

# Chapter 10

## Graduate Education Within a Liberal Arts College Context: A Case of Lingnan University, Hong Kong



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**Abstract** This chapter discusses the development and role of graduate education within a liberal arts college context by examining the case of Lingnan University, Hong Kong. With a student-centered focus, Lingnan University applies evidence-informed teaching and experiential learning to integrate liberal arts education, graduate programs, and research to enhance students' learning experiences and maintain the core of whole-person education. Lingnan University's efforts demonstrate the potential of developing graduate education in the liberal arts context, which can serve as implications for other liberal arts higher education institutions.

**Keywords** Liberal arts education · Graduate education · Evidence-informed teaching · Experiential learning · Lingnan University

### 10.1 Introduction

Liberal arts education has experienced dramatic changes since its origin in Europe and rapid development in the US (Baker & Baldwin, 2015). These changes occur in various areas, including the modifications of institutional mission and vision, the re-design of curriculum, the introduction of new academic and vocational orientations, and the adoption of technologies and extra-curricular learning as a supplement to the traditional classrooms (Freeland, 2009). The change and development of liberal arts colleges, like other types of higher education institutions, are seen as necessary to adapt to the rapidly changing and dynamic external circumstances for higher education, including market demands, financial pressures, students' interests, technological development, and more (Baker & Baldwin, 2015; Logan & Curry, 2015).

Among these changes, one topic that keeps attracting the attention and discussion is the conflict or tension between the research and professional orientation of graduate education and the aim of liberal arts education to equip students with skills and attitudes to be life-long learners, engaged citizens, and responsible leaders

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(Humphreys & Kelly, 2014). Graduate education has been increasingly developed at liberal arts colleges globally. For instance, among the 30 member institutions of the Global Liberal Arts Alliance (GLAA) from 18 countries and regions, 17 institutions have integrated graduate programs into their education systems (GLAA, 2022). The question to ask now has changed from “should liberal arts colleges offer graduate education?” to “how should liberal arts colleges integrate graduate education to meet their institutional core missions?” Under this background, this chapter discusses the development and role of graduate education within a liberal arts college context by examining the case of Lingnan University in Hong Kong.

This chapter first introduces the graduate education at Lingnan University within the broad background of the Hong Kong higher education sector. Lingnan University’s responses to the challenges in developing graduate education are then examined, followed by a discussion of insights derived from Lingnan University’s efforts. This chapter ends with the conclusion and implications for developing graduate education in a liberal arts college context.

## 10.2 Hong Kong Higher Education and Lingnan University

Hong Kong higher education is public university dominated. Eight public universities, including Lingnan University, are funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Benefiting from the buffering role of UGC between universities and the Hong Kong government, eight institutions enjoy high-level autonomy in their development (UGC, 2017). The Hong Kong government also encourages all universities to emphasize their uniqueness and strengths and promotes diversity in terms of institutional types, including comprehensive research universities (the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong), research universities with focused areas (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and the City University of Hong Kong), teacher education-focused university (Education University of Hong Kong), and liberal arts universities (Hong Kong Baptist University and Lingnan University).

Among the eight UGC-funded institutions, Lingnan University has the longest history, with its establishment in 1888 in Guangdong Province, China. After a 15-year closure from 1952 due to the higher education restructuring in mainland China, the university was re-established as Lingnan College in Hong Kong in 1967, and it was renamed Lingnan University in 1999. Lingnan University is featured for its high-quality liberal arts education, which has been recognized worldwide (Forbes, 2015). Choosing to be small in scale, Lingnan University aims to create a close relationship between faculty and students to secure their high-quality educational experiences. Up to September 30, 2021, Lingnan University has 833 staff members, among which 231 are academic staff. A total of 4488 undergraduate and graduate students are studying in the areas of arts, business, and social sciences (Lingnan University, 2021a, 2021b).

Despite giving eight universities high institutional autonomy and freedom, UGC applies several quality assurance schemes to facilitate institutions to reach excellent performance. In specific, eight universities signed the University Accountability Agreement (UAA) with the UGC. The UAA covers five areas, namely student experience of teaching and learning, research performance and research-postgraduate experience, knowledge transfer and social engagement, internationalization, and financial health and institutional sustainability (UGC, 2021). Research performance and graduate education experience are a key area. More importantly, research performance in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) organized by UGC directly determines the funding allocation to eight institutions.

