of globalization, it seems that it is impossible to differ from capitalism and adopt a single method to alleviate poverty in real world practice. Nevertheless, whether using small credit loans or alternative currency to overcome poverty, a very important point is about diversity and flexibility in policy. Different countries should use a poverty alleviation method that matches their own culture. … The most important thing is that the bottom-up plan of a poverty alleviation plan is more effective than the top-down approach for solving poverty problems caused by cultural factors. This means that the unity of the working class people can deeply contribute to national development.

Distinguishing the differences between top-down and bottom-up approaches, Elizabeth used a bottom-up strategy to encourage unity and solidarity in working class people. She believed that such an approach would lead to a major change in life. This is not only about economic development, but also about human rights and the fundamental freedom that everyone should be entitled to.

Many students want to make a contribution to society and they often pinpoint social problems that affect society, and then make suggestions for improvements. Following this trend, Susan, a postgraduate student of cultural studies, wrote about *Women of Tin Shui Wai* (天水圍女人). Her assignment analyzed the social and economic disadvantages of the Tin Shui Wai community and in particular revealed the difficulties of the women living in the area. Susan wrote:

The people of Tin Shui Wai are mostly new immigrants from mainland China. Many came to have a family reunion or a meeting with their husbands but some did not get used to their life in Hong Kong. Due to the financial situation, many feel almost as if they are trapped in Tin Shui Wai every day and have a strong sense of isolation. Though frustrated, they receive no help from society. In fact, society and the entire government not only give no help to them, but they also locate them in Tin Shui Wai, where they are far away from the city. When they seek help, society turns them down and does nothing to help them. This makes them feel that they have been abandoned by society. This is not right and this is a case of discrimination.

Voicing the needs of Tin Shui Wai’s women, Susan was aware of the disadvantaged group in the community. She asked for help from the government and any agents concerned with the support of this disadvantaged group. Her work, together with Elizabeth’s, both serve as typical examples of upholding social responsibility as a significant part of student learning outcomes.

Table 10 shows details of the selected assignments, i.e. types of learning outcomes, titles of assignments, pseudonyms, programmes that students attended, and types of assignments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type of learning outcome</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Submitted by***</th>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Type of Assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>A Study of Wu Zhen’s Fisherman Painting* (吳鎮漁父圖研究)</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>PhD in Fine Arts</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>The Law in the Han Dynasty and the Ethics of Law Enforcement – the bamboo slips of Han Zhang, Jia Shan’s ‘Zou Yan Shu’ and ‘Two Years Law’* (論漢代之法與執法之倫理因素 - 以漢簡張家山〈奏讞書〉和〈二年律令〉為中心)</td>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>MA in History</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Society awareness</td>
<td>Tree Development will be Restricted if Attitudes of Government and Citizens do not Change* (港官民心態不改，樹木成發展障礙)</td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>BA in Anthropology</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Society awareness</td>
<td>Comparison of Women’s Rights between Ancient China and Hong Kong* (比較古代傳統中國及今日香港的情況: 女權)</td>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>BA in Translation</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Credit for Talking: Consolidation of Women’s Friendship through Talk – A Revisit of Three Postcards (三個女人唱出一個噓 – 張可堅 07, 創作空間)</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>BA in Linguistics and Modern Languages</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Link and Align (接軌，趕上)</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>MA in Fine Arts</td>
<td>Artwork</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Language ability</td>
<td>The Surgeon (外科醫生)</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>BA in Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Language ability</td>
<td>The Painted Veil</td>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>BA in Translation</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Personality traits</td>
<td>Desire and Liberate* (渴望, 釋放)</td>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>MA in Fine Arts</td>
<td>Artwork</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Why is She a Witch? – A Discussion of the Witch Figure in Relation to Gender</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>People-oriented values</td>
<td>Celebrating the Festival of the Dead – Ocean Park Halloween Bash</td>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>BA in Cultural Studies</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
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<td>14</td>
<td>People-oriented values</td>
<td>Lu Xun’s ‘Nora’ Writing: Revisiting the Gender Role in ‘Shang Shi’* (魯迅的「娜拉」書寫: 重讀〈傷逝〉的性別角色)</td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>MA in Cultural Studies</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>People-oriented values</td>
<td>Sick People (病者)</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>MA in Cultural Studies (Women’s Studies)</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
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<td>No.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Computer Game Centre* (遊戲機中心)</td>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>MA in Journalism (BA in Cultural Studies)</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Professional/life skills</td>
<td>'aLife’ – Star, Web, Eternity</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>MSc in Journalism (BA in Fine Arts)</td>
<td>Report</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>The Life of a Guider: an Ethnographic View of the ‘Whats, Whys and Hows’ of a Guider’s Life</td>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td>From Korea to Hong Kong</td>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>BA in Anthropology</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Sociolinguistics: a fieldwork report**</td>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>The Wedding Culture of Nude Photography* (裸體婚紗攝影的文化解讀)</td>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>MA in Fine Arts</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>Speaking Out for the Right to Silence – Interview with the complainant for a quiet bus* (要為靜音而大聲爭取 - 訪問「靜音巴士」負責人)</td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>BA in Anthropology</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Eileen Cheng’s Image of Hong Kong – Hong Kong Images of Eileen Cheng* (張愛玲的香港形象 - 香港的張愛玲形象)</td>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>MA in Chinese Language and Literature</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Self-direction</td>
<td>Without Fan Palms in Kwai Shing* (沒有葵樹的葵盛)</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>BA in Anthropology</td>
<td>Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>Quaint Customs and Manners of Japan* (日本之奇風異俗)</td>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>BA in Translation</td>
<td>Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>From Old Woman to New Woman</td>
<td>Teresa</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>Revealing Peace – The Pros and Cons of Helping the Poor and Globalized Capitalism* (和平的啟示? - 扶貧與全球資本主義正、反、合)</td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>BA in Cultural Studies</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>Women of Tin Shui Wai* (天水圍女人)</td>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>MA in Cultural Studies (Women’s Studies)</td>
<td>Thesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * A translation for a given Chinese title; ** A given title for the untitled work; *** Names provided are not real.
The above 30 student assignments serve as examples to illustrate learning experience in humanities and also try to justify the learning outcome categories as identified in the interviews. Each quoted example by no means applies to just one type of learning outcome because many relate to a variety of learning outcomes. The examples shown here however demonstrate the wide range of learning outcomes that humanities students engage in and experience.
Chapter 8: Implications and reflections

The focuses of this chapter are threefold. First, this chapter examines the construct validity of the learning outcomes presented and discusses its implications for general attributes expected of graduates or graduate standards. Secondly, this chapter will look at threshold standards and discuss their possible links with institutional missions and programme development. Thirdly, it will explore the issues of quality assurance and how learning outcomes can be used to contribute to the improvement of programme quality.

