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A Longitudinal Study of Hospitality Undergraduate Students' Approaches to Learning: A Case Study of Self-Financed College

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how tourism and hospitality students learn and how they develop their approaches to learning in a self-financed college. The study investigates whether there is a change in students' approaches to learning as they progress through their programmes of study. Data was collected on student approaches to learning at four points: the initial entry to their associate degree programmes, the second year of study (associate degree), the beginning of the first semester of their degree programmes (top-up degree) and the final year of the same programmes. The study is a longitudinal one. It is hoped by that assessing and analyzing students' learning approaches and the direction of any change will allow feedback to be provided to colleges, curriculum planners, and teaching staff about how they are affecting the way their students approach to learning, and thereby assist them to work towards continued improvement and enhancement of learning and teaching.

KEYWORDS: Tourism and hospitality student, Approaches to learning, Teaching

1 INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate education teaching staff are often faced with the question of how to improve the quality of student learning. The aim of this study was to evaluate contextual influences on student learning, and to show how teaching staff and institutions might establish the learning situation so that it develops students' deeper learning. Teaching staff need to take into account the different approaches to learning that students may adopt.

For undergraduate education, in some countries, it is the post-secondary education up to the level of a bachelor's degree (Wikipedia, 2015). In Hong Kong, the chief executive (2000) announced 60% of the senior secondary school graduates should pursue tertiary education in order to compete with the nearby countries (Policy address 2000, 2000). Viewing the situation at year 2000, with 60,000 secondary graduates, about 30,000 graduates were fulfilling the basic entry requirement for the government-funded bachelor degree programmes offered by eight University Grants Committee (UGC-funded) universities. In reality, there were only 14,435 places in those eight universities (FTE Student Enrolment of UGC-funded Programmes 1996-2003, 2013). By deducting that number, there were still more than half of qualified graduates who could not get a place in the public universities. Graduates might consider re-taking the public examination in the next year or finding jobs in the market. So, it might be hard to achieve the target that set by the chief executive in the previous time. Furthermore, the development of 'private university' is uncommon in Hong Kong (University World News, 2008). For a private institution that preferred to be named as a private university needed to be accredited by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ). In addition, the institution needed to operate for at least ten years in order to ensure its quality of teaching up to the degree level. So far, the Hong Kong Shue Yan College (later titled Hong Kong Shue Yan University in 2014) is the first being recognized as private university offering self-financed four-year degree programmes in Hong Kong.

Hence, a gap has been existed between the number of university places and the new target. In order to narrow down such gap, in 2000, some private institutes took the initiative by introducing the two-year associate degree in Hong Kong. Most of the programmes offered by those institutes were self-financed. In general, an associate degree is an academic qualification awarded by community college. In some countries such as United States, the two years study is equivalent to the first two years of a four years bachelor degree offered by college or university (Wikipedia, 2015). Associate degree programmes are mostly articulated with the local or overseas universities.

College of Professional and Continuing Education (CPCE), one of the largest self-financed undergraduate programmes providers, was founded in 2002 by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) that followed the government policy. It focuses on the provision of high quality self-financed programmes at the post-secondary level. The programmes are offered through CPCE's two education units, namely Hong Kong Community College (HKCC) and the School of Professional Education and Executive Development (SPEED). As the college is not a 'real' private university, it is not allowed offering a four-year bachelor degree programme. The only option for the college is provided two years associate degree programmes for secondary school leavers and two years bachelor degree programmes for associate degree and higher diploma graduates. One of the college's missions is seamless articulation through tight integration between units creates a multitude of cross-unit progression opportunities. Nevertheless, the college also promotes multi-entry and multi-exit policy that allows student leaving the college after the first two years associate degree study if student had gained a higher grade. According to HKCC Graduate Survey 2014, a total of 2,580 graduates articulated to bachelor's degree programmes, representing an articulation rate of 81% (HKCC, 2015). Among those, only 27.5% of HKCC were enrolled self-financed top-up degree programmes offered by SPEED. Actually, one of the college's

missions cannot be achieved and the majority of new intakes in SPEED are graduates from other colleges or institutes. Even though HKCC and SPEED are under one college, i.e. CPCE, students in two units have different goals that lead to different approaches of learning.

A lot of previous studies are more focused on the approaches of learning for university students. There is a lack of research to explore the approaches of learning for self-financed college students and it is worth to investigate on it.

