Liberating Liberal Studies: Cultivating Interdisciplinary Learning, Thinking Skills and Appreciation of Diversity

Our Hong Kong Foundation
Aug 2020
## ABC of Liberal Studies

### Awareness
- To enhance students’ understanding of themselves, their society, their nation, the human world and the physical environment.

### Broadening
- To enable students to develop multiple perspectives on perennial and contemporary issues in different contexts (e.g. cultural, social, economic, political and technological contexts).

### Critical Thinking
- To help students become independent thinkers so that they can construct knowledge appropriate to changing personal and social circumstances.
- To develop in students a range of skills for life-long learning, including critical thinking skills, creativity, problem-solving skills, communication skills and information technology skills.

### Values
- To help students appreciate and respect diversity in cultures and views in a pluralistic society and handle conflicting values.
- To help students develop positive values and attitude towards life, so that they can become informed and responsible citizens of society, the country and the world.

*Sources: Education Bureau and Legislative Council*
Goals and approaches converge as different regions develop twenty-first century competencies

### Learning Goals
- Global and social awareness
- Critical thinking
- Communication
- Active citizenship

### Teaching Approaches
- Issue-based
- Self-directed learning
- Multiple perspectives
Liberal Studies was launched in Hong Kong in the 1990s...

- Advanced Supplementary Level Liberal Studies (1992)
- Integrated Humanities, and Science and Technology as transitional subjects (2003)
- One-off Curriculum Support Grant (2010)
- HKDSE Liberal Studies commences (2012)
- Curriculum and Assessment Resource Package (2013)
- NSS Medium Term Review (2015)
- LS Booklet Series (2017)
- Task Force on Review of School Curriculum (2019)
- Voluntary textbook reviews
- Curriculum Development Council’s Ad-Hoc Committee formed

Sources: HKEdCity; Education Bureau and Legislative Council
In 2017, 65% of people (16 to 74 years old) consumed online news, compared to only 25% in 2005.

Recent research studies reveal that young people find it difficult to spot fake news.

More than 80% could not differentiate between real and fake news.

Fake Twitter news spreads faster than true stories.

Sources: OECD, Stanford University, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
Recalibrating Liberal Studies’ aim starts with thoughtful re-evaluation

Sources: Education Bureau, Education Commission, and Legislative Council

‘[Learning resources] should not be treated as information and fact to be studied and memorised, but as artefacts to be analysed and evaluated critically.’

‘Every senior secondary student should take Liberal Studies, so that they will be able to analyse practical problems from a wider perspective by applying cross-curricular concepts and knowledge.’

‘The issue-enquiry approach aims to encourage students to develop self-learning capacity to pursue knowledge and to open up their minds to alternative views through discussion.’

Are all of these achievable simultaneously?

Sources: Education Bureau, Education Commission, and Legislative Council
Reevaluating Liberal Studies through five interlocking components

1. To what extent have the goals of Liberal Studies been fulfilled?
2. Are there other methods to achieve similar or better outcomes?
Recommendation 1: Curriculum

Reconfigure the curriculum to facilitate in-depth learning and to cultivate critical thinking skills
Liberal Studies covers diverse subjects and needs to be delivered within 10 percent of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum.

Liberal Studies takes up 10% of the NSS curriculum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Study</th>
<th>Modules</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Self and Personal Development      | 1. Personal Development and Interpersonal Relationships                 | • Understanding oneself  
• Interpersonal relationships |
| Society and Culture                | 2. Hong Kong Today                                                     | • Quality of life  
• Rule of law and socio-political participation  
• Identity |
|                                    | 3. Modern China                                                        | • China’s reform and opening-up  
• Chinese culture and modernity |
|                                    | 4. Globalisation                                                       | • Impact of globalisation and related responses |
| Science, Technology and the Environment | 5. Public Health                                                     | • Understanding public health  
• Science, technology and public health |
|                                    | 6. Energy Technology and the Environment                              | • The influences of energy technology  
• The environment and sustainable development |

Liberal Studies Component | Teaching Hours
---|---
Modules | 168
Independent Enquiry Study (IES) | 82
Total | 250

Sources: Education Bureau and Hong Kong Professional Teacher’s Union (2017)
A solid knowledge base is the foundation for critical thinking curriculums

Uneven delivery of course work by Hong Kong junior secondary schools differs from more unified international approaches

Notes: [1] Curriculum standards design and course delivery varies across states, where schools either teach content through Social Studies or other discrete subjects
Under Hong Kong’s school-based management, there is no single approach for curriculum alignment.