Construct validity

Useful performance indicators are those that are relevant, cost-effective, timely, reliable and valid – in terms of their capacity to inform strategic decision-making and resulting in improvements to desired outcomes (Rowe & Lievesley, 2002). Validity is an important aspect while assessing research. Based on different sources of data, i.e. interviews and students’ assignments, this study explored students’ perceptions of desired learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes, and student exemplars were used to demonstrate types of learning outcomes in humanities. Through grounded theory, this research has identified 16 sets of learning outcomes that are key components in humanities.

In order to examine the construct validity of these learning outcomes, a cross check with other outcomes-based models is performed. Table 11 shows the relationship between the 16 learning outcomes and other existing models, i.e. Alverno College (US), University of Macquarie (Australia), University of Sheffield (UK) and the Tuning Project of Europe.

Table 11: Learning outcomes and other existing models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student generated outcomes</th>
<th>Existing models reviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Personality traits</td>
<td>Alverno*, Macquarie, Tuning, Sheffield*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Language ability</td>
<td>Tuning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Knowledge</td>
<td>Macquarie*, Tuning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Rational thinking</td>
<td>Alverno*, Macquarie, Tuning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Adaptability</td>
<td>Tuning, Sheffield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Self-direction</td>
<td>Tuning*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Process of learning</td>
<td>Tuning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 People-oriented values</td>
<td>Alverno*, Tuning*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Research skills</td>
<td>Tuning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Problem-solving</td>
<td>Alverno, Macquarie, Tuning, Sheffield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Communication skills</td>
<td>Alverno, Macquarie, Tuning, Sheffield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Professional/ life skills</td>
<td>Alverno*, Macquarie*, Tuning, Sheffield*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Social responsibility</td>
<td>Alverno*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Society awareness</td>
<td>Tuning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These items appear in a slightly different form in that particular model

It can be seen in Table 11 that most categories of identified learning outcomes link well to some particular learning models, with the exception of Accomplishment and Interest. It is not surprising that Personality traits, Problem-solving, Communication skills and Professional/
Life skills are popular because they appear in all models. These outcomes no doubt are key attributes for graduates and are important for their learning.

Apart from comparing with other models of learning outcomes, the learning outcomes identified in the study can also be cross-checked with traditional virtues of Chinese culture, the Five Virtues. In terms of the cultural perspective, the 16 learning outcomes can be compared with Five Educational Virtues (五育) and Five Virtues of Humanity (Confucianism). The five educational virtues, i.e. ethics (德), the intellect (智), the physique (體), social skills (羣) and aesthetics (美), have been promoted in Hong Kong and China for a long time, and have been commonly used as general aims of education for decades. In Hong Kong, the Education Commission (1999a) indicated that they are key domains reflecting the overall aims of education that enable everyone to develop their potential.

The origin of the Five Virtues can be traced to the School Regulation of the Republic of China that promoted ethics, intellect and physique as aims of education in 1945. In 1979 all five virtues had been included in the Education Law in the Republic of China (Taiwan). Article 1 of Education Law stresses that the aims of education should balance the ethics, the intellect, the physique, social skills and aesthetics (Li, 2007). In Hong Kong the five virtues have been used as aims of education since 1999 (Education Commission, 1999a).

The five educational virtues described here are about aims of education as perceived in Chinese traditional culture. The virtues are concerned with educational policies and practice that are different from the five virtues expressed by Confucius which focus on how to become a gentleman. Once Confucius was asked by his disciple about what perfect virtues are. Confucius said:

‘Gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness. If you are grave, you will not be treated with disrespect. If you are generous, you will win all. If you are sincere, people will repose trust in you. If you are earnest, you will accomplish much. If you are kind, this will enable you to employ the services of others.’

(Analects of Confucius, Book XVII, Chapter VI; translated by Legge, n.d.)

The perfect virtues of Confucius mentioned are about the character of a perfect person who has the following five major cardinal human relationships, namely: gravity (恭), generosity of soul (寬), sincerity (信), earnestness (敏), and kindness (惠). The human philosophy of Confucius is concerned with love and how to build relationships with people. These five elements can be seen as a model of a perfect gentleman and are the core of Confucian teaching.

Confucius’s human philosophy has had a great impact on China. Based on his teaching, his followers highlighted the following five virtues of humanity. They are: benevolence (仁), righteousness (義), propriety (禮), wisdom (智), and trustworthiness (信). Benevolence can mean loving others, and particularly refers to harmonious relationships between people. Righteousness is about doing the right thing, especially when someone needs help and you offer your help. Propriety means good manners, politeness with correct behaviour and respect for others. Wisdom is about intellectual thinking and is a foundation of knowledge. Trustworthiness can mean honesty or trustfulness here. Based on the human philosophy of Confucius, these virtues have been values and moral standards of Chinese people since the
Confucian teaching and the five educational virtues have already had a huge impact on Chinese education. While Confucianism contributes to Chinese values, traditions and thoughts, the five educational virtues refer to the general aims of education. In addition to adopting the five educational virtues as the overall aims of education in Hong Kong, the Education Commission (1999b) laid down specific aims of tertiary education in the following terms. They are: knowledge and competency; leadership; intellectual capabilities; international outlook; positive attitudes; physical and cultural well-being. In order to establish a content validity in various domains, Table 12 shows the relationship between 16 identified learning outcomes, five Confucian virtues, and five educational virtues, as well as the specific aims of tertiary education.

