CONTEXT: BUILDING A CROSS-CULTURAL LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

Working Group Report #1

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INTRODUCTION

The Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (VCAA) charged an IGHE Working Group with exploring the underlying principles and practices of a liberal arts and sciences education in a global context and in the context of a joint venture institution deeply informed by Chinese and US approaches to education.

The Working Group began by examining the core features of a liberal arts and science education, how Yale-NUS and NYU-Abu Dhabi sought to blend different educational philosophies, and the opportunities and challenges they navigated in doing so. It then considered the extent to which these schools offered a Western import, a cultural blending, or something new and global, and the questions that emerged as relevant for DKU.

The group then explored Chinese premodern educational traditions as one way of how DKU might further root its approach in different cultural and philosophical viewpoints. The group considered both the opportunities and the obstacles presented by further blending Chinese educational traditions with the more Western liberal arts and science model adopted from Duke University.

Last, the Working Group then turned its attention to a different kind of context: the diversity and commonalities among our own students as these influence their approach to learning and, consistent with a Chinese-inspired educational model, whether DKU might experiment with different approaches to teaching and learning that reduced the influence of grades.

This report summarizes the Working Group's discussions of the issues above and concludes with a set of recommendations for further exploring issues related to DKU's "rooted globalist" identity, the US, Chinese, and global sources of its educational model, and the opportunities for investigating more deeply ideas from classical and modern Chinese thought that could enrich a liberal arts education. The recommendations further address practical issues related to teaching and learning, grading, and language acquisition.

THE LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

The Working Group began by revisiting a 2017 DKU report on the Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) in China. That report defined a liberal arts and sciences education as "a comprehensive and holistic approach to the purpose of education. Its aim is to prepare workers and citizens who can think broadly and learn independently." [1] It noted several features:

- A set of common courses or classes in a breadth of disciplines as well as the development of intellectual competencies that go beyond specific disciplinary content.

- Purposeful efforts to inculcate problem-solving and analytical skills, the ability to listen and to communicate, and the capacity to integrate and make meaning out of contending intellectual and cultural perspectives.

- Graduates develop both qualitative and quantitative acumen, as well as "a deep understanding of complex connections between issues of profound importance."

- Science is an equally indispensable element for fostering adaptability and creativity as part of a holistic education; the liberal arts does not mean the humanities and fine arts alone.

Liberal arts and sciences education strives to prepare graduates to make wise contributions to technologically dynamic and culturally diverse societies. This approach contrasts most directly with the dominant method of education globally, which is highly specialized or technical and explicitly vocational in orientation.

The Working Group further learned about the history of a liberal arts and sciences education in different countries and traditions:

- Western historians often trace the idea of a liberal education to "two Western traditions: Socrates' belief in the value of 'the examined life,' and Aristotle's conviction for 'reflective citizenship.'

- Across Asia, various Confucian traditions are oriented around humanism and self-reflection and promote personal exploration rather than passive learning. Hindu and Buddhist traditions have also emphasized self-reflection and self-realization, which were fostered in universities founded centuries before the oldest European universities.

- Nalanda University in India, founded in 427 CE, was a residential university hosting a global community of scholars, and helped foster intellectual connections across the world. In Cairo, Al-Azhar University, founded in 975 CE, supplemented theological studies with philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. Today, though, most countries shaped by Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions offer highly utilitarian and ideological forms of education.

JOINT-VENTURE UNIVERSITIES

The Working Group next read about the origins, accomplishments, and challenges encountered by Yale-NUS College and NYU-Abu Dhabi.

Yale-NUS

Yale-NUS adopted a global mission statement in the form of a haiku:

A community of learning,

Founded by two great universities,

In Asia, for the world.

It built a curriculum in which students studied ancient Rome and the Ming dynasty and read both Homer's *Odyssey* and the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*. They encountered Ibn Khaldun and Max Weber, Simone de Beauvoir and Saba Mahmood, the Buddhist monk Shantideva and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Yet even Yale-NUS's global core curriculum raised thorny questions: Does Asia stretch from China to India, Southeast Asia to the Middle East? And, however Asia is defined, how do the varied traditions, texts, politics, and cultures found there sit next to an equally varied Western tradition? Does the very formulation of "Asia" suggest that East and West are uniform entities? Some students have felt that the curriculum places too much emphasis on China and India and is insufficiently attentive to the culture and traditions of Singapore and more locally rooted writers, thinkers, and communities.

