

Independence and Interdependence: A Comparative Case Study of Individuals from Two Institutions in Mainland China and Hong Kong

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Abstract

There has been a clear shift in higher education to empower the current generation of students and prepare them for the future, which will be quite different and more complex than those faced by previous generations. It is expected that they will possess comprehensive abilities to deal with challenges arising from new employment demands and beyond. While liberal arts education has a long history in the West, it has been increasingly implemented in East Asia as one response to the needs of educational reform. This research is an empirical study of how liberal arts education has affected individuals from two institutions with distinct interpretations of 'liberal arts education' – University N, the first Sino-foreign joint university in Mainland China and University L, the only public liberal arts university in Hong Kong. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, the study illustrates the interplay and balance between students' self-interest and their sense of social obligation fostered through liberal arts education elements. Semi-structured interviews with senior students, fresh graduates, educators and career counselors are conducted to gather in-depth primary data. These reveal that, by providing inter-disciplinary knowledge and transferable skillsets, a liberal arts education experience does enhance individuals' personal agency and intellectual competencies in a professional context – they are trained to become independent thinkers and learners. Moreover, the 'humanistic' aspect of liberal arts is also highly relevant: having engaged in various activities and programs, students in both universities are encouraged to care, cooperate and make positive differences in their increasingly interconnected communities.

Keywords: liberal arts education, transferable skills, social obligation, Sino-foreign university, Hong Kong