Table 12: A comparison of 16 learning outcomes and five virtues (educational aims and Confucianism)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Five Confucian virtues</th>
<th>Five educational virtues**</th>
<th>Specific aims of tertiary education ***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Personality traits</td>
<td>Benevolence, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Intellectual capabilities, Positive attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Language ability</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Knowledge and competency, Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Knowledge</td>
<td>Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Ethics, Intellect, Physique, Social skills, Aesthetics</td>
<td>Knowledge and competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Rational thinking</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Intellectual capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Adaptability</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Intellectual capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Self-direction</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Intellectual capabilities, Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Process of learning</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Knowledge and competency, Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  People-oriented values</td>
<td>Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Positive attitudes, Cultural well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9  Research skills</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Intellectual capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Problem-solving</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Intellectual capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Communication skills</td>
<td>Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Intellect, Social skills</td>
<td>International outlook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Accomplishment</td>
<td>Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Intellect</td>
<td>Intellectual Capacities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Interest</td>
<td>Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Intellect, Physique, Aesthetics</td>
<td>Physical and cultural well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Professional/ life skills</td>
<td>Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Ethics, Intellect, Social skills</td>
<td>Knowledge and competency, Intellectual capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Social responsibility</td>
<td>Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Ethics, Social skills</td>
<td>Positive attitudes, Cultural well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Society awareness</td>
<td>Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Ethics, Social skills</td>
<td>Positive attitudes, Cultural well-being</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The five virtues of Confucianism are: benevolence (仁), righteousness (義), propriety (禮), wisdom (智), and
trustworthiness (信).

** The five virtues as aims of education are: ethics (德), the intellect (智), the physique (體), social skills (羣) and aesthetics (美).

*** The specific aims of tertiary education are adopted from the Education Commission (1999a). They have four aspects: knowledge and competency; leadership, intellectual capabilities and international outlook; positive attitudes; physical and cultural well-being.

It can be seen that the 16 learning outcomes to varying degrees link well with the five Confucian virtues and the five educational virtues, as well as the specific aims of tertiary education suggested by the Education Commission. This means that the 16 learning outcome categories identified are relevant and link closely to traditional Chinese values and traditional Chinese educational thoughts, as well as the specific aims of tertiary education.

Besides this, it can be seen in the table that for all learning outcomes appearing in various models, intellectual thinking or wisdom has the highest frequency counts; then ethics or benevolence, and then social skills or propriety follow. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that intellectual, moral and social development are the three core learning domains appearing in Chinese culture because many learning outcomes fall into these areas. On the other hand, physical and aesthetic domains receive comparatively little emphasis. Although the Chinese values always emphasize the balance of all aspects, i.e. the harmony among moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic domains, based on the analysis shown, Chinese culture tends to put emphasis more on intellect, moral and social developments, rather than physical and aesthetic developments.

The relationship shown may, to a certain extent, be treated as an indicator of construct validity because the identified 16 learning outcomes link closely with the traditional Chinese values or virtues. Though the linkage tends to be casual and unspecific, such a classification offers us a cultural and historical sense of linkage.

Apart from linking with traditional Chinese culture, the 16 learning outcomes can also link up with programmes in the humanities in order to check whether the designed programmes reflect specific kinds of learning outcomes. Table 13 is an example showing the relationship between 16 learning outcomes and four programmes.

Table 13: Learning outcomes and programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Chinese Language &amp; Literature</th>
<th>Cultural &amp; Religious Studies</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Fine Arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Personality traits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Language ability</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Knowledge</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Rational thinking</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Adaptability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Self-direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Process of learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 People-oriented values</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Research skills</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Problem-solving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Communication skills</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The metric shown indicates common characteristics and differences among programmes. It can be seen from the table that all four programmes have in common that they cover knowledge, communication skills and research skills as learning outcomes in their programmes. A thematic analysis suggests that while Cultural and Religious Studies deals with social responsibility and society awareness learning outcomes, Chinese and English relate to language ability, while Fine Arts is concerned with personality traits.

The identified learning outcome model of humanities may be applied at various levels: institutional, programme and module levels. It is expected that various institutions may have their own characteristics, background and mission, and therefore the selection of learning outcomes could be different. In addition, disciplinary territories also accentuate differences, and the resulting patterns shown in Table 13 reflect such differences.

Having considered the construct validity and cultural issues of learning outcomes, attention below is shifted to the practical aspect – the use of learning outcomes in tertiary education, in particular in relation to policy formation, competency standards, implementation guidelines and quality assurance.

**Policy and standards**

Tertiary education is a national treasure for all young generations. In Hong Kong, the competency standards for university students are situated in a broader policy context of educational reform, policy documents or reports delivered by the policy makers, such as the Education Bureau and University Grants Committee, for their centralizing efforts to contribute to the sustainable development of higher education. The purposes and goals are diverse and the main ideology can be summarized as follows, based on the specific aims of tertiary education as outlined by the Education Commission (1999b).

- inculcating core Chinese traditional education values and humanistic virtues, and passing on cultural legacy;
- supporting all-round development of young people and promoting cultural diversity, for example, biliteracy and trilingualism;
- promoting critical and compassionate thinking, lifelong education, leadership skills and competency-based education;
- encouraging family involvement, community participation and global citizenship; and
- supporting economic development and growth and emphasizing sound and widespread prosperity.

These themes can be seen as ideology with respect to the overall aims of tertiary education in Hong Kong. In the current development, tertiary education tends to focus on the expansion of the higher-education system. Furthermore, it places great emphasis on the ways to maintain academic quality, and learning and teaching enhancement. An expansion of undergraduate
education brought fundamental changes in higher education from an elite system to a mass approach. In this context, the UGC put much emphasis on matters concerning quality assurance and cost-effectiveness strategies (French, 1995; Mok, 1999). The recent efforts, such as the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (TLQPRs), the promotion of an OBA, and the establishment of the Quality Assurance Council, can be seen as various initiatives contributing to the quality of learning experience at various higher-education institutions in Hong Kong.

