THE EFFECTS OF THE WHOLE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE
ON GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY AND FURTHER STUDY

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Abstract: A study of recent graduates was conducted in which their present status, campus life experiences, perceptions of their own performances in work or study, and suggestions on improving the curriculum design were explored. Altogether, 315 completed questionnaires were received and the result confirmed that students' campus involvement positively but weakly correlated with their perceived performances in both working and studying environments after graduation. To enhance students' involvement in attaining whole educational experience, group-based programmes involving peer activities are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Pursuing vocational education represents an important aspect of the school-to-work transition. It provides pathways to occupations through training students to attain a basic requirement of a profession as well as the appropriate attitudes and work-place behaviour. However, employers nowadays also seek, in addition to academic qualifications, various personality qualities, attitudes and personal attributes which classroom learning alone might not be able to provide. These personal qualities cannot be taken for granted even in graduates with very good academic qualifications. The ability to communicate, together with good motivation, potential leadership qualities, breadth of outlook and a positive attitude to change, are obvious requirements alongside technical and specialist skills.

In recent years, tertiary institutions have given more attention to the out-of-class experiences of students. The Education Commission (1999) recently suggests that admission to university should consider students' all round performances, and not just their public examination results, whereas students in formal higher education institutions should enjoy a comprehensive and rich campus life. So there is a need to "provide a better physical and learning environment to attract able students and foster their total development"[1] through providing activities and programmes to enable students to gain a broader educational experience (Pomfret & Lai, 1999b). These activities can improve personal

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[1] Goal 3 of the seven main Goals outlined in the *Total Quality Improvement: A Quality Policy dedicated to all staff within the VTC* (*VTC Quality Policy*)

attributes, such as communication and interpersonal skills, social and aesthetic sensibilities, physical wellbeing and a better appreciation of society and the world at large.

In an ever more competitive world, these life skills are essential. The cornerstone of whole educational experience lies in the involvement of students in campus activities. However there appears to be little local information available on the relationship between wholehearted and effective extra-curricular activities participation and subsequent success in employment, further study and personal achievement. However, large numbers of studies of college undergraduates in the States (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) have shown clearly that the greater the student's degree of involvement, the greater the learning and personal development. Whereas recent research findings even support that many important learning outcomes are negatively affected by various forms of "noninvolvement" that either isolate the student from peers or physically remove the student from the campus, such as attending part-time or being employed full-time (Astin, 1999). In this paper, we intend to explore the general performances of graduates in work or in study in relation to their campus involvement when they were students and consider strategies to enhance students' involvement to attain the whole educational experience goal.

GRADUATES' SURVEY

In an attempt to gain more insight into this area, a survey on the "Graduates' Campus Involvement, Views on Course Improvement and General Performance in Work and Further Study" was conducted in March 2000 for all graduates of full-time Certificate and Diploma courses at the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (Morrison Hill) in Hong Kong. These students graduated in July 1999, after completing one- or two-year courses, and a questionnaire was sent to each graduate in March 2000. Altogether, 614 questionnaires were sent out and 315 completed returns were received through the mail. The response rate was 51.3 per cent, quite a reasonable rate for a mailed-returned survey. It is worth noting that out of all samples from those 19 classes of graduates (*N*=315) from five academic departments, 4 classes are one-year certificate course graduates (*n*=60). The present status of all the graduates, their campus life experiences, perceptions on their own performances in work or study, and suggestions on improving the curriculum design are explored.

Study Design

As a follow-up survey (see Pomfret & Lai, 1999a), part of this questionnaire is based on the "Supportive Educational Experiences Questionnaire" (SEEQ), with reference to the design of the "College Students' Experience Questionnaire" (CSEQ) of Robert Pace (1990) and the adapted version of the "University Student Experiences Questionnaire" (USEQ) of Richard Armour and Cheng Wai-ning in Hong Kong. Besides, the instruments used in two local surveys for employers of graduates (Li & Lee, 1998) and high school leavers (Cheung & Lewis, 1998) are also referenced. The self-administered close-ended mailed questionnaire for this study mainly consists of two sections. In the first section, respondents are asked to indicate their frequency in using various facilities and services in the campus by choosing along a four-point scale ranging from "very often" to "never", scoring from 4 to 1 respectively, based on their own subjective judgement instead of quantifying measures. Besides, graduates are asked to express their opinions on various suggestions for the improvement of IVE's diploma courses. The second section consists of questions relating to their personal perception of their own performance in various areas in their present working or studying environment. Respondents are asked to choose along a four-point scale for each area, according to their self-perceived performances, ranging from "excellent" to "unsatisfactory".