**General Studies**

1. Liberal Studies (193 schools, 43.2%) \(^1\)
2. Life and Society (118 schools, 26.4%)
3. Mix of 1 and 2 (18 schools, 4.03%)
4. Other related subjects \(^2\) (92 schools, 20.6%)
5. Uncategorised \(^3\) (26 schools, 5.82%)

**HKDSE Liberal Studies**

Themes that teachers want to trim down:

- Science, technology and public health: 11%
- The influences of energy technology: 12%
- Identity: 14%
- China’s reform and opening-up: 15%
- Interpersonal relationships: 18%
- Rule of law and socio-political participation: 19%
- Understanding oneself: 24%

**Recommendation 1.1:** Trim the curriculum to intensify analyses, evaluations, and discussions.

Sources: Secondary School Profiles 2019/2020 and 447 school websites

Notes:
- \(^1\) Some schools use the course titles ‘Liberal Studies’ and ‘Life and Society’ interchangeably.
- \(^2\) Subjects include Integrated Humanities, Economy & Society, Social Studies, and Moral & Civic Education
- \(^3\) Schools not explicitly offering Liberal Studies courses / courses mentioned above

© 2020 Our Hong Kong Foundation Limited. All Right Reserved.
Clarity of key learning concepts helps students navigate interdisciplinary discussions

Case Study: What concepts do students need to know about coronavirus?

- How much do students have to understand?
  - Types of infectious diseases and viruses
  - Diagnosis processes
  - Vaccine development

Recommendation 1.2: Outline key learning concepts in the Curriculum and Assessment Guide

86% of the teachers concur that the C&A Guide should clearly state Liberal Studies’ key concepts.
Liberal Studies should help rebalance science and humanities-related disparities in the current NSS curriculum.

PISA mean science scores for 2009–2018

Local science course enrolment has nearly halved after NSS curriculum began

Review of the Academic Structure of Senior Secondary Education (May 2003)

‘...to analyse practical problems from a wider perspective by applying cross-curricular concepts and knowledge

... enable them to gain a comprehensive learning experience, thus fulfilling the objective of ensuring that students, irrespective of whether they are in the science or arts streams, would gain exposure to the discipline of the other stream.’
Liberal Studies should help rebalance science and humanities in the NSS curriculum

Recommendation 1.3: Offer humanities- and science-focused study options for students

- **Science topics**
- **Humanities topics**

**Paper 1**: Based on common core content of both streams

**Paper 2**: Based on advanced content with focus options given to students
Liberal Studies differs from traditional subjects and requires modern teaching methods to achieve desired learning outcomes...

Liberal Studies’ issue-enquiry process exemplifies the role of experiential learning

Concrete Experience
Having an experience

Active Experimentation
Planning/Trying out what you have learned

Mastery of facts, understanding phenomena, clarifying concepts

Reflective Observation
Reviewing and reflecting on the experience

Understanding differences and conflicts

Abstract Conceptualisation
Concluding and learning from experience

Reflection, evaluation, judgment, solutions, action

Sources: Education Bureau; Kolb
In Singapore, outdoor experiential activities (e.g. field trips) have become mainstream school activities.

Learning Journeys

MoE has a partnership list of organisations offering ‘experiential and multi-disciplinary learning’ programmes.

Incorporated in teaching different subjects; Mostly History, Geography and Social Studies.

Recommendation 1.4: Partner with organisations to develop module-specific experiential learning.