1.1 Approaches to learning

The phrase ‘approaches to learning’ refers to the process adopted prior to the outcome of learning, which is the sense in which it is used originally by Marton and Saljo (1976a,b) in their identification of surface and deep approaches in case studies of tertiary students. It is also used to refer to a predisposition to adopt particular processes, which is what is meant when students are asked how they usually go about learning (Biggs, 1987a, b).

The relevant research on student learning in higher education in the past 20 years describes students as approaching their learning in two qualitatively different ways (Biggs, 1987a, b; Ramsden, 1992; Marton et al., 1997). In one approach (the deep approach), students aim to understand ideas and seek meaning, with students having an intrinsic interest in the task. In the other approach (the surface approach), students see tasks as external impositions, and are instrumentally motivated and seeking to meet the demands of the task with minimal effort. Students typically display a bias towards one of these two approaches; however, these approaches are also sensitive to teaching contexts. Many studies have shown that the outcome of students’ learning is associated with the approaches they use (Biggs, 1989; Gibbs, 1992; Marton & Saljo, 1997; Ruhanen, 2005; Chan & Tang, 2006, 2007; Aubke, 2009).

In addition, a student adopting an achieving approach is neat and systemic, and plans ahead, allocating time to tasks in proportion to their grade earning potential. The achieving approach according to Biggs (1987a) is based on a particular form of extrinsic motive, namely the ego-enhancement that comes out of visibly achieving, in particular through high grades. The related strategies refer to organizing time, working space, and syllabus coverage in the most cost-effective way (usually known as ‘study skills’). The surface approach is generally associated with negative factors: poor performance, drop-out, poor self-academic concept. The deep approach is associated with positive factors: an ‘academic’ approach as long as the focus on personally valued subjects, a good academic self-concept, sees oneself as good performer and is satisfied with progress. The achieving approach is also positive academically, but more externally driven by the need to excel (Davies, et al., 1994; Biggs, 1992).

Furthermore, a constructivist view of learning holds that knowledge is something that is constructed by students, and not transmitted by the teacher (Shuell, 1986; Ruhanen, 2005). Constructivism is not a theory as much as a perspective on learning (Biggs & Watkins, 1993). The guidance, according to social constructivists, is not the usual didactic lecture but should be through ‘instructional conversation’ which means learners conversing and interacting with more capable personnel in situations like assisted discovery, scaffolding, reciprocal teaching, and collaborative group problem-solving (Woolfolk, 1995). Social construction of knowledge emphasizes the importance and roles of student interactions in promoting learning experience. As students interact, the collaborative processes of articulation, conflict and meaningful negotiating provide scaffolding effects to foster students’ deep understanding (Brown et al., 1989). The success of education depends crucially on how the learners proceed with their learning (Resnick, 1989).

The influence of a social approach to knowledge construction through social interaction is also evident in an increasing call for peer learning, collaborative group learning and situated learning in authentically real situations (Resnick, 1989; Shuell, 1993; Parashevas

& Sigala, 2003). Communities of learners (Brown, 1997) and collaborative knowledge-building in computer-supported intentional learning environments (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994) have been advocated since, as students work together, they acquire the practices of a learning community as they help each other pursue deep understanding (Ruhanen, 2005).

It is recognized that approaches which are learner-centred, exploratory and interactive are more conducive to vigorous construction of meaning by the students themselves. As individual students have their own learning styles, Paraskevas and Sigala (2003) indicated this encourages lecturers to develop student-lecturer interaction so as to enhance students' intellectual growth. This understanding calls for a shift in focus from transmission of information by the teacher to facilitating student learning. In higher education, the call for this shift has echoed throughout the literature in past two decades (Bowden, 1988; Biggs, 1989; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 1992).

When teaching staff want to improve student learning, it is very important that they know and understand how students learn. They need to assess students' approaches to learning and to create a situation that leads students to adopt or change to those learning approaches that produce the most appropriate and effective outcomes. Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) obtained evidence that students' academic progress relates strongly to organized study methods and positive attitudes to studying. In addition, Gordon (1999) developed the "Approaches to Learning Statistics Questionnaire," modified from the Study Process Questionnaire, (Biggs, 1987b) that also found that most students would adopt surface approaches to learning for those less interesting subjects. Students who are willing to study tend to adopt deep approaches. There was a clear indication that the departments rated high in good teaching and freedom in learning, had students with higher and deeper approaches to learning.

