

Education for All in Higher Education

Susanna Wai Ching Lai-Yeung, Ph.D.

Author's Contact Information

Susanna Wai Ching Lai-Yeung, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor,
The Open University of Hong Kong,
A0423 School of Education and Languages,
30 Good Shepherd Street,
Homantin, Kowloon, HONG KONG
852-2768 5811
email: swclai@ouhk.edu.hk

Abstract:

Students enrolled in distance learning courses present a rather different profile compared with the full-time students. This essay describes the problems such students commonly face and discusses some ways to facilitate students' learning. It ends with reflections on the goal of education for all, with reference to Confucius thinking and the higher education context.

Key Words:

Education for all, student diversity, student support, distance learning.

Introduction

My work at the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) involves multiple tasks. Besides teaching regular daytime full-time students and engaging in research work, I am heavily involved in course development and course coordination. Working in a university offering primarily distance learning programs, most of the academics are also responsible for coordinating several courses in these programs. Though I have worked in other "conventional" universities and coordinated different courses before, the course coordination work in a distance learning context is something slightly different. Course coordination at OUHK essentially refers to four areas of responsibilities, namely, working with the tutors, supporting students, preparing assignments and examinations, and developing learning and teaching materials. My present reflections will mainly focus on one area: my work with those students who enroll in our distance learning courses. These are mainly adults with diverse backgrounds who are interested in pursuing higher education. Most of them are working in the daytime. Our university does provide some evening tutorial sessions for students but attendance is basically voluntary. To ensure quality in our programs, we closely monitor many aspects related to learning, such as tutor recruitment and training, development and maintenance of the teaching and learning materials, the setting and marking of assignments and examinations.

Getting to Know the Students

1. Problems students face

My contact with students enrolled in the distance learning courses are mainly through several means: tutorial visits, telephone contacts, e-mails or sometimes letters. One of the most common reasons that students contact me is that they want to apply for extension of their assignment deadline. There are clearly stipulated guidelines about mark deductions for late assignments. To avoid such penalty, students will contact me for extension approval. Through such contacts, I learn more about our students. I hear all kinds of reasons for extension applications, usually falling into one of the following categories:

- Problems with work - such as working long hours; being occupied with celebrations or performances at school; making preparations for school quality assurance inspections; change of job, etc.
- emotional or health problems - such as being sick; undergoing surgery; being hospitalized; feeling depressed; complications associated with pregnancy or delivery, having high blood pressure and have to slow down to reduce stress, etc.
- Family issues – such as issues with taking care of sick family members; children’s homework supervision concerns; problems with spouse; death of loved ones, etc.
- Others – such as technical problems with the computer; moving house; assignments being lost in mail delivery; house being broken into, etc.

These problems are not uncommon among adult learners in taught programs, but as I have several hundred of distance learning students per semester, such problems are recounted in greater frequency. Besides granting approval for extension, I often respond to ‘special’ cases with special notes; such as “My best wishes for a happy and memorable wedding!” “With deep sympathy, I send you my condolences.” “I understand your difficulties. Take care!” Some students replied to these notes with appreciation which shows that small acts of kindness are important. For example, one student wrote:

“I am really thankful to you. I strongly feel that I must study hard in this course to return your thoughtful guidance. I am so deeply touched. Blessings to you!”

2. Lessons for Seasoned Procrastinators

At times, I receive applications from the same students repeatedly for most of their assignments. What bewilders me is that sometimes I receive applications for different assignments with the same reason throughout the semester! For example, one student’s application for Assignment 1, 2, and 3 is: “Busy at work, apply to extend for 21 days”. Isn’t it typical that all working adults, some with family obligations, are busy? Shouldn’t students learn to plan ahead and manage time more effectively? My usual response to such applications is: “Try to finish your assignment within x days. Consult your tutor for specific questions with the assignment, if necessary. Plan ahead and schedule time earlier in future.” If such students phone me to apply for extension, I often try to understand their situation and give them advice to improve their study skills and habits. In situations where such applications persist, approvals are not granted and

penalty is ensued so that students can learn the right attitude and time management skills to pursue their studies.

3. Students with Special Needs or Circumstances

From time to time, there are students with special needs or chronic illnesses in courses under my coordination. In such cases, with students' consent, I often alert the tutors and suggest ways that they can provide support to these students to facilitate learning. I also have prison inmates that enroll in some of my courses. For these students, because of their special circumstances, they cannot attend tutorials nor can they access our online support system. I mail them past examination papers and always find time to reply their letters when they make enquiries. Considering that I have several hundred students in courses under my coordination, these small gestures are sometimes taxing my time, but are often met with great appreciation by these inmate students, their family members, and their prison officers.

My Reflections:

1. Education for all – regardless of student characteristics

The mission of our University is “to make higher education available to adults, principally through a system of open access and distance education”. One of our key values is that “higher education should be available to all those aspiring to it, regardless of previous qualification, gender, or race” (Open University of Hong Kong, 2009). To realize this belief, I think, students with different background and characteristics need to feel supported. On the other hand, unreasonable and inappropriate requests will not be entertained to compromise quality education. Concrete, though small steps can be taken to facilitate their learning journey.

One inmate wrote to me: “I have many questions, and many requests! However, limited by my inmate identity and the circumstances, and unforeseen restrictions, such as my low intelligence, noisy environment, stuffy and hot room, I hope you can understand, show your compassion, and lend a helping hand.” My phone calls, letters, coordination with tutors are all small steps to assist. However, they seem to have made a difference to the students.

2. Education for all in higher education

As educators, we believe that education is for all, and that this belief should be put into practice. We may be aware of the Education for All movement launched in the 1990s in the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand (World Education Forum, 2009). In this movement, education is recognized as an important human right for all people, and “an indispensable key to personal social improvement”. UNESCO now leads the Global Education for All movement, aiming to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015 (UNESCO, 2009). Although this movement essentially aims to achieve education for all at the basic education level, to realize and develop human potential to the full, I am convicted that availability for open access for all to receive education beyond the basic education level is essential. This is particularly so in modern and developed societies where education opportunities

abound and where the trend towards lifelong learning and continuing education is prevalent.

Reflecting on this global trend towards lifelong learning and continuing education, in a deep analysis, I perceive that it is in fact in line with the Chinese cultural heritage that values education. Among the great masters in education, Confucius has long advocated the value of “you jiao wu lei” (educate all, reject none) in his collection of teachings in “lun yu” (Analects of Confucius). This is a respected value among educators but to actualize this ideal, particularly in the tertiary sector, is easier said than done. Higher education is viewed by many in Hong Kong to be for the selected minority (as government-funded places account for only 18%). To improve the situation, recent education reform measures have been introduced to open up more diversified higher education opportunities (Education Commission, 2000). This I consider as one step to achieve education for all. However, as key stakeholders in education, teachers also have a role to play, and an important one, too. We can help make one small step forward if we all uphold and practice the ideal to educate all and reject none in our daily work with students.

References

- Education Commission (2000). Learning for life, learning through life: Reform proposals for the education system in Hong Kong. Hong Kong: Education Commission.
- Open University of Hong Kong (2009). Mission, Key Values and Vision of The Open University of Hong Kong. Retrieved from <http://www.ouhk.edu.hk>. on 20 May, 2009.
- World Education Forum (2009). World Declaration on Education For All. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/en-conf/Jomtien%20Declaration%20eng.shtm> in December, 2009.
- UNESCO (2009). Education for All International Coordination. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/en/efa-international-coordination> in December, 2009.