Source: Ministry of Education, Singapore
Recommendation 2: Assessment

Revamp the grading system, rejuvenate the assessment mechanism, and enhance the overall governance.
Higher-order thinking skills can be difficult to assess

'Lvl 4 = Average thinking skills?' 😞

'Lvl 5** = Excellent thinking skills?'

'Do Liberal Studies exam results reflect students’ thinking skills? (Principals)

- Largely reflect: 13%
- Do not reflect much: 42%
- Do not reflect at all: 6%
- No comment: 39%

'Does the process of marking Liberal Studies examinations involve subjective judgment on the part of the markers? (Principals)

- Yes: 25%
- No: 21%
- No comment: 54%'

'Looking across different countries, we have yet to discover an effective method for assessing higher order thinking skills, and it is unlikely to see it happening in the next eight to ten years.'

Professor in Educational Psychology
Sample exam tips for students based on assessment framework

**Perspectives**
- Political
- Economic
- Environment
- Social

**Pros and Cons**
- 3 pros + 1 con
- 3 pros + 2 cons

**Stakeholders**
- Government
- Business Sector
- Citizens
Assessment methods laden with language bias

Answering in-depth questions within exam timeframes favours candidates with greater writing proficiency.

‘Soft power is the most effective way for governments to increase their influence in the world.’ Do you agree with this view?

‘China’s increasing participation in international affairs will facilitate world stability.’ To what extent do you agree with this view? [2]

97% of teachers believe students with better language skills have an advantage when taking Liberal Studies exams.

93% of teachers surveyed believe that past exam questions and assessment criteria have significantly affected teaching methods.

Sources: Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority and Hong Kong Professional Teacher’s Union (2017)
Notes: [1] 2015 HKDSE Liberal Studies Paper 2 Question 3b
Assessment should encourage students to reflect on their learning processes.

Assessment ‘for learning’ rather than ‘of learning’

Stronger emphasis on self-directed learning

Exam stress reduction

‘Assessment for learning is concerned with obtaining feedback on learning and teaching, and utilising this to make learning more effective and to introduce any necessary changes to teaching strategies.’

Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Guide

Recommendation 2.1: Replace the seven-point grading scale with a pass or fail system
Other countries exhibit more diversified modes of assessment relative to Hong Kong

Public exam includes:
- **Multiple Choice**
- Source-based questions
- **Drag and drop**
- Fill in the blank
- Select an area
- Drop down

**Recommendation 2.2:** Incorporate alternative modes of assessment, such as concept mapping, word matching, and multiple choice
Enhanced curriculum and assessment development requires closer coordination

Split-governance oversight for Liberal Studies curriculum and assessment development

Recommendation 2.3: Strengthen the recruitment and feedback mechanisms of HKEAA subject and moderation committees, to better align assessment and curriculum development and to enhance transparency and accountability.

Sources: Education Bureau, Curriculum Development Council, and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority
Recommendation 3: Teaching Materials

Ensure fair and unbiased teaching materials to improve learning outcome
Review of Liberal Studies teaching material needs transparency and wider scope

Recommendation 3.1: Publish clear and transparent vetting guidelines, covering teaching materials attached to textbooks (e.g. training exercises and supplementary tools)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal Studies teacher’s main sources of teaching materials</th>
<th>Teachers (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textbooks or reference books</td>
<td>87.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers and magazines</td>
<td>78.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information provided by Education Bureau (e.g. Liberal Studies Web-based Resource Platform)</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research papers</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Liberal Studies supplementary materials are currently not accepted by the Education Bureau for review |

- **Supplementary materials**
  - Practical books
  - Listening practices
  - Phonic practices

- **Subjects required for vetting**
  - Science
  - English
  - Chinese Language
  - Putonghua
Recommendation 3.2: Compile a publicly accessible online directory of recommended e-learning materials and supplements.
Recommendation 4: Teaching Process

Furnish comprehensive and timely training in order to enhance teaching and learning quality.
Teachers need specialised skills to enhance their performance

Tertiary education degree programmes focusing on Liberal Studies, BEd (LS), have fallen from four to one since 2013/14

HKU, CUHK, HKBU & EdUHK offer BEd (LS)

HKU terminates BEd (LS)

EdUHK terminates BEd (LS)

CUHK terminates BEd (LS) 2019/20

BEd (LS) student enrolment

Source: University Grants Committee
Recommendation 4.1: Publish a teaching manual outlining prerequisite knowledge and skills such as critical thinking theories.