Respondents' Profile

Nearly two thirds (62.1%) of all respondents were male students. A significant proportion (48.0%) of the students were over 20 years old. Respondents were quite proportionately distributed with respect to the number of graduates from different departments, Commercial Studies being the highest (35.9%) and Construction (10.8%) being the lowest. Most respondents were having an overall academic award at the "pass" level (67.3%), followed by those obtaining "credit" (28.6%), a distribution quite able to reflect the overall status of graduates. Among all respondents, only 30.3% of them reflected that they had been involved in a part-time job during their final year of study, out of which 35.2% of them worked for 6 to 10 hours per week on average. About half of all respondents (49.4%) revealed that they were currently employed, 42.4% were pursuing further study, and the remaining 8.3% were not in employment or in further study as at the beginning of March 2000. Out of those who were employed, 64.7% of them reflected that their present job was relevant to their course of study, and 43.9% of them also were engaged in part-time study.

Findings

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they utilized campus facilities and services during their previous academic year. According to the graduates' self perception in utilization of facilities and services provided when they were in campus, they would rank themselves as "very often", "often", "occasionally" and "never", each with a score of 4, 3, 2 and 1. It is reflected that "using computers outside time-tabled lessons" (M=2.41, SD=.84) is the most common activity for students. In fact, computer utilization is believed to be mostly academically related. Consonant with the results of our previous study in April 1999, students' interest in extra-curricular activities is generally low, especially in areas such as attending courses on personal development topics (M=1.30, SD=.55) and participating in inter-departmental or inter-campus sports team (M=1.41, SD=.81). As nearly one third of our respondents engaged in part-time jobs during their studies, this might account for one of the reasons of low involvement.

Additionally, respondents were asked to express their personal views on various suggestions on the improvement of IVE's diploma courses. Out of all respondents, 85.3% of them "strongly agree" or "agree" for improvement of library facilities with more up-to-date publications and reference materials (M=3.35, SD=.76) and 82.8% of them on further modernization of campus recreational and teaching facilities (M=3.18, SD=.73). It should be noted that quite a significant proportion (77.3%) of our graduates "strongly agree" or "agree" to incorporate broader training, such as leadership skills, knowledge of world-wide issues, interviewing and presentation skills, problem-solving techniques, etc. into the curriculum (M=3.15, SD=.8). As the general involvement of students in campus activities is relatively low, it is not strange to note that only 39.3% of the respondents "strongly agree" or "agree" to the suggestion that students' participation in extra-curricular activities should form part of overall assessment (M=2.35, SD=1.00). Since, at the moment, students' active involvement in campus life is not being recognized in their testimonials, we cannot expect our students to spend more time in extra-curricular activities when their counterparts are working hard to attain outstanding academic results, and only the latter is officially reflected and recognized in performance transcripts.

Graduates were asked to reflect views on their own performances in their present working environment, along a Likert-type scale ranging from "excellent" (4) to "unsatisfactory" (1). For those graduates who are employed, 75.6% of them indicate that they are either "excellent" or "good" in establishing good relations with colleagues (M=2.99, SD=.75). Other self-perceived strong areas include "flexibility and adaptability in managing tasks" (M=2.72, SD=.75) and "involvement in team work" (M=2.72, SD=.73). On the other hand, our graduates revealed that they are relatively weak in "commercial acumen" (M=2.06, SD=.70) and "ability to communicate in English" (M=2.10, SD=.64). For those who are pursuing further study, their self-perceived areas of strength and weakness are quite

similar with those who are employed. But it is worth noting that graduates are comparatively performing better in the working environment than in further study, at least in their own perception.

It was intended to study if there are differences between the students' involvement in campus activities and their perception of their own performances in work and in further study. In correlation analysis, the study employs the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (Pearson's r). Values of the correlation coefficient (r) range from 0 (no relationship) to + or – 1.00 (a perfect relationship). A negative relationship is indicated by a minus sign and a positive relationship by a plus sign. As a result, from analyzing the respondents' data, we might conclude that students' involvement in campus life is positively correlated with their self-perceived working performances after graduation, especially in the areas of "commercial acumen", "analytical reasoning when facing challenges" and "innovative capacity", but such correlation is rather low (see Table 1). From another angle, we might realize that students who are more actively involved in volunteer social services organized by civic education coordinators, student counsellors and student clubs on campus perform better in work (12 out of 16 areas of perceived working performance). Whereas, on the other hand, for those students who are pursuing further study, campus involvement is also low, but positively correlated with individual instead of all areas of their own perceived performances in study, especially in areas relating to "involvement in team work" and "flexibility and adaptability in managing tasks". We might also realize that students' utilization of library facilities and participation in team-work projects have slight statistical significance in most areas of performances in further study (see Table 2). Comparatively speaking, students' active involvement in campus activities is positively correlated with their performances in work more than that in pursuing further study.

