

The Future of Education
Keynote Speech at the 2024 Congregation of YCCECE
16 November 2024

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Dr Betty Chan, Dr Lydia Chan, Professor Kerry Lee, Honourable Guests, Governing Board and Council Members, Staff and Students, Parents, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me great pleasure to attend the 2024 Congregation of Yew Chung College of Early Childhood Education. It is my great honour to be awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the College.

Yew Chung

In Hong Kong, where it first started under the late Madam Tsang Chor-hang (曾楚珩) over nine decades ago, ‘Yew Chung’ represents a unique brand of private and later International Education. Its ‘learning through play’ pedagogy, introduced by Dr Betty Chan in the 1970s, has inspired generations of students as well as their parents. Together with ‘Yew Wah’, their extensive education network now includes 9 campuses in Hong Kong, as well as international schools and kindergartens in Guangzhou, Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Qingdao, Yantai, and Zhejiang Tongxiang on the mainland of China, as well as in Silicon Valley in the US, offering education from Early Childhood to Higher Education.

The establishment of Yew Chung College of Early Childhood Education in 2018, after 10 years of operation as a Community College, underscored a special dedication to the promotion of a discovery approach and research-informed teaching for Early Childhood Education, *or ECE* for short. Here I would like to take the opportunity to warmly congratulate the College for successfully obtaining institutional accreditation last month for operating postgraduate programmes at Qualifications Framework Level 6 from the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications. This is indeed a major milestone.

The “Yew Chung Approach to ECE” features an innovative combination of “Emergent Curriculum, Child-led Inquiry, and Multilingualism”, encapsulated by the 12 Values. It combines traditional Chinese Confucianism with the Western progressive education theory represented by John Dewey, celebrating both Chinese and Western cultures. Students are encouraged to value both cognitive thinking and compassion, appreciating Chinese culture as well as global awareness. Today, it is becoming more widely recognized that learning should be fun and intellectually stimulating, taking advantage of children’s natural curiosity, which applies to all levels of schooling. Let me quote a chemistry teacher (Alice Leung) who has just won the Australian Prime Minister’s Prize for Excellence in Science Teaching in Secondary Schools. Whether it is using chocolate chip muffins to show sustainability issues caused by mining or teaching algebra via how the pandemic spread, she wants her students to know how science can shape the future. *“It’s to make it memorable. And I think having that fun component, you make it exciting, you make it engaging, and then they want to understand it”*, she said.

Early childhood education

Education affects people's life. ECE is vital to education, laying a crucial foundation for the physical, emotional, psychological and cognitive growth of a child. We need a vigorous ECE that opens the heart, mind and intellect of a child, and through the child, the parents. In the past, many in Hong Kong thought that kindergartens only taught young children to sing, dance, draw, then sleep, such that almost anyone (at some point in time not even completing secondary education) could be a kindergarten teacher. It was not until the early 1990s that pre-school teacher training began to be integrated into mainstream teacher education.

During the past few decades, the distortions of the past have been gradually corrected, both in terms of policy and funding. A major turning point was the government's introduction of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme from the 2007/08 school year, under which direct fee subsidy is provided for parents of children attending local non-profit-making kindergartens. The salaries of kindergarten teachers have been improved. Because of the policy to require professional qualifications for ECE teachers, various public universities and self-financing institutions like Yew Chung have joined the ranks of the Education University of Hong Kong in offering undergraduate degree programmes in ECE, now among those most sought after by secondary school leavers. Postgraduate and research degree studies have also been developed along with better-funded research in ECE and related areas.

Our education system

By various standards, Hong Kong has achieved significant progress in education over the years. To start with, we invest a lot in education. During the past decade, the Hong Kong SAR government's recurrent expenditure on education has increased by 48%, an average growth rate of 4.4% per annum. According to the World Bank statistics, government expenditure in education represents 3.8% of GDP in 2023, higher than Singapore with 2.2%. The private sector's contribution, mostly from households, is impressive. A 2017 HSBC report in *The Value of Education* series put Hong Kong's spending as more than US\$132,000, or some HK\$920,000, the highest in the world.