So, too, stakeholders in Yale-NUS often had different understandings of key concepts including the meaning of freedom and critical thinking. One camp took an approach rooted in the belief that freedom is unfettered and "the goal is to win the argument or battle by attacking the opponent's argument and showing that one's argument is superior to the opponent's." The other camp advanced a more culturally embedded and cooperative model in which freedom is "situated within historical, political, and socio-cultural realities and constraints."

Intriguingly, proponents of the respective conceptions of critical thinking did not fall neatly into a West vs. East framework. Disputes over these different approach and over academic freedom at Yale-NUS capture the possibilities and constraints on cross-cultural understanding in one setting. These differences played some part in the rifts that led to the closing of Yale-NUS and its merger into NUS.

NYU-Abu Dhabi

NYU Abu Dhabi had to tackle an array of issues as a university committed to a global sensibility, formed in the US mold, and located in a culturally traditional and politically authoritarian Middle Eastern country. The university sought to address these complexities by blending Middle Eastern and Western perspectives in its curriculum and by offering options for mixed or gender-segregated halls in its residence halls, among other methods.

At the same time, confusion persisted over what it meant to be a global university. NYU's president, John Sexton, had articulated a quasi-theological vision of an "ecumenical university," which would push students to go beyond what he called "intellectual indifferentism" and engage with one another's differences. The goal was for them to argue and debate in ways that deepened understanding without assuming that there was one right answer or right way of thinking.

But NYU Abu Dhabi students struggled to understand what this ecumenical vision actually meant and worried about expressing views that might offend their peers. In the first years, students were more comfortable minimizing their differences. Over time, the university wrestled with questions such as: Is it better to offer a course on "Global Shakespeare" that examines a Western writer with whom writers around the world have had to engage? Or should a global university focus on applying the theoretical vocabulary of postcolonialism to an author like the Sudanese Tayeb Salih? These various disputes over culture and citizenship are challenging to resolve within a single curriculum for a heterogeneous student body.

WHAT IS A GLOBAL UNIVERSITY?

The Working Group then considered the extent to which American-sponsored universities in Asia and the Middle East, a liberal arts and sciences education has meant a Western import, a cultural blending, or something new and global. [2] It highlighted several questions:

- **What is "freedom"?** In Singapore, two different conceptions of freedom clashed, one which emphasized economic freedom and the other which emphasized political freedom. This conflict raises the broader question of what freedom means in different contexts. Does a liberal education presuppose the openness of Western, liberal societies? Is it tied to notions of individualism that are at odds with commitments to community and tradition in Asian societies?

- **How broad can and should the curriculum be?** Some praised the way that students in Singapore and in Abu Dhabi saw gaps in the curriculum and pushed for more diversity in in it. Others argued that not all ideas can be given equal weight in a curriculum and that it is the faculty's job to determine what should be taught.

- **What is "a global university?"** Some Working Group members thought that DKU should not try to be everything and, instead, to sharpen its identity at the intersection of the US and China. DKU, in this view, should be more open about the idea that our rootedness is a rootedness of an American university in China. Others argued that DKU should become a more global university and reflect more of the different traditions and cultures from which its students come.

- **How can DKU be more local?** DKU should be a genuine collaboration, not an imposition, in China, many members said. We need to foster relationships with our partners and under our local context better. How can we incorporate the local context into the curriculum and immerse students in local culture, especially if many students and faculty don't speak Chinese?

Working Group members also observed that DKU would benefit from having venues for faculty, students, and staff to explore the kinds of issues raised above and to learn more about other joint-venture universities and the challenges that they have encountered. Can DKU work through overlapping and sometimes competing cultures and philosophical commitments in ways that consciously engage with the messy issues at the juncture of the local and the global? Can it advance more profound and more successful forms of education than those found elsewhere?

CHINESE PREMODERN EDUCATIONAL TRADITIONS

A full consideration of what it might mean to further root DKU in the Chinese context would include historical, political, social, economic, and educational context. In a companion piece to this report, an IGHE Student Working Group has prepared a report on *Innovation in Undergraduate Education in China*. This report analyzes recent higher education policies, provides case studies of Chinese universities that exemplify innovative practices, and identifies the challenges these university face.

Owing to time constraints, the IGHE Faculty and Staff Working Group restricted its focus to examining one example of what it might mean to further incorporate into DKU the foremost

education tradition in China: Confucianism. The purpose was not to exclude other important educational influences in China or more globally but, instead, to try out in one case what it might mean for DKU to develop its own distinctive blend of cultural and philosophical traditions of education.