In the climate of striving for quality and standards, there is no exception in the classification of the 16 learning outcomes identified. In principle, the 16 learning outcomes can not only be regrouped into a small number of learning domains, but they can also be interpreted according to three levels of competency standards: beginning, deepening and creating levels. Table 14 shows that the 16 learning outcomes are grouped into five domains, namely, knowledge, cognitive development, self-development, self in society and social interaction. In each domain there are three standard levels, i.e. beginning, deepening and creating levels.

Table 14: Learning outcomes and standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Beginning level</th>
<th>Deepening level</th>
<th>Creating level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Humanities literacy</td>
<td>Humanities deepening exploration</td>
<td>Humanities creative work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive development</td>
<td>Rational thinking</td>
<td>Basic understanding</td>
<td>Partial understanding</td>
<td>Full understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-development</td>
<td>Process of Learning</td>
<td>Awareness of identity</td>
<td>Achieving a sense of identity</td>
<td>Self-actualisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional/ life skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personality traits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self in society</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Basic understanding</td>
<td>Engaging and applying</td>
<td>Active outreach and participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People-oriented values</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Society awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>Language skills</td>
<td>Basic skills, little interaction</td>
<td>Intermediate skills, responsive interaction</td>
<td>Advanced skills, confident and engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on such a model of learning outcomes and standards, at the beginning level, students tend to achieve a kind of humanities literacy of knowledge. They have a basic understanding of cognitive skills. They are aware of their own identity and have some basic understanding of their own responsibilities in society. In addition, they grasp the basic skills of communication but may sometimes have little interaction with others. Unlike the beginning level, students at deepening level tend to employ an exploring attitude. They can construct an argument and reach an intermediate level of understanding. They have a sense of their own identity and are willing to engage in society. They are responsive and can participate in
various social groups. They can make use of what they learn and apply it in society. Students who reach the most advanced level are described as achieving at the level of creating, in which students are generally confident, creative and innovative. These students achieve a wide range of knowledge in humanities, together with substantial and significant depth. They fully achieve their own potential and they are satisfied with what they learn. They actively participate in society, are confident at using social skills, and they engage effectively with others.

Such a model is in line with the UK Open University (OU) undergraduate levels framework that consists of three expected levels, namely, levels one to three (Dillon, Reuben, Coats & Hodgkinson, 2005). In the OU framework, six key generic skills areas are outlined: improving own learning and performance; communication; information literacy; application of numbers; and working with others. While the OU framework links mainly with areas promoting generic skills, the findings of this study suggest that there are five main domains in humanities, i.e. knowledge, cognitive development, self-development, self in society and social interaction, and there are also different performance levels in humanities, namely, beginning, deepening and creating levels.

As mentioned before, the policy goal of the literacy approach in humanities is to prepare learners to be capable of taking up new challenges, particularly maintaining core Chinese traditional educational values and humanistic virtues, as well as engaging in a climate for all-round personal development. In the early stages of development, students’ competences are likely to be located at the beginning level, then step-by-step making progress and reaching deepening and creating levels (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2008). As competency levels can be improved by engaging in a learning process, Table 15 shows the relationship between identified domains, competency levels and curricular goals in greater detail.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Beginning level</th>
<th>Deepening level</th>
<th>Creating level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy and vision</td>
<td>The policy goals at this stage are to prepare learners who are capable of taking up and improving basic humanities literacy skills.</td>
<td>The policy goals at this stage are to increase the ability of the learners by applying the knowledge of various humanities disciplines to solve complex problems in the real world.</td>
<td>The policy goals at this stage are to increase productivity by supporting students who are continually engaged in, and benefit from, knowledge creation and innovation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Humanities literacy – students are aware of key concepts and theories and have a basic understanding of the processes.</td>
<td>Humanities deepening exploration – students have sound knowledge of key concepts and theories and have some understanding of one or more disciplines.</td>
<td>Humanities creative work – students have a systematic and critical understanding of theories and have a critical understanding and a creative mind or innovative thinking in a specific area of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive development</td>
<td>Basic understanding – students can define and use basic concepts or key terms and present an argument in a suitable manner.</td>
<td>Partial understanding – students can construct an argument in humanities with appropriate use of evidence, concepts and theories, and can evaluate some social phenomena.</td>
<td>Full understanding – students can construct a sophisticated argument in humanities and can critically evaluate different theoretical approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-development</td>
<td>Awareness of identity – study path links with initial understanding of the self.</td>
<td>Achieving a sense of identity – study path links with some understanding of the self and some identity achievement.</td>
<td>Self-actualisation – study path links with in-depth understanding of the self, and fully uses self identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self in society</td>
<td>Basic understanding – students develop basic and appropriate skills and have an awareness of major social issues in society.</td>
<td>Engaging and applying – students engage in society and participate in one or more major social issues in society.</td>
<td>Active outreach and participation – students actively participate in society and this has an impact on their learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>Basic skills, little interaction – students develop basic communication skills and appropriately apply them to subject and audience.</td>
<td>Intermediate skills, responsive interaction – students can communicate information and arguments effectively, and use appropriate styles and language skills.</td>
<td>Advanced skills, confident and engaging – students can communicate complex information and arguments and have a confident manner with subject and audience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15 does not attempt to outline all the details for a curriculum model, but it distinguishes the differences between the three levels identified. In terms of policy and vision, the curricular goals at beginning level are to deal with basic humanities literacy skills, while the curricular goals at deepening level are to solve complex problems, and the curricular goals at creating level are to produce knowledge creation and innovation.

Similarly, in each domain – knowledge, cognitive development, self-development, self in society and social interaction – the curricular goals can be somewhat different. Therefore, students at beginning level tend to be targeted to develop a basic understanding of humanities knowledge, to acquire a basic concept of cognitive development, and to gain an awareness of their personal identity. The curricular goals at beginning level also cover basic communication skills and basic understanding of the major social issues in society.