Besides, from the data collected in this study, we can only conclude that graduates' ability in taking up early first full time employment was only slightly correlated with their frequency in "attending events organized by student bodies" ($n=154$, $r=.174$, $p=.031$) and "participating in working committee's meeting of a student organization" ($n=155$, $r=.179$, $p=.025$). Whereas, when overall academic result was concerned, it was reflected that there was only a slight correlation between good academic results with students' "utilization of computer on campus outside time-tabled lessons" ($N=314$, $r=.176$, $p=.002$), "attendance of events organized by study bodies" ($N=314$, $r=.156$, $p=.006$) and "participation in inter-departmental or inter-campus sports team" ($N=315$, $r=.117$, $p=.038$).

CONCLUSION

The study confirms that the students' campus involvement positively but weakly correlates with their perceived performances in both working and studying environments after graduation. Among various areas of campus involvement, students' participation in social services is most significantly correlated with good performance in work, whereas their involvement in teamwork projects and frequent utilization of library facilities are positively correlated with their ability in further study. Although our study cannot fully support the importance of students' campus involvement as a powerful means of enhancing performances after graduation just from the students' self-perceived measurement based on subjective judgment, a growing body of research suggests that active involvement gives rise to changes in affective and cognitive outcomes when more quantifying psychological instruments or observations and reports of behaviour, accompanying with carefully controlled measures researched over many years, are employed (see Astin, 1977, 1993, 1999; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, Krehbiel & MacKay, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). However, our recent study may serve as a baseline for future surveys in the vocational education sector.

As proposed in the recently published *Education Blueprint for the 21ˢᵗ Century* by the Hong Kong Education Commission (1999), it is clearly stated that "students should have a comprehensive learning experience through formal, non-formal and informal modes." However, students' out-of-class

involvement is not fully recognized under our existing assessment scheme, and it is time to consider if some form of modification could be made, such as systematically inputting students' campus involvement and participation data into their transcripts, issuing certificates to recognize active students involvement in campus-wide programmes and community services, etc. In the short run, to improve IVE's curriculum and campus facilities in meeting the needs of our graduates, it is worth to emphasize more on improving library facilities, encouraging teamwork projects during coursework, enhancing social service opportunities in serving the community and incorporating broader training, such as leadership skills, knowledge of world-wide issues, interviewing and presentation skills, and problem-solving techniques into the curriculum. Whereas, in the long run, IVE might need to review its assessment criteria to incorporate students' out-of-class involvement performances into the overall assessment scheme, following whole education principles, and borrowing the system of nearly all tertiary education institutions in Mainland China[2] or the City University of Hong Kong.[3]

Recent research findings confirm that the strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development is the student's peer group. In particular, the characteristics of the peer group and the extent of the student's interaction with that peer group have enormous potential for influencing virtually all aspects of the student's educational and personal development (Astin, 1999). Generally speaking, the greater the interaction with peers, the more favorable the outcome. Indeed, our study also reflects that "participation in teamwork projects with other students" is the highest form of students' involvement in campus. Peer group influence is powerful because it has the capacity to involve the student more intensely in the educational experience. So, to achieve the goal of whole education experiences, the campus should start from group-based activities in which peer groups are involved. Student affairs work in general should play a much more central role as most peer groups operate primarily outside of the formal classroom, and much of that out-of-class life falls under the purview of student affairs.[4]

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[2] Like other tertiary education institutions, the South China Normal University adopts a "comprehensive appraisal system" (????) in which students' performance in all three areas, namely, moral behaviour, academic performance and cultural/sports involvement, is transferred into "points" for recognition of awards when graduated (see Lai, 1999b). Behaviours are quantified and measurable and points will be added or deducted according to the performances. Each area carries a weighted percentage of 20%, 70% and 10%, out of 100%.