T-Standard+
Developed by the Committee on Professional Development of Teachers and Principals (COTAP)

‘Unified set of standards for the teaching profession’

The manual could reference ‘general’ teacher resources in C&A guide to provide teachers solid pedagogical know-how.

Sources: Education Bureau and Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Guide.
Continuous Professional Development is essential for Liberal Studies teachers

School-based curriculum development support services (2019/20 academic year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of development</th>
<th>Support Service Type I</th>
<th>Support Service Type II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberal Studies</td>
<td>Learning Community (Experiential Learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive support on:</td>
<td>Provision of platform promoting experiential learning in LS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School-based curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning and teaching strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assessment literacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>Mainly on-site support</td>
<td>Cross-school exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3–4 schools form a learning community)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of Experiential Learning support</td>
<td>• Collaboration in designing Experiential Learning activities</td>
<td>• Collaboration in developing pedagogical practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Learning Communities (e.g. workshops, and sharing)</td>
<td>• Cross-school visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Cross-school sharing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Education Bureau

**Recommendation 4.2:** Reinforce Continuous Professional Development through learning communities and on-site school support
Recommendation 5: Articulation

Adjust Liberal Studies’ weight in further articulation, allowing students to refocus on learning rather than assessment.
Liberal Studies’ aim conflicts with the nature of university admissions

Original rationale for Liberal Studies
- Issue Enquiry
- Higher Order Thinking
- Self-Learning Habits

University Admissions
- Rigid Assessment Mechanism
- Language Bias

‘The focus of Liberal Studies should be on the learning process, rather than how much students have learned...Hong Kong adopts a lazy approach in university admission.’

Anonymous university professor
Examination culture is deeply rooted in Hong Kong’s education system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compulsory subject</th>
<th>% of school principals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory public examination</td>
<td>Retain seven-point grading scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change to pass / fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional public examination</td>
<td>Retain seven-point grading scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change to pass / fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No public examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elective subject</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public examination</td>
<td>Retain seven-point grading scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change to pass / fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No public examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No comment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendation 5.1** Maintain Liberal Studies as a mandatory HKDSE examination subject

**Recommendation 5.2** Remove Liberal Studies from the JUPAS scoring system, such that only a pass is required for further articulation

© 2020 Our Hong Kong Foundation Limited. All Right Reserved.
University admissions rarely mandate thinking skills subjects

Even Hong Kong’s closet analogue Singapore allows university and faculty-based exceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject of Comparison</th>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Japan</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Mainland China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory subject [1]</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Only in some states)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory subject for examination</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Only in some states)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject as part of university admission criteria</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Only in some states)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Education Bureau (Hong Kong), GOV.UK, Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Education (Singapore), Australian College of Educators, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, China Youth On Line, National Council for the Social Studies (the US), and Shironavi (Japan)

Notes: [1] Compulsory subject refers to the level immediately preceding university entrance

[2] Social Studies in Japan is compulsory for the National Center Test for University Admissions but a limited number of universities and programmes do not require this prerequisite

[3] ‘Ideological and Political Education’ is a mandatory subject for examination in certain areas within mainland China such as Shanghai.
Conclusion
Adjust Liberal Studies’ weight in further articulation, allowing students to refocus on learning rather than assessment

Reconfigure the curriculum to facilitate in-depth learning and to cultivate critical thinking skills

Revamp the grading system, rejuvenate the assessment mechanism, and enhance the overall governance

Ensure fair and unbiased teaching materials to improve learning outcome

Furnish comprehensive and timely training in order to enhance teaching and learning quality