Furthermore, Biggs (2003) introduced the 3P (presage, process, product) model of teaching and learning which showed approaches to learning occupy a central place in student learning. These resulted from student characteristics interacting with the teaching environment, and have a large say in the quality of the product or outcome of learning. As such, the teaching context includes what is intended to be taught, the 'curriculum' and how it will be taught and assessed, the 'climate' of the classroom and the institution itself.

In order to increase knowledge for first year students, curriculum planners are likely to promote low levels of student activity in year one subject outcomes. This may lead to encouraging student surface learning (deVries & Downie, 2000; Aubke, 2009). However, students should develop deep learning approach progressively during their study. Aubke (2009) argued that there was no evidence showing deep approach would result in better performance.

Furthermore, there are different approaches to teaching in secondary schools and universities, and Barron (2002) suggests that universities should give assistance to first-year hospitality students so as to help them adjust their learning style. Byrne et al (2002), in their study, found out that those above mean age students especially from overseas exchange students may have a tendency towards a deep approach.

The review of the research literature has shown that there is a growing consensus among researchers in their accounts of students' approaches to learning, with the terms 'surface approach' and 'deep approach' being the most commonly used (Biggs, 1987a; Ramsden, 1992; Marton et al., 1997, Byrne et al, 2002). The most important aspect of the distinction between these approaches lies in the student's intention – or the absence of such intention – to understand (Biggs, 1987a; Entwistle, 1987; Richardson, 1994). Rote learning, a mechanical act without any thought given to the meaning of what is being learnt, is by definition part of a surface approach because there is no intention to seek meaning. However, students may also memorize and rehearse with the intention of seeking meaning (Gordon,

1999). Furthermore, there is a relationship between grade, study approaches and assessment (Lizzio et al, 2002; Hornby et al, 2009). Ruhanen (2005) experienced that an experiential learning approach based on role play method could develop students deep approach that benefit both the students and industry.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the issue of different approaches to learning and how these relate to the teaching and learning environment, specifically to assess and evaluate the approaches to learning taken by tourism and hospitality students in the associate degree and top-up degree programmes in Hong Kong. In detail, the study aims to

- i. provide a comprehensive understanding of how the tourism and hospitality students learn and develop their approaches to learning during their programme of study;
- ii. develop an understanding of the impact of undergraduate teaching on the approaches to learning adopted by the tourism and hospitality students; and
- iii. make recommendations which can be used by the college to improve the quality of student learning.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research orientation of the study is set within an ‘interpretive paradigm’. The essential characteristic of interpretivist theory of research into student learning is its interest in understanding learning from the perspectives of the students as it happens in natural settings (Saljo, 1988; Lindlof, 1995).

To accomplish the broad aims and specific objectives of the study, its research design incorporates both quantitative and qualitative techniques. In the first phase of the study, questionnaires were used to discover the pattern of learning approaches employed by the tourism and hospitality students and their changes or unchanged in learning approaches as they progressed through the programme of study.

Since students’ learning approaches are influenced by their learning contexts, in the second phase of the study, interviews to collect qualitative data were employed to understand the contextual variables present in the students’ learning environment from their points of view, and to find out the reasons for any change in their learning approaches.

a. Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in the first phase comprised the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) developed by Biggs (1992). The SPQ was used in a ‘repeated measures’ design to determine changes in learning approaches after one year.

The SPQ is an empirically-derived instrument which aims to examine the quality of learning by students; in particular, it assesses students’ approaches to learning. The SPQ Hong Kong version (Biggs, 1992) used in the present study was based on the 42 items of Biggs’ SPQ (1987b), with seven items constructed to reflect each of the sub-scales, i.e. surface, deep and achievement motive (SM, DM & AM); and seven items to reflect surface, deep and achievement strategy (SS, DS & AS), translated into Chinese by a research team at the University of Hong Kong led by Biggs.

