The basic mission of a university is teaching and research. It is a community of learned men and women. As has been wisely observed, “a university should be a place of light, of liberty and of learning”. Universities enjoy institutional autonomy and academic freedom. They are essential institutions in a civil society.

Through teaching, students do not merely acquire knowledge which will soon be out of date. What is more important is that they understand the values of our society and are taught the means to educate themselves throughout life and to develop an inquiring mind, to ask questions and to challenge orthodox thinking. Through research, a university contributes to the knowledge of mankind and to the enrichment of humanity.

It is fashionable nowadays to compare a university to a large scale corporation and to compare the responsibilities of its vice-chancellor or president to those of the chief executive of such a corporation. A university of course has substantial assets and resources which must be managed and managed effectively and efficiently. No doubt, modern business management skills and methodologies can be usefully applied or adapted for the governance of a university. The qualities required of its vice-chancellor or president certainly include those of an able administrator.

Further, the community is investing substantially at all levels of education. As far as Hong Kong is concerned, recurrent public expenditure on education is and has been running at just over 20% of total recurrent public expenditure. This represents just over 4% of Gross Domestic Product. Expenditure on tertiary education is and has been at around 35% of the education budget. With such substantial public funds invested, it is right that there should be sufficient public transparency and accountability to demonstrate that the community’s resources are well invested.

That said, the point I wish to make and make with some emphasis is that the analogy between a university and a business corporation must not be pressed too far. Having regard to the nature of its mission, a university cannot be treated like a business in the full sense. There are no profits to be made and students cannot be treated as units of production. The fruits of a university are in many respects intangible, and cannot be measured in monetary or materialistic terms. One cannot and should not try to put a dollar tag on the expansion of the frontiers of knowledge and the nurturing of the human mind and spirit.

Following a period of rapid and unprecedented expansion in tertiary education in the early 1990’s, we are now in a period of consolidation when efforts must centre on the maintenance and improvement of quality. The expansion took place in rosier economic times when public finances were in a buoyant state. Now that we are facing leaner times, it is understandable that there should be greater stringency in funding.

All over the world, reduction in tertiary education funding gives rise to controversy. The process for the institutions can be a painful one and would put to the test the institutions' management capability. However, reduction may depending on the circumstances be justified.

But the aim must only be to cut out such fat if any as there is in the system. One must not get to and damage the bone. It must be borne in mind that it may not be easy to judge how close one is to the bone. This is a delicate matter that requires cautious judgment.

There is a limit to which the public purse can fund tertiary education, as there are many competing demands on it. Many top universities outside Hong Kong are either entirely or substantially privately funded. In this centre of capitalism, although many citizens have donated generously, our universities at present do not have substantial private endowments. Whilst this was perhaps understandable when Hong Kong under colonial administration was considered to be a borrowed place on borrowed time, this is no longer so with re-unification. We are in our own place in our own time. Hopefully, a stronger tradition of philanthropy in relation to our universities will be gradually developed....

Extract from the Hon Chief Justice Andrew K N Li’s address at the 161st Congregation.
“Microcosmographia Academia, the small world of academia, was written by F M Cornford, a Cambridge academic.... Microcosmographia went on to become a classic referred to not only by academics but also government departments and senior management in industry. Because the contents have their roots in human nature and not in historical situation its relevance cannot be out of date.

Microcosmographia described three developmental phases of the academic:

1. Youth is characterised by being oppressed, feeling angry and becoming increasingly disagreeable.
2. Middle age ushers in a sense of complacency and in turn he becomes an oppressor who sees more reasons why things should not be done.
3. In old age the academic acquires power and an accretion of peculiarities. Below will be a multitude of young men in a hurry to get him out of the way.

The importance of teaching is best summed up by Robert Solow who formulated the Solow economic growth model. At his Nobel Prize acceptance speech he said, “I estimate that if I had neglected the students I would have written 25% more scientific papers. The choice was easy to make and I do not regret it.” On the notion of creative teamwork Gerd Binning, a major contributor to the development of the electron microscope, compared it to playing in a rock and roll band. “The music is creative but everyone plays together.”

All the laureates surveyed cultivated a variety of interests outside the area of their expertise. Their intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm led to pursuing activities like mountain climbing, writing poetry, composition of music. Taking up a multiplicity of roles do not necessarily translate into being awarded the Nobel Prize but it certainly makes life more interesting....

A university needs diversity and each of these personalities have their own strengths. The challenge is to get this motley crowd to work together. To this end a variety of methods have been tried....

Nothing can be more unifying than the existence of an external enemy or competitor. In this context the University Grants Committee, the Financial Secretary or indeed another university has often been used as the bogeyman. At best this is a short-term approach. Even then it cannot be made to work unless the sense of danger is intimately felt by each and every member....

When the reform of the medical curriculum was proposed opponents to change used the dangerous precedent argument. Everything done for the first time carries risks. It is better to see more universities do it first.... Universities make decisions through committees and consultation. This process invariably takes time which engenders circularity. Just when changes are to be implemented the old arguments will be rehashed by senior academics because they have forgotten what went on before and by the young men in a hurry who are unaware of what went on before.