Secondly, we have a high level of education attainment. To illustrate, the 2021 Population Census found that for those aged 25 to 34, 34.8% and 61.4% had attended secondary and postsecondary education respectively. The postsecondary participation rate among secondary school leavers has reached 80.9% in 2023-24. Hong Kong's scores in PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment conducted by the OECD of 81 countries and economies) remain competitive, higher than the OECD average in Mathematics, Reading and Science.¹ STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) has received increasing government attention during the last few years, in line with Hong Kong's aspiration to be an international Innovation and Technology centre. It has now included A (Arts) to become STEAM, which forms the backbone of basic education.

¹ In the most recent 2022 assessment Hong Kong maintained its global ranking of 4th place in Mathematics and moved up from 9th to 7th place in Science although there was a slippage from 4th to 11th place in Reading.

Thirdly, our universities are of world-class standards. Five of our publicly funded universities are ranked among the top 100 in the world, with one to two consistently in the top 50.² In terms of research performance, according to the University Grants Committee’s Research Assessment Exercise conducted in 2020, about 70% of the research projects assessed were judged by international experts to be “internationally excellent” or above — 25% being “world leading”. Meanwhile some self-financing universities and postsecondary colleges are making inroads into enhancing their niche areas in professional and vocational education. They contribute actively to applied education in some strategic areas designated by the government.

Challenges

That said, when we look deeper into our system, we also face challenges. There is still room for improvement in our school environment, not just the physical but also the cultural and technological. While emphasising the importance of patriotic education in schools, we must at the same time cultivate a cosmopolitan outlook that has all along marked Hong Kong’s open-city positioning. Collaboration between universities and industry needs to be deepened to facilitate the application of our exemplary basic research.

As Hong Kong aspires to be an international education hub, we are not as successful in attracting students from foreign countries into our public universities as from the mainland which takes up some 77% of the non-local intake. We have to do more to attract students across the world — the Belt and Road countries, other parts of Asia as well as OECD countries, to make us fully international in Higher Education. We need to contemplate how Hong Kong can be a ‘distinctive’ hub — not just more of the same as other regional hubs, but having its own flavours and colours, showcasing its own unique forms of excellence and hybrid cultural elements.

How would “Study in Hong Kong” (「留學香港」), a new brand now promoted by the government, make a difference compared to other education hubs? In my view, in Hong Kong, one should see the most cosmopolitan and liberal face of a rising China in the global arena. From Hong Kong, one also observes the world through perspectives different from other Asian cities, even Singapore. In terms of core strength, Hong Kong is capable of actively contributing to both international and Asian scholarship and intellectual inquiry in the sciences, arts and humanities.

The impact of Industrial Revolution 4.0

With the advent of Industrial Revolution 4.0, we need to re-examine how we teach and learn in schools, as well as universities.

Kenichi Ohmae (大前研一), a management guru, advocated some years ago that for the 21st-century new economy, we need ‘New Professionals’ who are critical thinkers and adaptive, good at communication and resource management, and capable of solving

² According to the latest (October 2024) Times Higher Education rankings, we have two in the Top 50, namely The University of Hong Kong at 35th place and The Chinese University of Hong Kong at 44th place.

new problems in a fast-changing world. He described such capability in Japanese Kanji as 即(そく)戦(せん)力(りょく)(*sokusenryoku*) or “即戦力” in Chinese, i.e., “instant combat power”, meaning “*put you anywhere and you can start fighting immediately*”.

Thanks to Automation and AI (Artificial Intelligence), many traditional jobs have diminished, but new jobs are also created. Several years ago, there were estimates that 65% of the children entering school will likely end up working in a job that has not been invented yet; 49% of the current jobs have the potential for machine replacement, and 80% of the skills trained during the last five decades can be outperformed by machines. A 2016 World Economic Forum paper expressed concern that education systems have failed to keep up with our “accelerating” world of “disruptive changes” and the “widening skills gaps” in the labour market.