Table 1 Brief description of SPQ sub-scales

Approach	Motive	Strategy
Surface	Surface Motive (SM)	Surface Strategy (SS)
	Instrumental: to pass without working too	Reproductive: to rote learn

Deep	hard Deep Motive (DM) Intrinsic: to really understand	essentials Deep Strategy (DS) Wide reading: to link with previous knowledge
Achieving	Achieving Motive (AM) Ego-building: to get best grades	Achieving Strategy (AS) Time management: to be a “model student”

(Adapted from Biggs, 1987a)

Each item in the SPQ is a self-report statement that respondents rate on a 5-point scale, from 5 ('this item is always or almost always true of me') to 1 ('this item is never or only rarely true of me'). Scores are obtained for each student on 'deep', 'surface' and 'achieving' approach scales. The minimum and maximum score of each category are 14 (1*14) and 70 (5*14) respectively.

Scores were obtained from each student on 'deep', 'surface' and 'achieving' approach scales. A deep approach to learning is indicated when the student is interested in the task and therefore strives for understanding. The surface approach is based on a motive to minimize effort and also to minimize the consequences resulting from low effort, in other words, it is outcome-oriented. The achieving approach is described by Biggs (1987a) as being based on extrinsic motivation, such as gaining high grades. A student adopting an achieving approach is neat and systematic, and plans ahead, allocating time to complete tasks in proportion to their grade-earning potential.

Table 2 Classification of the 42 items in SPQ

Approach	Motive Items	Strategy Items
Surface	1,7,13,19,25,31,37	4,10,16,22,28,34,40
Deep	2,8,14,20,26,32,38	5,11,17,23,29,35,41
Achieving	3,9,15,21,27,33,39	6,12,18,24,30,36,42

(Biggs, 1992, p.45)

The Hong Kong version of the SPQ with Chinese translations (Biggs, 1992) was tested for a variety of aspects to establish its reliability. A great deal of research in Hong Kong (Davies et al., 1994; Biggs, 1992, Chan & Tang, 2007) has demonstrated several relationships between SPQ scores and approaches to learning that confirm the construct validity of the scales and the theory on which they are based.

b. Interviews

In order to understand the students' adoption of different approaches to learning and the teaching environments in the college (associate degree and top-up degree), interview data was gathered by semi-structured interviews with three students from HKCC and four from SPEED in the college. All students involved in the interviews had participated in two rounds of questionnaire data collection.

The interviews started with some guided questions, followed by open-ended questions. The guided questions were developed on the basis of the literature review (Biggs, 1987a; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 1992; Marton et al., 1997, Ruhanen, 2005) regarding the factors that encourage students to adopt a surface, a deep or achieving approach to learning, as seen from students' perspectives.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher and audio-taped. The total number of interviews was seven. All audio tapes were transcribed by the researcher.

Research sample

The students who took part in this study were from CPCE, The associate in business - tourism management (TM) and hospitality management (HM) which is very popular among programmes in HKCC with an intake of around 200 students each year. In SPEED, the two programmes: BA (Hons) in Hospitality Management (HPM) and BA (Hons) in Travel Industry Management (TIM) is also popular with an intake of around 240 students each year.

Research schedule

The questionnaires were administered to the students individually in their normal class periods by arrangement between the researcher and the subject lecturers. The first round of the SPQ to HKCC students was undertaken in early October, 2011. The second round of the SPQ was administered to the second year students in early November 2012 in scheduled classes. The in-depth interviews were carried out in March 2013 during the second semester of year two.

Following that, the administration of the first round of the SPQ to SPEED students was undertaken in early October, 2013. The second round of the SPQ was administered to the final year students in December 2014. The in-depth interviews were carried out in March 2015.

Selection of students for interview

In order to get a better understanding of approaches to learning, for associate degree students, three out of fifty-five respondents (one from surface changed to achieving approach, two are remain unchanged as surface approach in two years) who participated in all two rounds of study were invited for interview. For the top-up degree students in SPEED, four out of hundred and four respondents (one is from deep changed to achieving approach, one remain unchanged as deep approach and two also remain unchanged as surface approached in two years) were participated in the interview. Purposive sampling was used in this study.

Table 3 Selection of students for interviews

Students' approaches to learning	No. of students selected for interviews	
	Associate degree	Top-up degree
Change:		
Surface bias to achieve bias	1	0
Deep bias to achieve bias	0	1
No Change:		
Surface bias to surface bias	2	2*
Deep bias to Deep bias	0	1*
Total	3	4

Remark: * one respondent is graduated from HKCC

Data analysis

Analysis yielded scores for the approaches to learning in the first and second rounds for an individual student, and mean scores for the approaches to learning (surface, deep and achieving scores) for the students as a group at two time points.