The Hong Kong higher education context has exerted a complex impact on Lingnan University's liberal arts education. On the one hand, the high-level institutional autonomy provides Lingnan University with the freedom to develop its academic programs. On the other hand, UGC's high standards for quality assurance of research and teaching create a highly competitive circumstance for its funded universities. Lingnan University has managed to become a leading liberal arts university in Asia and achieved high-quality teaching and student learning. Even though such is the case, Lingnan University must follow the same performance measures of RAE and play the research-oriented game to ensure its funding source from UGC. Owing to the narrow focus on humanities and social sciences with the emphasis on undergraduate study, Lingnan University has difficulties securing a competitive position in the major league table of university rankings that put a high value on research performance. Same as other liberal arts colleges in Asia, Lingnan University must perform equally well in research for rankings because Asian parents and students have taken university rankings seriously (Jung et al., 2016; Ka, 2016). Considering this situation, Lingnan University determined to expand its graduate education and enhance its research performance.

### 10.3 Graduate Education at Lingnan University

All eight Hong Kong public universities provide two types of graduate programs. One is the research-postgraduate (RPg) program, and the other is the taught-postgraduate (TPg) program. RPg programs aim to provide students with research training and award them the Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). Differently, TPg programs do not require students to complete an academic thesis for graduation but only focus on completing course works. The degrees granted by the TPg programs vary across disciplines and programs, including the Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Science (M.Sc.), and Master of Social Sciences (M.Soc.Sc.). Usually, the RPg students are financially supported by the UGC; therefore, the quota of RPg students for each university is determined by UGC. Hong Kong universities have much flexibility in offering TPg programs.

The development of graduate education at Lingnan University can be traced back to 1995 when its campus moved to the current location in Tuen Mun of the New Territories. The offer of M.Phil. programs was a step toward future university expansion. Owing to its teaching focus of the liberal arts education tradition and weak research orientation, Lingnan University was in a disadvantageous position compared with other research-intensive universities for the RAE and its sequential funding allocation. For the RAE in 2014, Lingnan University's unsatisfactory research performance resulted in a considerable funding loss from the UGC. Therefore, in 2016, Lingnan University began to facilitate the comprehensive development of graduate education to promote research and set up self-financed TPg programs to make up the financial gap. In specific, the Division of Graduate Studies was established in 2016 and expanded to the School of Graduate Studies in 2019 to oversee Lingnan University's graduate education in terms of academic and administrative affairs.

Given the small scale, Lingnan University receives a very limited quota of RPg students from the UGC. In the academic year 2021–2022, only 96 students were enrolled in the RPg programs (Lingnan University, 2021b). Consequently, Lingnan University focuses on the self-financed TPg programs. The university's choice of this path to developing graduate education is embedded in the unique governance style of Hong Kong higher education. Lingnan University made the development of graduate education a strategic focus and set "Expanding Postgraduate Education" as one of the key strategic areas and initiatives in the strategic plan of 2019–2025 (Lingnan University, 2019). In the latest strategic plan 2022–2028, Lingnan University aims at "Augmenting Postgraduate Studies" (Lingnan University, 2022). Specifically, the university focuses on the self-financed TPg programs and possesses total flexibility to determine the program content and student number. Accordingly, research-track faculty positions are increased to support the research and teach graduate-level courses for TPg programs.

By the academic year 2021–2022, Lingnan University has established 33 TPg programs housed by the School of Graduate Studies, Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Business, and Faculty of Social Sciences (Lingnan University School of Graduate Studies, 2022a). For the RPg programs, Lingnan University offered 13 UGC-funded M.Phil. and Ph.D. programs in four areas: arts, business, social sciences, and environmental science (Lingnan University School of Graduate Studies, 2022b). In addition, more than 60 new academic staff joined Lingnan University in 2021, which was the highest recruiting record of academic staff ever.

With the rapid expansion of TPg programs, Lingnan University strictly follows the quality assurance practices regulated and recommended by UGC to ensure the quality of program delivery and, more importantly, students' learning experiences. First, the newly developed TPg programs are under the UAA and quality assurance review. The Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of UGC conducts the audit for eight public universities every six years. Second, TPg programs seek quality review through the External Academic Advisors (EAA) scheme and the benchmarking process. In the EAA scheme, the senior scholars from the fields relevant to the TPg programs are invited to serve as advisors to provide feedback and suggestions to the development of the entire program and specific courses. The benchmarking practice allows the

TPg programs to review and learn from the good practices of similar programs in other higher education systems.

## 10.4 Challenges and Responses

### 10.4.1 *Challenges to Lingnan University in Developing Graduate Education*

Lingnan University has faced three major challenges when developing and expanding its graduate education: the undergraduate-centered focus of liberal arts education, the relatively weak research orientation, and the uncertain funding for TPg programs.