Confucianism is the somewhat misleading translation of the Chinese term *rujia* (house of the scholars), a term that does not include the name of Confucius himself. From what we know about Confucius as he appears in his collected dialogues (like Socrates, Confucius left no writing of his own), he saw himself primarily as a transmitter of knowledge and customs. Confucius lived in an era of constant strife, and he saw in the customs of the past a way of returning to a harmonious society. Key principles and practices include:

- **An emphasis on tradition, not on innovation.** A Confucian approach to knowledge respects (sometimes even reveres) the past. Confucius saw himself as a transmitter of older knowledge, not as someone who was himself special or revolutionary. Confucian history shows that, even when new ideas are presented, this is always done by reference to what came before.

- **An emphasis on the social, human environment.** Of essence to Confucians is the specific situations we find ourselves in: the family, the classroom, the business meeting, government. In each of these situations, we have specific roles to fulfill. Confucianism is thus not interested in "discovering who we are," which is often the advertised offering of universities in the West. It is interested in molding individuals to adapt smoothly to different situations.[3]

- **Education for everyone, not just for the elite.** Confucius famously taught anyone who wanted to learn. Every single person has a role to play in society, and education ensures that each person is able to function well.

- **Education tailored to individual needs**. Because he taught anyone willing to learn, Confucius's student body was very diverse. Confucius therefore felt it was necessary to adjust his teachings to individual needs. This is why his teachings are often contradictory: they need to be understood as delivered to a certain individual, and are not absolute statements that have to be taken at face value.[4] For the modern university classroom, this implies that classrooms have to be small so that teachers can understand the backgrounds of their individual students such as to be able to speak to their needs as learners.

- **The teacher is a role model for the student.** The teacher teaches not just in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom, by acting correctly and judiciously in social situations. Confucian teachers practice what they preach.

- **The teacher's sole professional focus is teaching.** Because for Confucius teaching is something that is to be taken very seriously, involving the wholesale transformation of a young individual into a virtuous person, a teacher needs to devote their full energy to this task.

For Confucius, the ultimate goal of education was to create individuals that are *benevolent*, a term that signifies a deep and empathetic connection to the community surrounding them. This communal orientation towards virtuous individuals is not so commonly emphasized in western liberal arts education. Could it inspire us to rethink the role of education in shaping an individual: innovation balanced with tradition; authenticity balanced with social adaptability; benevolence with savviness?

There is also great variety within Confucianism: Confucius is far from its only component, and arguably other figures like Mencius, Xunzi, Zhu Xi, and others are as important or even more important than him. Historically, Confucianism was also a decidedly global tradition, affecting politics and society in Greater East Asia: in the eighteenth century, for example, Korea claimed to be "the most Confucian country in East Asia."[5] Some have even argued that it has cosmopolitan dimensions. Certainly, for Confucians, the community closest to an individual is the most important. Once one has oneself and one's family in order, only then can an individual have broader ambitions. This is visible in the Confucian virtue of filial piety, an often-misunderstood idea that nevertheless urges on children the need to obey their parents (but also, if necessary, correct them).

Though in the working group we focused on Confucianism, this is of course not the only pedagogical tradition in China. We needed to start our exploration somewhere, and Confucianism, which has dominated secular education in China for the past 2000 years, offered a logical starting point. But the other two of the "Three Teachings," Buddhism and Daoism, also offer robust models and ideas of how to nurture human beings towards becoming wise individuals. The Chinese tradition of Zen Buddhism, for example, positions itself opposite Confucianism in emphasizing personal experience as the heart of learning.

The Daoist tradition emphasizes harmony not just with the social, but also, as DKU faculty member James Miller has argued, with the natural environment, a useful teaching for times of ecological crisis.[6] Emerging in China at roughly the same time as Confucianism, Daoism is in many ways a response to it: whereas Confucius emphasized culture and purposeful education, Daoist thinkers like Laozi and Zhuangzi believed that human beings should be left alone. We don't need to be forced to learn; we learn naturally, just like a child picks up language by listening to its parents or learns to walk by imitating its peers. Of course, as with Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism also come with a unique set of challenges and a historical complexity.

IMPLICATIONS, OPPORTUNITES, AND OBSTACLES

What might it look like to draw on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism to shape a distinctively DKU approach to an education in the liberal arts and sciences? Some ideas include:

- Drawing on the idea that a teacher is a role model, we might invite faculty to model, in the classroom and outside of it, what it is like to learn, and what behaviors promote learning. This could mean, as discussed below, that they participate as students in undergraduate classes in Chinese or quantum physics. Students could thus see faculty struggling to understand something complex, but also see how faculty are willing to fail in learning and mimic the metacognitive processes they demonstrate. This would build a community of

learning where faculty are no longer untouchable "sage on the stages," but role models of learning.