Means of the approaches to learning of students for the pre- and post-SPQ were compared by paired t-test to determine whether there were differences in their learning approaches over two years.

3 FINDINGS

(i) Phase 1: Quantitative findings from questionnaires

The number of students enrolled in the TM and HM programme in HKCC was 180 at the beginning of the first semester. The number of responses to the SPQ obtained in the first round, referred to hereafter as Pre-SPQ, was 171, and the number of responses obtained in the second round, referred to hereafter as Post-SPQ, was 129. The student number is being used to pair with the pre and post-SPQ. The number of valid cases available for analysis was 55 out of 180 possible ones in the college (31%). After matching the student number, only fifty-five pair of respondents (tourism and hospitality students) were found during the two round studies. The reason for only one third of the respondents could be paired was due to the flexibility of subject selection in the programme design, tourism and hospitality subjects class can be registered by non-tourism and hospitality discipline (as elective) student.

Table 4 Paired T-test among two tests in associate degree group

		Mean	SD	T-Test	Sig.
Associate degree group (n = 55)					
Surface	Pre	48.4	5.37	0.355	0.724
	Post	48.6	5.59		
Deep	Pre	45.6	5.64	1.645	0.106
	Post	46.8	6.09		
Achieving	Pre	46.8	7.38	2.185	0.033*
	Post	48.4	6.23		

* p-value < 0.05

Whereas in SPEED, the number of students enrolled in HPM and TIM programme was 240. The number of respondents in the first round was 217, and the number of respondents in the second round was 109. The number of valid cases available for analysis was 104 out of 240 possible ones in the school (43%).

Table 5 Paired T-test among two tests in top-up degree group

		Mean	SD	T-Test	Sig.
Degree group (n = 104)					
Surface	Pre	49.8	5.87	-1.274	0.205
	Post	50.9	5.50		
Deep	Pre	44.3	7.04	-2.754	0.007*
	Post	46.5	7.13		
Achieving	Pre	43.6	7.39	-0.220	0.826
	Post	43.9	7.88		

* p-value < 0.05

Pre- and Post-SPQ result

In HKCC, with fifty five respondents paired with pre- and post-SPQ, no significant differences showed in the surface (0.724) and deep (0.106) approach after one year (table 1). However, significant differences showed in achieving (0.033) approach after one year. In SPEED, with hundred and four respondents were paired, deep (0.007) approach showed significant differences after a year study.

However, with the small sample size, the findings need to be interpreted with some caution.

Phase 2: Qualitative findings from student interviews

Interviews were used to probe the contextual factors that might influence students' approaches to learning. Students were interviewed in order to discover their conceptions of teaching, their learning practices, and their views of the subjects. Students interviewed had participated in all two rounds of the questionnaire data collection.

a. HKCC

Approaches to learning

All the interviewees realized there was no significant difference between their approaches to learning in secondary school and in the community college. As they mentioned, in the community college, they tended to learn by rote and their key motivation of learning was getting good results in the school examination so that they would be able to articulate into university successfully. One of the respondents (achieving approach) mentioned his goal was to pass the course in order to articulate to university.

"summarizing the points in the notes and tailor made my own notes will benefit for the preparation of examination I drop down the notes in class but not fully understand all the points of the notes mentioned by the lecturer"

In general, respondents mentioned they did not have confidence in understanding all the subjects either prior to studying the course or during the study. So, in order to passing the subject, all the respondents said they used the same study approach throughout their study for all subjects. Students stated that lecture notes were the main source of the study tools.

Comments on the Teaching

Two of the interviewees (surface approach) expressed they were passive recipients caused by the boring content in the programme and the inability of the lecturer to lead the teaching atmosphere. Students normally sat and listened to the lecturers during the lecture and felt weird if they were being asked questions in the class. In fact, no student was willing to answer questions that were raised by lecturers.

All interviewees agreed that the teaching was appropriate and acceptable. However, one way teaching was being found in some subjects. Students perceived that there was lack of interaction and discussion in class. One respondent (achieving approach) mentioned such teaching methodology might be a disadvantage when progressed to university as he understood that more discussions in class were being applied in university.

Comments on the assessment

Two of the interviewees mentioned that the workload was acceptable and appropriate. Each subject consisted of one group project and one individual assignment. On contrast, some students felt worried and anxious about the course assessment instruments such as examination and assignment. Some of the interviewees (surface approach) found the workload were quite heavy as they had to do a project for every subject and the deadlines of all projects were fell on the same period of time.