At a deepening level, the curriculum is targeted at solving complex problems in the real world and students are required to develop sound knowledge of key concepts and theories. Students are expected to construct arguments in humanities with appropriate use of evidence, to achieve a sense of personal identity, to participate in contributing to major issues in society as well as communicate effectively with the use of appropriate language skills.

At a creating level, the curriculum is aimed at developing a systematic and critical understanding of theories and building a creative mind. Students are expected to construct sophisticated arguments in humanities and have an in-depth understanding of the self. At this level, students can communicate complex information and arguments and can actively participate in society and make an impact by learning about themselves.

The levels adopted in Tables 14 and 15 are in line with the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982; Biggs 1999; Biggs 2003). The SOLO taxonomy stands for: Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes. The taxonomy describes levels of increasing complexity in a student’s understanding of a subject, through five stages: pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, rational and extended abstract (Figure 10).
In the pre-structural stage (missing the point) of SOLO taxonomy, students often miss the point and simply acquire bits of unconnected information, and have no organization. In the uni-structural stage (single point), students can state one point or have a simple connection of knowledge but the significance is not grasped. The multi-structural stage (multiple unrelated points) refers to a number of connections but the meta-connections between them and the significance for the whole are missed. The fourth stage is the rational level (logically related answer) in which students are able to appreciate the significance of the parts in relation to the whole. At extended abstract level (unanticipated extension), students can make connections not only within a particular area, but also beyond it, and they are able to make generalizations for a wide context. It is claimed that the SOLO taxonomy is applicable to any subject area, but not all students or teaching programmes can get through all five stages.

While the discussion above throws light on policy and standards of learning outcomes, it also highlights the possible use of SOLO taxonomy and a three-level system (beginning, deepening and creating) to distinguish learning outcomes for curriculum development. While combining the features of the two models, students at a low level of competence may be seen as performing at beginning, pre-structural and uni-structural stages. Students at a medium level can be considered as engaging in deepening and multi-structural stages, while students at a high level of competence may be described as operating at creating, rational and extended abstract stages.

It is believed that such a model can be further developed based on the needs of the community, the mission of institutions, and particular strengths shown in various academic developments. In addition, levels of relevance and significance are important elements in the developmental process. The SOLO taxonomy and the three-level system can both play a specific role in linking learning approaches and learning outcomes, curriculum design and assessment in many different subject areas (Watson, 2002).
It is not intended that the discussion here should outline the procedure for designing a humanities curriculum in detail, but it attempts to outline the key elements of the formation of a humanistic curriculum and figure out the key issues, such as, when preparing a curriculum in humanities, what policy and standards will be involved. This section having considered the issues involved in preparing an outcomes-based curriculum in humanities, the next section discusses issues concerning quality assurance.

Quality assurance

The roots of the current Hong Kong higher-education system lie in the legislation from various times when the government deliberately stimulated both demand and supply in higher education. Over the years, the eight higher-education institutions funded through the UGC have enjoyed a high degree of academic and institutional autonomy; they have self-accrediting status and well-established quality-assurance mechanisms (Hong Kong Yearbook, 2007). In 2007 the UGC set up a semi-autonomous Quality Assurance Council (QAC) under its aegis to provide third-party assurance of quality. The major issues of quality assurance using OBAs have at least the following three aspects. The discussion below is not limited to the humanities discipline; it also relates to all other subjects in higher education.

Issues of assuring student performance

The first set of issues relate to how the system in higher education can be held more accountable for assuring student performance and how student learning outcomes can be appropriately used at programme and institutional levels. It is generally accepted that one of the most important elements in higher education is student performance, especially the achievement of learning outcomes. In order to outline the profiles, the National Center for Public Policy and Education (2006) created Learning Index Scores for Measuring up 2006, gathering educational statistics from 50 states in the US. Apart from measuring abilities of the college-educated population and college and university contributions to educational capital, Measuring up deals with performance of college graduates. The exercise was intended to examine how well graduates perform and how competent they are in real-world problem-solving situations. The measures used in the project consisted of two sets of assessments, the Collegiate Learning Assessment for four-year students, and the ACT Work Keys assessment for two-year students. Besides this, the National Survey of Student Engagement also focuses on how students engage with higher education in the US and Canada.

The American tools tend to address more performance-based measures, such as problem-solving, writing and reading skills, and the Australian Graduate Skills Assessment and Course Experience Questionnaire focuses similarly on skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and written communication. In the UK, however, there is a lack of a centralizing system to measure student learning nationally. The UK Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education is used to check whether graduates have developed occupational competencies. Thus, in higher education, it seems that there is no shortage of tools for measuring student learning.

Nevertheless, there has been a long-standing debate on the issue of whether government agencies or higher-education institutions should be accountable for assuring performance, especially student learning outcomes. In Hong Kong, the exercises of the TLQPRs focus primarily on quality process standards and resources such as interaction among academic staff, leadership and continuous improvement. These exercises do not require evidence of
measuring student learning outcomes and the achievement that is consistent with institutional missions.

In compensation for such a shortcoming in the TLQPRs, the University Grants Committee (2004) published a report entitled *To make a difference, to move with the times*, which first specified the roles of each UGC-funded institution. The first quality audit by the QAC was in 2008 at CUHK. Unlike TLQPRs, the audits put great emphasis on the quality of student learning and quality enhancement (QAC, 2008). The audit manual spells out that

A QAC audit is not a review against a predefined set of standards. It does, however, oblige institutions to articulate and justify the standards they set for themselves, and demonstrate how the standards are achieved.

Apart from individual institution roles and standards, the audit also examines procedures and outcomes that are informed by external reference points. This means that codes of good practice, professional accreditation requirements, and employer expectations of graduates, are all covered. In the full list of external reference points given by the QAC, apart from local resources, such as the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework and Education Quality Work, reference points from Australian, UK, UNESCO/OECD and European Quality Assurance agencies have been suggested. This means that not only should the standards of learning outcomes be bound by the role or standard of individual institutions, but the standards set by institutions should be comparable with standards elsewhere, including legislative and professional requirements, codes of good practice, subject benchmarks, programme specifications, level descriptors, requirements of qualification frameworks and external reviews, etc.