- Drawing on the idea that context matters, our classrooms could offer simulations of real social contexts, where the goal is not to conquer or triumph, but to make sure that everyone feels included and welcomed and can function to the best of their ability. One template for this might be the Giving Voice to Values model pioneered in business schools. DKU's own Liang Yu is an expert on this model, which aims to model real-life ethical conflicts and invites students to solve these conflicts without confrontational behavior.

- Zen Buddhism's emphasis on personal experience could entail a shift towards more experiential learning, or even incorporating various types of meditation as classroom activities. One model for this is what Contemplative Studies pioneer Harold Roth calls "labs:" instead of students having a lab section in a separate space, in psychology and religious studies courses the lab is their own mind. Instead of asking students to write papers, we could invite them to submit to platforms, such as Wikipedia or Sciworthy, that host their own brand of peer reviews, showing how classroom knowledge applies to the "real" world.

- The Daoist tradition might lead DKU to put greater emphasis on the specific interests that students bring into our courses. We could imagine, for example, a constantly changing class that adjusts to the students who are in it, while still maintaining the same learning objectives. Such a class might focus on skills rather than content, and it would allow students to gain these skills by playing to their natural inclinations.

- We would also share what we do with the broader community that surrounds us. We might not be able to teach everyone, but we can imagine models of public scholarship that invite anyone interested onto our campus. DKU could, for example, host a lecture series around cultural features of the Kunshan and Suzhou area. The Kun Opera conference that Working Group member Kim Hunter Gordon organized this year would be one model of what that could look like. At the same time, we can also imagine developing non-degree programs that teach anyone willing to learn.

Working Group members saw opportunities and obstacles to further integrating Chinese educational traditions with Western notions of a liberal arts and sciences education:

Many found appealing Confucianism's emphasis on being a good person and on building from there to family and society. So, too, they were drawn to its emphasis on personal development as well as skill development and to the role of faculty as mentors who help guide a student's overall development, not just his or her academic development. They also saw productive areas of overlap and connection between the Western liberal arts approach and Confucianism. This tradition's focus on self-improvement, individualized learning, and emotional intelligence could enable DKU to roots its approach in both Western and Asian traditions of learning.

The discussion of Confucianism also raised concerns that drawing on this tradition could instill too much respect for authority, as opposed to critical thinking. The focus on harmony could reinforce hierarchy and come at the expense of tolerance for a diversity of perspectives and limit

critical analysis, some said. Worrisome, too, were aspects of Confucianism seen to be at odds with modern ideas of equality and especially the equality of women. Working Group members suggested that students may perceive Confucianism as out of touch with their lives and supportive of conservative ideology. Others asked whether it is appropriate for a university to actively teach compassion and other moral values, and whether faculty would be willing and able to do so?

Working Group members thought that the questions above merited further learning and discussion. They also identified several other questions for further exploration. Confucianism, they noted, is a complex tradition including Classical, Neo, New, Democratic, and Constitutional versions, and its internal variety poses difficulties for integrating into the curriculum. DKU should be careful to articulate what it means when referring to Confucianism. More broadly, they asked whether the goal would be layer aspects of Confucianism onto a Western liberal arts and sciences foundation, or would the goal be to blend the two can blend into an organic fusion? Last, Working Group members wanted to know more about practical questions: What would it mean to further implement Confucian and other educational traditions into the classroom in terms of curriculum design, course activities, and classroom assessment?

One underlying barrier to further exploring these questions is a lack of linguistic competency and broad knowledge about China among faculty. Working Group members highlighted the absence of incentives for non-Chinese faculty to learn Mandarin. At a university where we mandate that all students be proficient in English and Mandarin, such a disconnect between faculty and students does not help the cross-cultural understanding DKU is premised upon.

GRADING AND LEARNING

The Working Group then turned its attention to a different kind of context for our deliberations: the diversity and commonalities among our own students as it influences their approach to learning. While DKU is located in China, its students come from a wide range of geographical origins and cultural backgrounds. In the lounges of the dormitories in campus, one can hear students from the former USSR Republic Georgia discussing the possibilities of economic and political change with friends from Nepal. Here, students from Pakistan can explore Buddhist temples together with their Chinese colleagues and have debates about what "religion" really is. We wanted to understand what, if anything, this diverse group of individuals has in common.