Two of the interviewees agreed that the marking scheme for the coursework was fair in evaluating the performance. Furthermore, one respondent (achieving approach) commented that the marking system should be more transparency in order to understand the college expectation.

All the interviewees reported they mainly used the past examination papers as the

primary tool for the preparation of examination.

“.. exam questions have been repeated many times. Even the teacher does not teach some topics in class, there will be a chance coming up in the examination.”

This practice has become a norm in the college when preparing for the examination and students found that it worked all the times. Students would neglect the importance on understanding the concepts of the core knowledge. When asking whether the examination questions were able to develop their creativity, their answers were ‘no’.

Comments on the course structure

Two interviewees mentioned about the tight schedule of the course and the packed content of each subject. They found it was not easy to digest the knowledge of different subjects within ten to eleven weeks. Quantitative methods, financial accounting, yield management, food and beverage management and tourism management were the favourite subjects that highlighted by the interviewees. Realistic, applicable to the real life environment and personal interest were the reasons of choosing the favourite subjects from the course. Some of them had doubts about the relevance of some subjects like General Education because of its irrelevance to the core subjects and heavily relied on memory.

b. SPEED

Learning Approaches

Similar with the HKCC students, all interviewees mentioned they would use the same approach, for example, revising notes before tests and examinations for all subjects. One respondent (surface approach) used this way to prepare for the examination.

“I normally have revision on notes when preparing the examination that I used to do it when studying in CC.”

One respondent (achieving approach) has different view, “If I don’t understand the content, I would further ask my classmates. We would form study groups for revision before the examination.”

“.. we do accounting exercise together. It is efficient for me to ask my friends regarding the calculation method when I found the question is difficult to answer” said by another respondent (surface approach).

One respondent (deep approach) would spend time on understanding the concepts and exploring more on the topics.

“it is easier to strengthen the memory of knowledgeI would put more time and effort, for example, borrowing books from library, on the subjects that are interested in.”

Comments on the Teaching

All the interviewees mentioned they must attend lectures and seminars even though attendance record was not required. The teaching materials such as powerpoint are highly relevant to the subject that encouraged them to attend the class. Teachers would ask questions during the class in order to test their understanding of the concept. Sometimes, they would do case studies in class and required discussing with the classmates. Industry professionals were invited for lectures. One respondent (surface approach) mentioned,

“..lecturers would invite some industry professionals to share their experience during lesson. I think all of the teaching methodologies are practical and benefit for my future career. I would pay attention in class.”

Two respondents (surface approach and deep approach) agreed the teaching methodology was good.

“The questions being asked by the teachers are useful for us in order to test our understanding of the concept.”

However, one respondent (achieving approach) commented on the teaching approach of some teachers.

“..some teaching approaches have rooms for improvement. For example, a teacher leaves some blanks on the notes and asking us to fill it. I think it is superfluous and even lose my interest in class.”

Comments on the assessment

One respondent (deep approach) commented that the programme was not too demanding.

“It just depends on whether you have good time management or not I think the assessment requires students to search more information from various sources such as books, news to support their argument..... the assessment could evaluate what I have learnt in the subject. By applying the concepts in assessment, it could strengthen my knowledge.”

However, another respondent (surface approach) argued that the teaching materials are sufficient for working on the assessment.

“I normally attend class as passive recipient and rarely search addition information as it is enough for handling the assessment.”

“For group project, joining group with responsible and determinative leader is important, besides, cooperative members are also key factors to get high quality work...getting a ‘B’ grade is not difficult. If you want to get higher grade, you need to search more information and analytic skills are needed.”

Another respondent (surface approach) commented that there was too much work for the programme.

“the workload is very heavy in this programme. There are many group projects. Large amount of time are spent on group discussion and information search.... I feel anxious as there are too many homework.”

Comments on the course structure

Most of the interviewees expressed the programme covers areas that can develop their future career in tourism and hospitality industry.

One respondent (achieving approach) commented the subjects are useful for his future career.

“hospitality operations as it is more interesting and could learn more practical knowledge that benefit for my future career.”

However, one respondent (deep approach) commented some subject contents are

overlapping.

“I found the urban tourism has many marketing concepts and knowledge related to tourism development that has overlapped with other subjects. I don’t think I have learnt much knowledge in this subject.”