A review of universities in OECD countries showed that changes were effected by external forces, a critical mass from within the university and leadership. External factors in the USA were mainly market forces and innovative technology. Changes in Europe were mostly instigated governments through reconfigured funding formulae and the establishment of commissions to oversee universities. Changes effected from within are rather less common. Effective leadership is even less common given the simple fact that individuals who are distinguished academics with excellent management skills and fund raising capabilities are rare....

This is the paradox of reductionism; the more restricted the scale the more complex it becomes. Whereas when the issues are broad and deal with general principles the conflicts are limited.

Unfortunately politics cannot remain broad-brush. Any political decision will also have to deal with details otherwise nothing can be implemented.

In the final analysis regardless of the structure of any university, notwithstanding the different systems of governance nothing will function optimally unless there is integrity which forms the bedrock of trust."

Extract from Professor Lieh-Mak’s valedictory lecture, “Microcosmographia Academia Revisited”.

MICROCOSMOGRAPHIA ACADEMIA REVISITED

On April 9, 2001, the Department of Surgery was honoured to host a valedictory lecture entitled ‘Microcosmographia Academia Revisited’ by Professor Felice Lieh-Mak 麥烈錦. Head and Chair of the Department of Psychiatry, HKU on the occasion of her retirement from the University. Just to make it abundantly clear that she is not really leaving us, she delivered an address that made us all think about the importance and politics of striving for excellence - an attitude for which Professor Lieh Mak is both a proponent and an example.

John Wong
Professor of Surgery
The concept of a “liberal education” or “liberal arts education” has a long and honourable ancestry in the East as well as in the West. In medieval times, a “liberal” person studied the trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). In the teaching of Confucius, a scholar should be adept at the six arts viz. rites, music, archery, riding, writing and arithmetic. However, the most distinguished expression of liberal education is found in the American liberal arts colleges and to a considerable extent in the British universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Hong Kong has the reputation of being a dynamic place, always open to new ideas. This is of course true for the private sector. Its expeditious response to changing market conditions accounts for much of Hong Kong’s economic success over the years. Even the Hong Kong Government is not slow in cottoning on to a new idea. But why are the policy makers, the politicians and the University Grants Committee (UGC) finding it so difficult to get their heads around the idea of “liberal arts”, when it comes to deciding how much money should be given to (or, more accurately, taken away from) each of the higher education institutions in Hong Kong this year? Admittedly, it is a new concept for Hong Kong. But aren’t we, Hong Kong people, supposed to be good at learning new concepts. What has gone wrong here? The answer is a simple one. They have failed to recognise the importance of liberal arts education in making the economy, particularly the “New Economy”, tick.

The chief characteristic of Hong Kong’s approach to education might be defined as “utilitarian”: both students and parents are keen that it should lead, in some direct and clearly visible way, to a career. The choice of career is determined, as often as not, by the prospective, or worse, the immediate financial rewards it will offer. They have, however, failed to see that it is no longer possible to predict the prospect of a specific career in this ever changing world.

One of the major characteristics of a “liberal” or “liberal arts” education is that it is not focussed on a specific career, but aims instead to provide an environment both within the curriculum and outside it that helps students to learn how to think, how to be creative, how to be flexible, how to get on with others - and how to go on learning for the rest of their lives. As one distinguished American Professor of Education put it, in the course of a visit to Hong Kong: “When you’re through learning - you’re through!”

What liberal arts institutions aspire to transmit is “values and virtues”, not primarily knowledge and skills. But a student who has enjoyed the benefits of a truly “liberal education” will have acquired - en passant, as it were - knowledge and skills which will be of inestimable value to him or her, not only in the career(s) that they choose to pursue thereafter, but in the whole of their lives....}

"A modest ambition, in this utilitarian community of ours, but one which the community will surely wish to support.”

Edward K Y Chen

"Professor Edward K Y Chen 陳坤耀 (BA 1967)
Professor Chen is President of Lingnan University

Extract from “What Price Liberal Arts Education”.
A modified version of the article was published on March 8, 2001 of South China Morning Post."
明日棟樑—社區領袖獎勵計劃

社區領袖聚首 校長寓所

培養人才是高等教育之首要任務，亦是社會發展的基石。創校以來，香港大學努力建立具多才多藝的領袖，為教學目標。今年適逢九十週年校慶的大日子，香港大學特別成立「明日棟樑—社區領袖獎勵計劃」，藉此計劃提供機會讓社區傑出人士，表揚具備領袖潛能，對社會有使命感，在課餘活動有出色表現的大學生。

計劃的主要目的，是要鼓勵青年人多關心社會，積極參與社區服務工作，及增強他們日後與社區的關係。設立這項獎勵計劃的首項工作，是集合全港九十位傑出地區領袖，共同捐助成立一筆為數九百萬元的基金。基金日後的利息收益，將撥作每年獲獎學生的獎學金。計劃推行以來，經籌備委員會的努力，各界反應熱烈，已見成效。

為表謝意，頒授「社區領袖獎勵計劃」的將軍，大學校長戴義安博士於六月十二日下午在學校寓所（University Lodge）舉行酒會。「社區領袖獎勵計劃」籌備委員會主席陳祖澤先生及副主席李熙銘女士，與多位地區領袖及社會賢達均有出席。

舊雨新知，濟濟一堂，主客同樂，為寧靜雅緻的校長寓所，平添幾許熱鬧。賓主先參觀了著名文物—重達二十三噸的巨砲後，便舉行支票遞交與拍照留念等活動。