[3] The Student Development Services of the City University of Hong Kong launched a "Whole Person Development (WPD) Award Scheme" to encourage and motivate students to take part in various programmes related to seven areas of development, namely, spiritual, intellectual, physical, social, aesthetic, career and emotional, to become all round persons. Points will be awarded to students after attending programmes according to duration and the extent of involvement. Depending on the points gained, students will receive either the Award of Achievement or Award of Excellence.

[4] Interested readers can also refer to Lai (1999a) for a more detailed analysis of ways to enhance students' involvement.

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Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficients (r) of Campus Involvement with Working Environment Performance (n=156)

	Campus facilities and rooms	Events atten-dance	Athletic /aquatic partici-p ation	Joined sports team	Social services	Sought help from another student	Attend personal develop-ment course	Attend civic educa-ti on pro-gra ms	Use sports facilities outside lessons
Knowledge and skills for jobs	.093	.146	.012	.059	.170*	.181*	.114	.202*	-.040
Ability to communicate in English	.170*	.195*	.101	.153	.256**	.138	.169*	.091	.085
Ability to communicate in Chinese	.191*	.140	.153	.211**	.186*	.179*	.130	.121	.111
Analytical reasoning when challenged	.317**	.212**	.228**	.274**	.245**	.194*	.213**	.086	.298**
Observance of safety precautions	.124	.108	.130	.106	.127	.202*	.166*	.187*	.081
Ability in job planning	.153	.118	.102	.096	.144	.218**	.092	.177*	.135
Presentation in front of a group	.153	.208**	.213**	.260**	.152	.097	.149	.064	.122
Has good relations with colleagues	.078	.217**	.077	.134	.111	.208**	.148	.110	.104
Innovative capacity	.234**	.212**	.122	.156	.235**	.188*	.201*	.180*	.300**
Ability to grow and learn on my own	.165	.226**	.069	.154	.292**	.120	.132	.216**	.119
Flexibility and adaptability in managing tasks	.118	.129	.184*	.068	.198*	.191*	.200*	.093	.076
Ability to persevere and get results	.174*	.147	.117	.119	.198*	.186*	.059	.211**	.066
Common sense in dealing with problems	.079	.110	.108	.143	.184*	.103	.169*	.126	.005
Commercial acumen	.248**	.160*	.251**	.264**	.280**	.192*	.291**	.194*	.296**
Awareness of the ethical values and moral concerns in the workplace	.057	.115	.132	.144	.195*	.135	.111	.105	-.023
Involvement in team work	.121	.195*	.138	.241**	.228**	.281**	.146	.266**	.154

* Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)   ** Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficients (*r*) of Campus Involvement with Further Study Performance (*n*=133)

	Use of library	Use of com-put er	Athletic /aquatic partici-p ation	Joined sports team	Social services	Sought help from another student	Attend personal develop-ment course	Parti-cip ate in team-w ork project	Use sports facilities outside lessons
Knowledge and skills required	.385**	.057	.126	.195*	.178*	.103	.063	.271**	.014
Ability to communicate in English	.257**	.259**	.205*	.167	.172*	.059	.164	.117	-.006
Ability to communicate in Chinese	.131	.199*	.106	.152	.026	.049	.096	.067	.157
Analytical reasoning when challenged	.112	-.094	.225**	.108	-.062	.050	.000	.170	.127
Observance of safety precautions	.109	-.115	.181*	.089	.105	-.075	.024	.002	.123
Ability in job planning	.092	-.024	.141	.158	.147	.137	.163	.165	-.061
Presentation in front of a group	.203*	.053	.057	.174*	.009	.059	.166	.220*	.015
Has good relations with classmates	.027	-.138	.118	.186*	-.011	.035	.058	.115	.167
Innovative capacity	.163	-.010	.197	.027	.044	.020	.104	.076	-.021
Ability to grow and learn on my own	.325**	.046	.112	.026	.103	.114	.134	.347**	.015
Flexibility and adaptability in managing tasks	.247**	-.050	.180*	.080	.177*	.210*	.096	.238**	.016
Ability to persevere and get results	.239**	.200*	.108	.026	.063	.050	-.010	.222*	.072
Common sense in dealing with problems	.181*	-.047	.114	.107	.135	.142	.066	.184*	-.023
Commercial acumen	.214*	.008	.206*	.172*	.189*	.041	.108	.152	.042
Awareness of the ethical values and moral concerns in your study	.152	-.005	.209*	.165	.149	.053	.103	.181*	-.037
Involvement in team work	.160	.052	.237**	.215*	.101	.187*	.217*	.334**	.251**

* Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)   ** Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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