Such gaps alert us of the pressing need for a transformative review of our pedagogy without losing sight of the essence of education. There has been a long debate in many countries about the importance of a knowledge-rich curriculum. Policymakers and educationalists have diverse views. A former British minister of education Nick Gibb wrote last year that “*For the brain to carry out complex problem-solving or critical thinking, it needs required knowledge in long-term memory*”. Our education must help students attain a good knowledge base, develop the capacity for critical and creative thinking, constructive adaptability to the changing environment, as well as moral and social responsibility. We must avoid becoming enslaved by our latest technology and letting it dictate our lives, confine our thinking, and even define our emotions and values.

Beware of excellence without a soul

Since the beginning of this century, there have been warnings from time to time about the possible displacement or even loss of meaning and purpose in universities. Harry Lewis, a former Dean of Harvard College, lamented in his 2006 book that some American universities had achieved “*excellence without a soul*”. Steven Schwartz, then Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University in Australia, remarked in 2010 that “*Universities these days have become so focused on imparting knowledge that they have forgotten to impart wisdom.*”

Despite the rapid advancement made by universities worldwide in scholarly work and ground-breaking research, and despite the quantum leap in the number of graduates and doctorates passed out every year, our institutions of higher learning are encountering what some describe as a crisis of trust. Political correctness of one kind or another, and partisan intrusions, are encroaching on academic freedom on campus. The humanities and social sciences are becoming less valued because the pendulum has shifted towards science and technology.

According to Edelman, a multinational public relations and marketing consultancy firm which has been conducting trust surveys regularly, as of June 2024, nearly one-third of US adult respondents “*have very little or no confidence in higher education*”, marking a double-digit increase from just one year ago. Why so? — a soul-searching question for all university and college leaders. Rebuilding trust—or establishing a larger

reservoir of it—should be every institution’s top priority. Reasserting the core value proposition of the university is a pressing task.

Rebuilding social trust with education as starting point

But not just universities. An even more alarming finding of the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer was: Nearly 60% of the respondents lack trust, 53% think governments are less capable than businesses, and 44% think they are inferior to NGOs. Nearly half believe that the government (48%) and the media (46%) are divisive forces in society. The 2024 findings detect a ‘New Paradox’: While rapid innovation promises hope for a new era of prosperity, it has instead aggravated the risk of trust, leading to further social instability and political polarization.

Education should be the starting point of the process to rebuild trust in our society. We need to inculcate a culture whereby our students understand and appreciate others, dare to imagine positively and think out of the box, thus becoming less cynical or sceptical. Education is ultimately about transforming the lives and future of individuals. The late Nelson Mandela was among those leaders who argued strongly for education as a driver of social change and reform. “*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world*”, he said, although he also added that the most difficult thing to change, oftentimes, is our own selves — our pride and prejudice, I suppose.

Investing in the future

The world has become more divisive and conflict-ridden. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)’s 2021-22 Human Development Report depicted the world as in “*Uncertain Times and Unsettled Lives*”. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 6 out of 7 people globally felt insecure, ironically in a context of incredible progress made around the world. While we now have more power, especially through technology, to influence our future, we don’t have more control over it, as acutely seen over climate change. To navigate the uncertain and complex world, the UNDP urges policies focusing on the 3 ‘I’ — Investment, Insurance, and Innovation.

It came as no surprise that UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), in its 2021 Report *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*, called upon governments, institutions, organizations and citizens around the world to forge a new social contract for education that will help build peaceful, just, and sustainable futures for all. That report was based on two years of worldwide discussions about the ‘Futures of Education’.

Education, if done well, can contribute towards the 3Is by investing in our future generations, providing them the competencies for productive participation and social mobility, and opening their awareness and intelligence to better engage in innovation. What holds the future of humanity amid polarization, distrust and hatred, conflicts and wars, would be Education. All educators should ask, and especially our graduates today: What kind of young people we aspire to nurture to face and shape the new future? The first steps start with ECE.

With this note, I commend the Yew Chung community once again for their immense efforts in making a difference to generations of students under their care and guidance,

and especially through the training of ECE teachers and principals. Many congratulations to the YCCECE graduates of 2024 and I wish you all a fruitful and rewarding career.

Thank you so very much.