Despite their diversity, almost all our students have been trained to pursue grades as the goal of education, and only sometimes to focus on learning for its own sake. Chinese students come in as top achievers on the *gaokao*, the Chinese high school test. Despite the idea, common in China, that the *gaokao* is based on one's merit as an individual, top achievers on this test usually belong to the upper and middle classes, which are more adequately able to support the intense process of studying for this test.[7] Much like the SATs in the United States, the *gaokao* is a test that rewards studying for its own sake: students learn the tricks of doing well on questions.

In the United States, a similar emphasis on what an anthropologist we read calls "schooling" exists.[8] American students are taught to write and test in genres (the five-paragraph essay, the multiple-choice test) that have little to no relationship to real-life situations. Their education is measured in time units that equal to time spent in class, which she finds a poor indication of how much a student is actually learning.

Moreover, by giving students a grade, we erase the particularity of their learning achievements. We and they learn very little from it. Grade inflation worsens this problem, making it hard to see what learning actually happened. What's more, students can see grades as a game that is regulated by changing rules that seem arbitrary. An A-paper with one professor often is not an A with another. Students are incentivized to go through the course trying to please the professor, trying to obtain a grade with as little efforts as possible and, in extreme cases, to take the risk of plagiarizing and cheating. A relentless focus on grades also induces a fear of failure in which students avoid higher-level courses that may be more demanding and harder to receive top grades.

Consistent with Confucianism's emphasis on learning, might we experiment with educational approaches that allow for experimentation and failure, that promote metacognition by asking student to reflect regularly on how they learn, and provide more holistic assessments of students that offer a fuller picture of the student's background and their learning progress? Could we find ways that balance students' desires for grades with options that don't erase the particularly of each student's learning achievement and contribute to grade inflation?

IMPLICATIONS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND OBSTACLES

During and after our discussion, working group members expressed a deeper understanding of their students' backgrounds and the various influences shaping their experiences. They highlighted that assessment is "tricky," and wondered about the extent to which alternative assessment methods could be implemented broadly at DKU: we are an institution that relies on accreditation by two different countries, and that accreditation often is linked to traditional assessment. Some suggested that adopting a pass/fail model for every course would be a good way to promote learning at DKU. During one of our meetings, support was also given to the idea of assessing students over their entire academic journey rather than in shorter sessions, particularly benefiting sophomores and juniors. In general, the exchange of new and diverse perspectives on assessment inspired members to consider similar approaches in their own courses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify and support opportunities for DKU faculty, students, and staff to learn more about overlapping and sometimes competing cultures and philosophical commitments at play in joint-venture universities, what DKU can learn from the challenges these institutions have encountered, and the opportunities for advancing a distinctively DKU "rooted globalist" model of curricular and co-curricular education. These opportunities should consciously attend to questions of what it means to be a US-China joint venture that includes students, faculty, and staff from across the globe.

- Organize a research group or a co-curricular seminar with faculty, students, and staff to investigate more deeply ideas from classical and modern Chinese thought that could enrich a liberal arts education. This is both a scholarly and pedagogical project. The last major English-language study of Confucian pedagogy dates back to 1989.[9] Often such studies are focused on reconstructing the past rather than examining what the past can mean for us today. This is thus a major research opportunity that DKU is perfectly placed to pursue, having already recruited many experts on Chinese history and culture. The tasks for the research groups could include inviting experts on Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist

education and how these traditions can enrich a liberal arts education for a workshop at DKU, with the result of publishing an edited volume on this topic.

- As DKU explores and revises its curriculum and its co-curricular, experiential and student affairs programming, intentionally attend to opportunities to infuse a deeper understanding of East-Asian and Western concepts across the curriculum including how different traditions may provide resources for developing the "durable skills" taxonomy recommended in the IGHE companion report on the skills underlying DKU's principles, curriculum, and co-curriculum. Examine students' attitudes toward grading and interactions with faculty. There is some evidence that there are significant cultural differences between East-Asian and Western students in this sense. This therefore could possibly be another research opportunity that DKU could fruitfully pursue. One could imagine, for example, pioneering new models of assessment in the Common Core while also measuring quantitative and qualitative outcomes of such a change in assessment models.

- Examine support and incentives for international faculty to gain a deeper proficiency in Chinese. This could take the form of additional discretionary funding reserved exclusively for this purpose (with which they could pay for individual tutoring or for subscriptions to learning apps), course releases or bonuses for people who pass standardized or in-house proficiency tests (e.g. HSK) and so on. Consider the possibility international faculty's Chinese learning would take place alongside undergraduate students by allowing faculty to enroll in DKU's Chinese language courses. Doing so could provide our international students with a model for learning to follow, showing them that they are not alone in attempting to master this challenging language. Conversely, we should also contemplate short and fun events aimed to display the complexity of Chinese traditions.

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