First, the traditional undergraduate-centered focus in liberal arts education has become a barrier. This challenge is demonstrated by the unbalanced distribution of resources between undergraduate and graduate programs. As the QAC report of 2016 stated, Lingnan University faced the challenge of integrating liberal arts education into graduate programs, especially the expanding TPg programs (QAC, 2016). Integrated learning program (ILP) is a co-curricular program for undergraduate students to enhance their skills, knowledge, and attitudes in six domains (i.e., civic education and leadership development, intellectual and entrepreneurship development, physical fitness and well-being, social and emotional well-being, esthetic development, and residential education). In the featured ILP activities, undergraduate students need to obtain sufficient ILP credits to meet the graduation requirements (Lingnan University, 2021a). As a critical component of whole-personal education and experience at Lingnan University, the ILP activities primarily target undergraduate students (Lingnan University, 2021c).

The second challenge of Lingnan University to develop graduate education is the relatively weak research orientation. Owing to the tradition of liberal arts education in students' learning, Lingnan University has attached significance to the faculty's teaching. However, with the increasing trend of evidence-informed practices in Hong Kong higher education, research has been recognized as substantial evidence for faculty members to inform and improve their teaching, especially at the graduate level. Given the rapid expansion of the TPg programs, Lingnan University needs to create a research environment to develop graduate education.

The third challenge is the uncertain funding sources for the TPg programs. Given the self-financed status, the operation of TPg programs relies on student tuition. The student enrollment number determines whether the program can have a sustainable future. This challenge is greatly influenced by external contexts, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and related border control regulations.

## **10.4.2 *Lingnan University's Responses***

Facing the above-discussed challenges, Lingnan University has made great efforts as responses. These efforts are based on the review and application of the opportunities identified in the local, regional, and global higher education contexts. The first and fundamental advantage of Lingnan University is the high-level institutional autonomy, which guarantees the freedom to develop graduate education. Second, as mainland China has become the most prominent source of international students, the proximity between Hong Kong and the mainland provides sufficient graduate student applicants. In the current COVID-19 pandemic, Hong Kong has become a popular destination for mainland students when considering safety and health (Mok et al., 2021). Third, Hong Kong's high reputation in higher education with its international metropolitan status has become a feature for Lingnan University to attract graduate students and, more importantly, international faculty members to support the development of graduate education.

Exploiting these opportunities, Lingnan University has taken specific actions to respond to the challenges in developing its graduate education in a liberal arts education context. These actions include shifting resources and integrating liberal arts education into graduate programs, strategically recruiting research staff and promoting social impact, and striving for high-quality learning with appropriate market positioning to attract sufficient TPg students.

### **10.4.2.1 *Shifting Resources and Integrating Liberal Arts Education into Graduate Programs***

With the rapid development of TPg programs, Lingnan University has intentionally shifted resources to these programs and, more importantly, aimed to integrate liberal arts elements into graduate students' learning experiences. For example, as residential education is a significant component of liberal arts education, the university has allocated on-campus hostel quotas to TPg programs in addition to the small amount of RPg students who can live in the hostel at the beginning. Moreover, some liberal arts education activities have become available to graduate students. The ILP activities previously mentioned have been opened to graduate students. However, the ILP activities are not credit-bearing for graduate students.

Considering the different focus of graduate education, which is more research-related, the School of Graduate Studies has launched the Learning Enhancement Activities Plan (LEAP) to "enrich the student learning experience and to promote the development of Lingnan University graduate attributes in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitude" (Lingnan University, 2021d). LEAP activities include four areas to help graduate students gain fulfilling learning experiences at Lingnan University (Table 10.1).

**Table 10.1** LEAP activity areas and purposes

Areas	Purposes
Orientations	To provide essential information on studying and living at Lingnan University
New experiences	To provide culture- and language-related activities for connecting to the new learning and living environment
Community engagement	To promote civic awareness and understanding the societal issues of Hong Kong To explore local internship and volunteer opportunities for students to strengthen their bond with the local community
Personal growth series	To provide skill enhancement for personal, academic, and career development through continuing and professional studies

#### 10.4.2.2 Strategically Recruiting Research Staff and Promoting Social Impact

Facing the challenges derived from the relatively weak research orientation, Lingnan University has turned research enhancement into an institutional strategic priority. Guided by this priority, Lingnan University has increased its recruitment of research-track staff under the self-financed TPg programs, which would not be limited by the quota of UGC. All research-track staff members, from postdoc fellows to professors, have made significant contributions to the university's research performance. In the latest round of RAE in 2020 (covering the period of 2014–2020), Lingnan University made impressive progress, especially compared with its performance in the previous round. In specific, among 431 research items submitted by 119 staff members in four panels (Business and Economics; Social Sciences; Humanities; and Creative Arts, Performing Arts, and Design), more than half received 4-Star (World Leading) or 3-Star (Internationally Excellent) ratings. In addition, in Sociology and Anthropology, Lingnan University had the highest percentage of 4-Star research (Lingnan University, 2021e).