Another respondent (surface approach) also commented on the subjects.
“I dislike finance subject as I hate calculation very much.”

4 DISCUSSION

In HKCC, students had an increase in all approaches after one year study. It may be, at the beginning, students were not too familiar with the subjects being offered in higher education (professional-oriented), and tended to memorize the materials. By doing that, students found this approach could achieve a high grade. Statistical analysis showed that there was a significant increase in the achieving score of students after one year. It was being reconfirmed by the interviews with students. As higher grade has a better chance to articulate to public university, students would like to apply the achieving approach of learning (Biggs, 1987a, Lizzio et al, 2002; Hornby et al, 2009).

This phenomenon of encouraging in surface approaches from the first year onward is not confined to college students; it aligned with deVries & Downie (2000) and Aubke (2009) study. For the course structure, students commented that there was insufficient time for them to understand the materials. Furthermore, for subjects such as General Education, when students showed no interest, this is a major reason that they took a surface approach. This concurred with Gordon’s (1999) findings.

It has been recognized by many researchers that the workload of courses has an impact on the learning approach adopted by students, and it has been suggested that heavy workload is associated with students taking a surface approach to learning (Stokes et al., 1989; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden, 1992; Kember et al., 1995).

From the students’ comment, teachers used one way teaching methods, especially in lectures. Since there was little interaction between student and lecturer in class, in fact, the college has not adopted a student-centred approach and encouraged an active-learning attitude in study. This might be different from Parashevas and Sigala (2003) who suggested that students can develop their intellectual skills with the assistance of teacher. However, Barrett et al (2007) argued that community college instructors preferred teacher-centred when delivering lecture. In addition, students are also preferred method of lecture as it is easy to follow especially when preparing for the test (McKeachie, 1997).

Furthermore, students commented that in the assessment part, each subject has to submit a group project that may discourage students to pursue deep understanding in order to meet the deadline. Such findings were also different from Ruhanen (2005) study.

In SPEED, as the students were coming from different colleges or institutes, students might use their previous approach to learning at the beginning especially for HKCC graduates. However, there was a change after one year.

Table 6 Approach to learning of HKCC graduates studying in SPEED (4 years in CPCE)

Year one			
Approach	TIM	HPM	Total
Surface	39	5	44
Deep	6	1	7

Achieving	3	1	4
Year two			
Approach	TIM	HPM	Total
Surface	35	5	40
Deep	11	2	13
Achieving	4	0	4

Even though students expressed the importance of teaching materials in preparing the test and examination, when working on the assignment, students were willing to search additional information and more discussion with group members in order to get a better understanding on topics (Brown et al, 1989; Resnick, 1989; Shuell, 1993; Woolfolk, 1995; Parashevas & Sigala, 2003).

In general, with high level of subjects, teachers asked questions in class in order to strengthen the understanding of concepts that appreciated by the students. In addition, the presentation in class could develop the confident of the student and changed to deep approach as mentioned by Ruhanen (2005).

Student-lecturer interaction approach was being found in SPEED. Case study, group discussion, projects were being used in class to encourage students to develop their intellectual skills that concurred with Paraskevas and Sigala (2003) suggestion.

As Gordon (1999) mentioned that if the subjects were student's interest, students were willing to learn and look for better understanding that led to deep approach. Students also mentioned that those subjects were benefit for their future career. On contrast, coordination between subjects should be done by the curriculum planner as some of the topics were being overlapped that might encourage rote learning.

In general, it is quite clear that there is a relationship between study approaches, grade and assessment in self-financed college (Lizzio et al, 2002; Hornby et al, 2009).

5 CONCLUSIONS

In Hong Kong, the main source of income for a self-financed college is come from the number of students (intakes). The learning environment of the college, the qualification of the teaching staff, the physical facilities in the campus, the popularity of programmes being offered, the articulation rate and high chance of finding jobs after graduation are key components from the applicants' perspective when selecting their undergraduate programme. Without exception, CPCE also needs to put effort on these issues. Moreover, it is not a private university in status, it cannot offer a straight four-year degree programme by substitute with two-year associate degree and two-year degree programmes for those graduates from secondary school. By doing that, different mission statements are being set by the two units (HKCC and SPEED) with different impact on students. From this study, one aspect that previous studies have not been discussed with the approach to learning in self-financed college is student's personnel goal and college culture. Such issue may affect their learning approach and behaviour towards the programme. Furthermore, some of the self-financed colleges may treat the students as 'customer' disregarding the importance of developing high-order thinking skills within undergraduate study. From the findings, the situation becomes serious in the associate degree level. It may be a disadvantage to students who articulated to public universities as senior year since universities are encouraged student deeper approach after first year (Barron, 2002).