The QAC has undoubtedly taken a major step to ensure quality by conducting audits and outlining standards and reference points for higher-education institutions in Hong Kong. Such a move aims to ensure institutions provide valid and reliable evidence of student learning outcomes. However, the QAC does not make explicit reference to performance outcomes or measures of institutional effectiveness in their quality standards, but only refer to individual institutional missions and a few external reference points as a kind of outcome-referencing measure. Such a method may create confusion and a lack of articulate and explicit domestic quality standard from which institutions may take reference.

In Hong Kong, the social issues and higher-education development may differ from other developed western systems. The adaption of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics as aims of tertiary education is a classic example. Although a centralized system or standard may not be necessary, measures of quality standards of institutions should be explicit, effective and in place. However, apparently there seems no agreement on how the Hong Kong standards were formed and whether such a reference together with information on institutional effectiveness is available to the general public. Thus, for accessing the evidence on student learning, systematic evidence apparently comes mainly from the QAC quality audit. Other efforts are very likely on an institutional basis and may be limited and inconsistent because different institutions may deal with a particular kind of issues that they perceive as important at a particular time. In brief, the following questions may be raised for assuring student performance:
Should the QAC be held accountable for assuring that institutions and programmes have clearly defined student learning outcomes and valid and reliable outcomes-based systems for providing effective learning?

What is the best approach and good practice for establishing quality standards and processes in the Hong Kong higher-education system?

**Issues of consistency and diversity**

As outlined earlier, the higher-education system in Hong Kong has a very decentralized structure that reflects institutional autonomy and diversity. To a certain degree this can be seen as a major strength of higher education in Hong Kong. Critics however may argue that such a structure may not be consistent with the growth standards and processes for quality assurance. Although the QAC in Hong Kong, like the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), has been responsible for ensuring quality in higher education, its efforts tend to be limited to the use of institutional visits and an audit manual that incorporates core themes of recognition standards. For this reason, the following questions may be raised:

- Are there ways to improve the standardization and consistency of quality-assurance standards apart from a quality audit? If so, what are they?

**Integrating learning outcomes into programmes**

When considering integrating learning outcomes into programmes, at least two perspectives are noticeable: the macro level – academic infrastructure in relation to quality and standards – and the micro level – the link of learning outcomes with teaching, learning and assessment.

First, considering learning outcomes from a macro perspective, different countries have their own academic infrastructure and quality-assurance system. In the UK, the academic infrastructure has four elements and all are inter-related (Universities UK, 2008). They are:

- The Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education;
- Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and for Scotland;
- Subject Benchmark Statements; and
- Programme Specifications.

The above elements can be seen as a checklist to ensure quality and standards of programmes offered in higher education. Although the elements in the academic infrastructure are described at national level, they relate to programme development, because the use of codes of practice, a qualifications framework, subject benchmarks and programme specifications has been promoted. In addition, the elements outlined provide an important reference to the development of quality in higher education and they link closely to European standards in which institutions are required to have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2007). Thus, in terms of developing a quality programme, the above elements of academic infrastructure should be carefully considered for incorporation into the policy statement or operational procedures. Apart from the *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area* (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2007), the following guidelines and policy statements can also be considered for establishing a quality-assurance mechanism in higher education: *Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education*.
Secondly, when considering learning outcomes at the micro level, the way of incorporating them is often seen as the heart of the curriculum (Watson, 2002). This means that the overall strategy of structuring learning outcomes is to link up with learning and teaching methods, assessment procedure and the feedback mechanism that targets whether the objectives of the course are matched. As set out in Chapter 3, OBE is a way of revealing what students achieve as a result of learning, because learning outcomes are definable, observable and measurable, so course providers can describe students’ learning outcomes in a logical and specific way that reflects their overall standard and individual performance. Therefore, the concept of using learning outcomes involves not only in the initial process of planning, but also the actual process of operation during teaching and learning, conducting assessment and establishing a feedback mechanism.

During the teaching and learning process, teachers often use a wide range of resources and methods to study a unit or topic, e.g. direct reading, references to lectures, and online resources, etc.; at the same time the teachers set up assessment criteria to evaluate student performance. The criteria set should refer to the level of achievement that is required for a student to pass the unit and should relate to the unit learning outcomes. The use of a mapping metric is a common way of describing such a relationship. Table 16 shows a unit mapping example of a programme of construction management, which shows how the learning outcomes relate to study units.

Table 16: Learning outcomes and study units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcomes relating to Communication</th>
<th>BSc (Hons) Construction Management unit titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidates are required to:</td>
<td>Dissertation, CN302, CN306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Prepare and present a written report</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Prepare and make an oral presentation</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Participate in a forum where their own view(s) are subjected to peer group criticism</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Engage in an activity requiring manipulation of numbers</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Prepare and make a presentation involving graphical description</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: Adopted from Watson (2002)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *could be covered by the unit

In the metric table, it can easily be seen whether or not a unit links with a particular type of learning outcome. Such a presentation is also often used by the programme administration to
prepare for a programme review in order to show the linkages between learning outcomes and programme design. Based on this quality-assurance model, the identification of learning outcomes becomes important because it closely relates to study units, and intimately to the overall programme content.

In our study, 16 categories of learning outcomes in humanities have been identified, based on the qualitative data. While some of these learning outcomes may be considered as generic learning outcomes in nature that may apply to all programmes, some seem to be more specific to humanities disciplines. Table 17 is a list of learning outcomes in humanities; it presents their definition, drawing from the results of the study.