More importantly, Lingnan University does not develop its research only for the sake of research. Research has been integrated into Lingnan University's pursuit of quality liberal arts education, which is demonstrated in its teaching and social impact efforts. Research is a significant means for Lingnan University to exert a positive social impact. Lingnan University clearly states its "strong commitment to developing successful interdisciplinary research, forging international collaborations and partnerships, and ensuring that our research effectively informs teaching and knowledge transfer besides contributing to academia" (Lingnan University, 2020a). In summary, Lingnan University aims to impact with "CARE," which stands for "committing to society, advancing entrepreneurship, revitalizing heritage, and embracing sustainability." Impact with CARE has encapsulated the research efforts and been inspiring researchers at Lingnan University (Lingnan University, 2020b).

### 10.4.2.3 Striving for High-Quality Learning and Appropriate Market Positioning

Responding to the challenge derived from uncertain funding for TPg programs, Lingnan University strives to provide a high-quality learning experience as the key strategy to attract TPg students and secure a stable funding source. Rooted in the liberal arts and whole-person education tradition, Lingnan University believes a high-quality learning experience which is essential in establishing the reputation for the university and the individual programs. In addition to integrating liberal arts elements into its TPg programs, Lingnan University promotes and facilitates evidence-informed teaching and experiential learning to enhance students' educational experiences in the graduate programs.

Evidence-informed teaching refers to instructors' practices of applying the evidence and knowledge derived from their research data or findings to teaching (Mok & Xiong, 2022). Lingnan University encourages faculty members to apply their latest research as teaching materials to improve their teaching instead of merely relying on textbooks. In this way, instructors can keep course content relevant to the frontier of research areas, and students can catch up with the development of the research topics in their classes (Mok & Xiong, 2022). For example, in the course titled *Managing Talents and Finance in Education Institutions*, the instructor applied his research findings on professional development centers at various universities globally to help students understand the significance and exemplary practices of faculty's professional development in higher education (i.e., Jacob et al., 2015, 2018). Moreover, as a course assignment, the instructor followed the research framework in his study and required students to work as a team to conduct a case study of a professional development center at a selected university. In the data collection process, students were encouraged to contact the staff members of the case centers in a professional manner. After the course, the instructor encouraged the groups with satisfactory performance to turn their report into their master's thesis or present it at some international conferences. Through this assignment, students can obtain up-to-date information and research experience on professional development in higher education while practicing their teamwork and communication skills, which are significant components of the whole-person education at Lingnan University.

As to experiential learning, Lingnan University emphasizes that graduate students should learn from experiencing the actual academic and social environments instead of merely listening to lectures in the classroom. Therefore, faculty members are encouraged to open their research projects as a platform for graduate students to gain first-hand experiences in real research projects and academic events. In 2017, the School of Graduate Studies launched the Student Research Enhancement Scheme to support graduate students to join these projects as paid research assistants each semester (Lingnan University, 2020b). Moreover, to promote experiential learning, some graduate programs integrate exchange opportunities and international academic conferences into their curricula. Students are required to attend these activities to gain credits and meet the graduation requirements. Among the nine compulsory courses for the program of Master of Arts in International Higher Education and



Management (IHEM), three are experiential learning courses based on three annual international conferences of different scales and topics. For instance, students of the course *Internationalization and Quality Management in Higher Education* attend a symposium of the same title every year, and they are also encouraged to present their research works in addition to joining as audiences.

Besides ensuring high-quality learning experiences as the key strategy to attract students, TPg programs of Lingnan University are trying to take up the niche market. Specifically, to differentiate the TPg programs from the traditional RPg programs in Hong Kong, Lingnan University has set up many interdisciplinary programs to cultivate students with multiple dimensions of skills needed in the job market. For example, under the School of Graduate Studies, the IHEM program and the Master of Social Sciences in Organizational Psychology and Education Management (OPEM) combine international education and management as well as psychology and education management. IHEM and OPEM have become the flagship TPg programs for Lingnan University. On top of meeting the market needs of local, mainland China, and international students in pursuing their graduate degrees, Lingnan University has set up TPg programs relevant to Hong Kong's strategic development priorities. For instance, the Master of Cities and Governance program aims to cultivate talents for developing Hong Kong into an international smart city.

