

URGENT

Ms. Flora Tai
Legco Panel on Education
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Building
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30 January 2001

Dear Ms. Tai,

Special Meeting on 3 February 2001

While the UGC will represent us as one of the eight UGC-funded institutions, we wish to use this opportunity to help Legco and the general public better understand our needs from the point of view of Lingnan as a small university with a distinctive and unique mission of providing liberal arts education to students in Hong Kong.

Liberal arts education is a relatively novel concept to Asia, so much so that there has not been a generally-accepted Chinese translation. When we positioned Lingnan as a liberal arts institution in 1995, we decided to use the term 博雅教育. Despite our strenuous efforts to publicize and promote liberal arts education in the past few years, misconceptions still persist.

The most serious misconception is that liberal arts education is defined in terms of subjects or disciplines, specifically humanities such as literature, history and philosophy. This is, of course, not the case. In the United States where liberal arts colleges and universities flourish, it is found that liberal arts institutions produce in relative terms not only more diplomats and CEOs of transnational corporations, but also students who later obtain PhDs in mathematics and physical sciences, than do the major research-oriented universities. Indeed, many liberal arts institutions in the United States have first-rate science departments.

At Lingnan, we are currently establishing decision science subjects, and are considering ways in which we can offer opportunities for students to take physical science subjects in other institutions.

It is also a misconception that liberal arts colleges and universities have strengths only in undergraduate teaching. Today, liberal arts institutions, with only a few exceptions, have well-established graduate programmes. For example, Williams College's graduate programme in development economics and Brandeis University's international business programme are well-known. Some liberal arts institutions have also been ranked among the best in certain areas of research, e.g. Amherst in Russian literature and Brandeis in biotechnology. Princeton, a top research university, is essentially a small liberal arts institution.

Liberal arts education is distinctive because of its intensive teaching and learning process. The objective of liberal arts education is not to produce professionals right away but to nurture critical thinkers, problem-solvers and effective communicators, in the first instance. Small-group teaching is encouraged and close student-staff relationships are emphasized. Students are given a guided liberal choice of subjects on an inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary basis. At Lingnan, every student is assigned an academic adviser. Campus life, especially hostel life, is regarded as an essential part of our education, and 75% (the highest in Hong Kong) of our students live on campus. Students are encouraged to contribute to community service, especially in the Tuen Mun and Yuen Long districts. We provide guidance and supervision to those students who participate in community work.

We have set up an extensive and intensive international exchange programme to increase the exposure of our students. Our international exchange programme works on a one-for-one basis, meaning that for every student we send to an overseas institution, we also receive one student from that institution. This ensures that our partner institutions will work closely with us and that a significant number of non-local students stay on campus to enrich our cross-cultural environment. Our target is that 25% of our students will have an opportunity of spending some time overseas during their three years of study at Lingnan.

Of course, all institutions probably are also doing what we described above. But, we certainly do these things more intensively and

systematically; it is this special teaching and learning approach that makes Lingnan distinctive as a liberal arts university and which incurs a much higher student unit cost than that perceived. Our liberal arts approach to teaching and learning aims at producing young people who are diverse, flexible and creative. It is sometimes erroneously believed that in the age of the New Economy (新經濟), sciences and technology are all that matter. Actually, in this new era innovation is equal to or even more important than technology. Innovation is based on diversity, flexibility and creativity. Liberal arts education thus meets the critical needs of the New Economy. Employers, local and overseas, have increasingly been searching for young graduates with a liberal and critical mind rather than those with special skills. Indeed, our mission of whole-person education and preparing students for life-long, life-wide and life-deep learning, formulated in 1995, concurs with the spirit of the Education Commission's recently proposed reform package.

By nature, liberal arts colleges and universities are small-scale. We have just over 2000 students. In the United States, the size of liberal arts institutions ranges from 500 to 2500 students. The lack of economies of scale is a fundamental problem facing all liberal arts institutions. The unit cost is high. In the United States, almost all liberal arts colleges are private and fees they charge are high. Parents are willing to pay more for a unique, quality education. The good liberal arts colleges are very prestigious and much coveted. It may be argued that in Hong Kong students should pay a higher fee for going to Lingnan to cover the higher cost. This is, however, not a valid argument because the unit cost given to Lingnan is the lowest among all institutions such that our students are already paying close to 30% of the actual cost instead of the average 18% for all higher education students in Hong Kong.

To sum up, there is a widespread lack of understanding of liberal arts education in the following ways:

1. It is wrongly perceived that liberal arts education does not meet the needs of the New Economy or ICT (Information and

Communication Technology) era. Liberal arts institutions are regarded as “lower” or second-rate. As a result, very limited funding has been given to us as front-end loading (extra funding for the development of an institution at the earlier stages), very much unlike the case of, for example, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Moreover, the front-end loading has been taken away from us quite abruptly during a time of cuts in funding for the higher education sector. No chance has therefore been given to Lingnan to develop into a unique, world-class liberal arts university serving the needs of Hong Kong.

2. The nature of liberal arts education is misunderstood. Liberal arts education is perceived as comprising subjects and disciplines incurring low student unit costs. Little attention has been paid to the distinctive teaching and learning processes embedded in liberal arts education. In liberal arts colleges in the United States, the usual staff-student ratio is 1:8-12. At Lingnan, we have to live with 1:15-16, the highest among all 8 institutions.
3. The problem of lack of economies of scale is not properly analysed. It is thought that, over time, the scale problem will gradually go away. Actually, scale by definition is not a function of time but a function of size and size alone. While an institution, whether small or large, can improve efficiency over time by increasing the efficiency of its inputs or in the short run by changing the mix of the inputs, the problem of scale is a separate factor which will remain as long as the size does not change. The funding of a small institution must take its lack of economies of scale into account as long as the institution remains small.

We believe that it is probably for the reasons outlined above that our funding was limited in the past, and is underprovided for the Triennium 2001-2004 in which our recurrent grant has been reduced vis-à-vis the last Triennium by 11.5% (compared to the 5.4% for all eight institutions) and our total funds by 8.3% (compared to the 3.9% cut for all eight institutions). This much higher-than-average cut in funding provided to

us is extremely detrimental to our development as a liberal arts university, especially at its early stage. According to our calculations, if we are going to retain our current activities and spending on the present (2000-2001) funding level, a deficit of \$75-80 million is projected for the Triennium 2001-2004. This sum, though representing less than 0.2% of the total funds for all eight institutions, amounts to almost 9% of our budget.

It is certainly extremely difficult, if not impossible, for us to cope with this deficit. Being a small and young institution, it is not possible for us to cut a unit or even one programme. It is not possible for us to make further savings from our administrative units because we have already done whatever we could to re-engineer them in the past few years. It is difficult for us to obtain significant private donations in the near future because we have already managed to raise funds of about \$201 million to supplement the inadequate government funding (\$580 million) in the campus construction. It is also difficult for Lingnan to generate significant outside income from offering continuing education courses because we lack the established goodwill and history in the provision of such courses. The only choice for us is to reduce significantly the number of our academic staff, which, of course, would have a significant impact on the quality of programmes we offer.

This submission is to urge Legco to recognize the importance of adequately funding the higher education sector in general and liberal arts education in particular at this stage of Hong Kong's development.

Yours sincerely,

Edward K.Y. Chen
President

c.c. Mr. Peter Cheung, Secretary-General, UGC
Mrs. Fanny Law, SEM
Heads of Institutions