Table 17: Categories of learning outcomes in humanities and their definition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>1. Knowledge</td>
<td>Deep comprehensive understanding in one’s own disciplines and the knowledge (e.g. history, cultures) associated with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive development</td>
<td>2. Rational thinking</td>
<td>Reasoning skills with critical, logical and analytical thinking; Ability to question effectively, make objective judgments and reflect upon material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Research skills</td>
<td>Ability to conduct research from gathering information from various sources, analyzing data and presenting data in meaningful ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Problem-solving</td>
<td>Ability to identify problems and determine the causes and effects; Ability to apply one’s knowledge in making decisions and handling tough situations in daily life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-development</td>
<td>5. Process of Learning</td>
<td>Self-directed learning, motivated active learning; Learning new materials on one’s own initiative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Self-direction</td>
<td>Good self-understanding of emotions, strengths and weaknesses; Good self-management and working towards a clear goal in life; Willing to face challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Professional/ life skills</td>
<td>Professional skills that benefits oneself in life/ career, e.g. good memory, being customer-oriented, time management, organization skills, able to work in a team, taking leadership roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Accomplishment</td>
<td>Sense of satisfaction in academic work, career or status; Having a successful feeling in achieving worthwhile tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Personality traits</td>
<td>Good character; a sense of well-being with a distinctive personality, such as sociable, warm-hearted, conscientious, assertive, emotionally stable and sensitive to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Adaptability</td>
<td>Receptive and optimistic towards changes and difficulties; Having an open mind for new learning, ideas and perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self in society</td>
<td>11. Interest</td>
<td>Increased attention and motivation to explore in related studies; Having positive emotions towards the subject learned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. People-oriented values</td>
<td>High self-esteem, self-worth and sense of identity; Processing moral beliefs and values for guidance in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Social responsibilities</td>
<td>Advocate and speak against social injustices; Understand the worldview and social issues in the society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14. Society awareness</td>
<td>Sensitive to social affairs and problems; Recognize social injustices and having compassion towards people in need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction</td>
<td>15. Language ability</td>
<td>Sophisticated language skills which allows one to be fully literate in the basic languages (e.g. English, Chinese) and to translate among those.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16. Communication</td>
<td>Effectively present and express one’s ideas and thoughts; Sensitive to non-verbal communication; Having persuasive interpersonal skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the categories in the list shown above cannot be treated as standardized for all cultures, the list covers a wide range of areas that may be treated as a summary of how the Hong Kong students in the samples reflected on the ways they wanted to learn and ways in which they have actually learnt. Such categories can no doubt throw light on characteristics of humanities students in a Hong Kong context and perhaps reflect a significant part of the overall Chinese culture. What the significance of these learning outcomes and domains has identified is that depending on the emphasis of programmes, humanities programme designers may select relevant learning outcomes to be included in their programmes as learning objectives. Furthermore, programme evaluators may examine whether such learning outcomes in humanities are being met or not. At developmental level, innovators may explore the use of such a set of learning outcomes with the SOLO taxonomy or the three levels of curricular standards described (beginning, deepening and creating) in order to initiate an innovative curriculum that reflects the humanities content covered and indicates the standards achieved. Any outcomes-based model in humanities should cover both these elements because one refers to the scope while the other is about student performance.

In brief, this chapter argues that an OBA in humanities in the Hong Kong context should be aware of the cultural dimensions in which traditional Chinese values should be highlighted, instead of only being based on the European or American models. In addition, the development should also take policy context and student performance standards into consideration because they are crucial elements in the formation of any OBA in higher education. Based on the results revealed, the study found that the five domains, i.e. knowledge, cognitive development, self-development, self in society and social interaction, and the identified 16 learning outcome categories, are most suitable to describe the OBA in humanities in the Hong Kong context. For this reason, the future development of any OBA could experiment with this approach and apply the framework to various programmes, so that the possible impact on programmes may be identified.
Chapter 9: Conclusion

Humanities cover a very wide range of academic disciplines and the learning outcomes of humanities students can be difficult to describe. As a pioneer in the field, this project attempts to identify domains or categories for indicating learning outcomes in humanities. In order to provide an adequate and detailed description, a qualitative method is adopted in the study. Drawing responses from students who studied at a university in Hong Kong, the study tries to establish construct validity for the identified domains. In addition, this study reviews the current move towards an OBA in higher education and highlights the key issues at international, national, institutional, and programme levels. Furthermore, the study distinguishes cultural differences and points out the key education values of Hong Kong education. Lastly but not least, the study covers the key issue of quality assurance and discusses the possible ways forward for the OBA in the context of Hong Kong higher education.

Contributions and limitations

The findings of the study have tried to make a contribution to the following three key areas. Firstly, this study identified five domains and 16 categories for describing learning outcomes in humanities. The five domains are: knowledge, cognitive development, self-development, self in society, and social interaction. Under each domain, there are specific indicators, i.e. cognitive development covers rational thinking, research skills and problem-solving; self-development includes process of learning, self-direction, life skills, accomplishment, personality traits and adaptability; self in society incorporates interest, people-oriented values, social responsibilities and society awareness; social interaction consists of language skills and communication skills. Based on a student-centred qualitative approach, the study presents a relevant and explicit framework for describing learning outcomes in humanities.

Secondly, the study provides a broad and in-depth overview of the current development of OBAs in higher education. It covers developmental issues and trends for an outcomes-based humanities curriculum. It also highlights the significance of external reference points, such as the UK subject benchmarks, level descriptors, programme specifications and National Qualifications Framework, as well as the European and UNESCO guidelines on quality assurance. Furthermore, the study describes a series of OBE levels: programme, institutional, national and international levels. At each level there are characteristics for outcomes-based development. For example, at programme level, one may look at the use of learning outcomes with an attempt to link them to learning and teaching, as well as assessment criteria. At institutional level, an explicit policy should be set up and good practice needs to be in place, in order to ensure that outcomes are being appropriately implemented or measured. At national level, the national movement and its ideology need to be carefully considered. For instance, in Hong Kong, a culture of quality assurance could be affected by the QAC. At an international level, one should be aware of the international standards of quality assurance, such as Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2007) and Guidelines on quality provision in cross-border higher education (UNESCO/OECD, 2005). By referring to the international standard, a local degree programme is then in a better position to compare itself with qualifications elsewhere and it may be possible to justify making a credit transfer, or to set up a kind of recognition system in which students may earn a qualification in one university and be recognized by another.
The third main area in which this study makes a contribution is concerned with humanities and culture. It is generally accepted that the five educational virtues, i.e. ethics (德), the intellect (智), the physique (體), social skills (羣) and aesthetics (美), have a significant impact on the aims of education for all sectors in Chinese culture. In Chapter 8 on ‘Implications and reflections’, the study links not only with the 16 learning-outcome categories with various existing outcomes-based models, but it also compares them with the five traditional virtues. It is believed that by linking the learning outcomes with the five virtues, a Chinese outcomes-based model can then be appropriately generated because the Chinese ideology has been carefully considered.