Lingnan University's TPg programs have gained considerable development. In terms of enrollment, the number of TPg students has reached 1436 for the academic year of 2021–2022, doubling the figure of that in 2018–2019, even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lingnan University, 2021b). Meanwhile, some TPg programs were recognized by the UGC and included in its Targeted TPg Program Fellowship Scheme, which aimed to attract local students to study in the TPg programs relevant to the priorities in Hong Kong's development (UGC, 2022).

## 10.5 Discussion

After reviewing the responses of Lingnan University to the challenges in developing graduate education within its liberal arts context, Lingnan University is on the right track, especially applying evidence-informed teaching and experiential learning to integrate its liberal arts and whole-person education into all graduate programs (Mok & Xiong, 2022). Lingnan University has also achieved impressive research progress, which is, in turn, facilitating graduate education (Lingnan University, 2021e).

Lingnan University's efforts to develop graduate education and address the conflict between research and the teaching focus of liberal arts education provide some insights into the roles of graduate education in promoting liberal arts education. First, graduate education can contribute to liberal arts education by applying evidence-informed teaching and experiential learning. Research in the liberal arts context should be applied as a valuable platform for students to gain first-hand research experiences and understand the frontier topics of a research area. By converting

research into necessary evidence for instructors' teaching, research can be integrated as a valuable component in liberal arts education. Moreover, research-related activities, such as conferences and symposiums, can provide students in a liberal arts context with a platform to gain first-hand academic experiences and practice their communication skills in social networking. Lingnan University has promoted these strategies to develop and promote self-financed TPg programs while highlighting its liberal arts traditions.

However, Lingnan University still has a long way to go to comprehensively integrate graduate education and liberal arts education. Even though the senior administrators have made strategic and practical efforts in shifting the institutional resources to graduate students, especially those from the self-financed TPg programs, the primary focus remains on the undergraduate students and programs. In addition, the one-year time of TPg programs is too short for students to sufficiently experience the liberal arts education. On the teaching side, despite having identified evidence-informed teaching and experiential learning as the approach to integrating research and teaching in the liberal arts context, Lingnan University should give time for faculty members to change their teaching style and re-design their courses accordingly. The high standards of both teaching and research also bring heavy burdens for new staff members of these TPg programs. At the institutional level, Lingnan University continues exploring the appropriate human resource management structure that can support the rapid development of graduate education and TPg programs.

Notwithstanding these barriers, Lingnan University as a liberal arts institution keeps students' learning experiences at the central point of developing graduate education. Lingnan University clearly understands that the key to the success of graduate education is paying attention to graduate students' particular needs regarding their study and future development. Given Lingnan University's experiences, the development of graduate education can well support liberal arts education.

## **10.6 Conclusion: Implications for Other Liberal Arts Colleges**

As a leading liberal arts university in Hong Kong and Asia, Lingnan University has increasingly emphasized research and graduate education. Its efforts in improving research and graduate programs are closely connected to its liberal arts traditions. Through evidence-informed teaching and experiential learning, research development has facilitated the integration of liberal arts education and graduate education. However, Lingnan University's case in improving graduate education is deeply embedded in Hong Kong's higher education system, which is featured by high institutional autonomy and fierce quality-based competition. Lingnan University can freely take the "bottom-up" approach to develop graduate education. When other liberal arts colleges want to refer to Lingnan University's case, they need to understand the impact of the Hong Kong higher education system on Lingnan University's

efforts and carefully evaluate their own context to determine an appropriate way of developing graduate education.

With Lingnan University's case in developing graduate education, the following student-centered implications are proposed for other liberal arts colleges.

First, the pursuit of research enhancement should be connected to students' learning. Evidence-informed teaching and experiential learning can be applied to convert research into useful liberal arts learning platform for students. In this sense, higher education institutions should develop necessary professional development programs to help faculty members balance their focus on research and teaching and adapt to the changes in teaching styles and contents.

Second, the development of graduate education in the liberal arts context should combine the advantages of liberal arts education and the job market's needs to help students cultivate the necessary skills to stand out among college graduates. Lingnan University's case highlights the trending development of interdisciplinary programs that can address the human resource needs in local, national, and international development.

The final and the most important implication is to keep the core tradition of liberal arts education, which is to help students become a "whole person" with the necessary knowledge and inquiry methods to explore the world and the life meaning, the skills and wisdom to work and live with other people, and finally, the attitude to serve the society for the human's well-being. The development of graduate education should support the realization of the whole-person education purpose instead of becoming a barrier. Each liberal arts college or university should explore its proper way, and Lingnan University has set an example.

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