In general, students perceived that associate degree programmes could give them a

second chance to entering the public university upon graduation. If student could achieve a better grade, a higher chance to enter the university after their two-year study in the community college. For assessment, easy, simple and direct instruments are urged by both the teaching staff and students. In addition, with assessment criteria involving creative thinking of the students may be difficult in measure also discouraged the teaching staff. Consequently, students might adjust their approaches to learning in order to achieve good results in those assessments.

Maher (2004) also concurred with such approach may restrict student's creativity and learning new knowledge. Furthermore, students realized that the teaching method might be a disadvantage for them when proceed to the university. To improve the situation, revisiting the curriculum design, assessment and teaching method applied in order to help the students with a smooth transition to their university study. However, it is always argued that articulation rate is the key performance indicator of a self-financed college, how to strike a balance between that would be additional challenge to the college.

Of course, the importance of curriculum design cannot be overlooked. As mentioned by Biggs (1992), students' approaches to learning are influenced by many contextual factors. The subjects should be more specific and industry-related. Lui (2012) also commented that the associate degree programmes are not developing students' skills and competencies that not matching with the demand of labour market.

As industrial knowledge is essential for students studying the tourism and hospitality programme, there is no evidence showing that the subjects in the first year should not focus on knowledge. Subject outcomes in year one can promote low levels of student activity so as to let students adjust their learning approach in higher education.

Assessment dominates most students' thinking to a considerable extent. Students have clear views as to how to pass their courses and what they have to do in order to gain good marks. When assessment systems reward a surface approach, students will adopt a surface approach to learning. Examinations and phase tests should not be the only instrument in evaluating student knowledge as these may encourage a surface approach. It is suggested such instruments should only be applied for first year subjects. For higher-level subjects, it is better to assess by other methods such as case studies and projects.

Project work is a useful teaching method for developing deep learning and understanding of a topic (Biggs, 1987a). It enables students to explore deeply a field or topic and thus provides personal ownership of learning and fosters independence in learning and creative problem-solving skills. Certainly in open-ended project work where there is no single correct answer, it is not possible to obtain good grades by memorization. Instead, students are forced to take a deep approach in order to obtain the best solution to the problem posed and to provide justification of their solution. However, a careful evaluation of group project for each subject are needed in order to reduce the workload and served the purpose of using group project.

In conclusion, the four-year tourism and hotel degree programmes are currently run by two units under a self-financed college. There is lack of coordination between unit especially comes to programme design. Basically, there is no objection from the society that the college cannot design a four-year programme. By using this concept, the subjects in the curriculum can be built on block from year one to four. If the programme design emphasizes a process of engaging students in learning, it encourages deep learning. In addition, deVries & Downie (2000) mentioned that subjects should have more application, high levels of knowledge and skills, promote synthesis and evaluation of information when student progress to year two and onwards. It is suggested that the curriculum can be divided into different levels linked with the year of study and the workload and method of assessment.

By doing that, it may create a win-win situation for the stakeholders: students, college and teaching staff. For students, they can progress to the top-up degree in year three with solid foundation that learnt from their associate degree study. For the college, teaching staff can be assigned to teach in both units that help the self-financed college in fully utilised the resources as the largest budget would be spent on it. Furthermore, students are got use to the teaching method that may bring a better articulation rate from HKCC to SPEED as students may prefer to continue their study in a familiar environment. For the teaching staff, they can base on the level of subject by setting the teaching methodology, assessment and develop a deep approach for the students.

All in all, learning is considered an active process by students in which they construct their own knowledge and understanding, while teaching provides the context in which learning can take place in order to achieve desirable learning outcomes.

Limitations and further research

Undoubtedly the results of this study are useful; however, some limitations of this study should be acknowledged critically. One major weakness is the small sample size, which means that it is difficult to generalize from statistical data.

Further research may conduct interview for teaching staff and curriculum planner to evaluate design of curriculum, learning outcomes of the programme, the relationship between learning approaches and teaching methodology throughout the whole programme.

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