In sum, the value of this project lies in two major aspects. Internally, based on student responses and collected assessment data, the findings of the project throw light on credible domains and categories that reflect unique qualities of humanities students. Externally, it links up with major areas of quality assurance and highlights the main issues in relation to programme development and quality enhancement. Furthermore, it highlights the features in various education systems and particularly puts emphasis on the cultural values of the Hong Kong education system.

As the research uses mainly a qualitative method, it shows characteristics of expected and actual learning outcomes in a great detail. The learning outcomes described have helped to contribute to a model of humanities that incorporates standards and curricular goals. However, this project has the following limitations.

First, it is methodological. This study employed a qualitative methodology and this is best to reveal circumstances at a deep level – for example, to understand students’ feedback and their overall experience. However, this may be weak in establishing a generalisation for others to follow. Although the learning outcomes suggested in the study are based on empirical findings, the actual implementation of learning outcomes at programme level might have a different emphasis due to subject differences.

Secondly, it is about political climate and institutional management preferences. The use of a top-down policy or a bottom-up strategy does make a difference in the formation of an OBA. The Hong Kong system tends to adopt a bottom-up strategy because the UGC tends to encourage higher-education institutions to develop their own outcomes-based practice. The UK system however tends to use a top-down approach in which a qualifications framework, level descriptors, subject benchmarks and programme specifications, all lay down clear procedures or guidance for institutions to follow. Thus, Hong Kong institutions tend to have autonomy to develop their own styles of OBA monitoring systems, such as making special arrangements to cater for an institutional audit. However, there seems to be a lack of collaborative efforts across institutions to develop standards for all institutions, apart from referring to the QAC audit manual and letting institutions decide what should be offered.

Thirdly, it is about implementation. For implementing an OBA, critics may argue that the new form of system can create extra workload and there are problems of adaptation. They may prefer the traditional teacher-centred method and question whether the new system is useful or not. In response, using a research-based focus can become a solution in which evidence of improvement and progress in learning can be monitored systematically.

Fourthly, it is about disciplinary differences. As the study primarily focuses on the humanities
discipline, not science or social science, in order to explore disciplinary differences, further research into applied science, natural science and social science is likely to be needed.

The way forward

For the future development of the use of learning outcomes in the Hong Kong context, there are possible ways forward and the following two areas are worth noting.

Learning outcomes and quality assurance – the QAC has been responsible for the further development of quality-assurance work for the higher-education system in Hong Kong. Institution audit is a major strategy for monitoring and supporting quality in higher-education institutions. However, as the audit panel has only an advisory role with no commanding authority, its influencing role in the system may be limited. In addition, the memberships of the panel are often formed by invitations and tend to be on a one-off basis. Their main duty is to write an audit report but they are likely to have little long-term association with the audited institution. Therefore the audit exercise tends to deal with particular issues at a particular time but is likely to have no continuous involvement with the institution. For this reason, the role of the QAC and its quality-assurance strategy could be limited because the effect tends to be temporary and the changes are likely to rely on institutional efforts. As full autonomy has been given to individual institutions, institutions may even disagree with the recommendations made by the QAC panel.

For the benefit of continuous improvement, it seems that the working relationship between the QAC and individual institutions should be transparent and considered as long-term. The existing strategies tend to use a bottom-up approach, i.e. autonomy is given to faculty members to decide how to put OBA into practice and few guidelines are provided for institutions to follow. Therefore, constructing relevant policy and supporting it with effective practice or procedures, like the UK and European models of setting up quality-assurance mechanisms, such as subject benchmarks, level descriptors, programme specifications and a qualifications framework, should be carefully considered in order to provide quality standards or explicit guidelines.

Social and educational change – traditional educators may only be concerned with specific ways of setting up programmes, such as setting appropriate aims or assessment criteria, but the knowledge context and the social world change consistently and these can possibly affect educational planning and development. The recent education reform in Hong Kong adopting a 3+3+4 model is an example because it creates many opportunities to improve the current system. The 3+3+4 model means providing a separate three-year education service to junior secondary school students and to senior secondary school students, as well as offering a four-year programme to undergraduate students. The transition from a three-year undergraduate system to a four-year system will be problematic but it could be an enormously positive change in educational planning. Conferences, discussions and practical work have been carried out in order to face the challenges and make the changes. One example is the first 3+3+4 Symposium, named ‘Partnering for Excellence in Education’ held in 2008 where teachers, academics and policymakers voiced their concerns about facing the challenges (Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2008). In such a climate, opportunities for OBA development are enormous because the development of OBA can link with all education sectors. Obstacles may of course arise because a small number of traditional educators may prefer no change and want to avoid the OBA. Facing such a dilemma, an evidence-based approach should be gradually implemented in order to clarify the situation because a
research-and-development model can provide evidence for changes and subsequently monitor
the system.

In summary, the study throws light on the understanding of learning outcomes of humanities
students. This project has provided detailed descriptions of their learning outcomes in the
Hong Kong context. University students interviewed in the study generally confirmed that
learning outcomes in humanities come from knowledge, cognitive development, self-
development, self in society and social interaction. Results of the study suggest that clear
patterns appear in the content of desired learning outcomes and actual learning outcomes.
Students’ experiences in humanities and the domains revealed in the study both are worth
noting, because they reflect a possible way forward, especially for guiding us to build a
meaningful academic life for humanities students in the 21st century.
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Post-script: An additional publication was produced. It is:

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