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## **AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY UNIVERSITIES IN TAIWAN: LIFELONG LEARNING FOR A CHANGING SOCIETY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In Taiwan, the “community universities” are a relatively new form of educational institution. They came into existence as a result of an education reform movement initiated by non-governmental groups. The community universities have broken the boundaries of traditional education and integrated the functions of higher education, civic education, adult education, community education, and lifelong education, and created their own unique characteristics.

On September 28, 1998, the first community university in Taiwan, Wenshan Community University, was born. Now there are over one hundred community universities in the country. The curriculum, quality of the teachers, management, and the school system of the community universities have been planned and developed as “alternative universities.” They provide citizens with opportunities for continuous learning. Although the community universities are still lacking in terms of legal protection, they have brought out many new experiments and attempts. Therefore, the community universities as a whole and their achievements are worth further examination.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The economy has played an important role in shaping lifelong education in Taiwan. Before 1975, Taiwan’s GNP was always under US \$1,000. During that time, a very large majority of Taiwanese people couldn’t receive higher education because they couldn’t afford the extra educational expenses. To make the situation worse, the colleges and universities of that period, which were few in number, admitted only a small number of new students each year. As a result, institutions of education turned down many people with aspirations to learn.

While Taiwan’s economy was improving by leaps and bounds, the society was thrust into a chaotic disorder of values, setting the stage for the need to establish a new model of education for adults, and a new social culture. These needs have become increasingly important ever since. As a result of supply and demand, the community universities promoted and established by some private circles in Taiwan have risen to meet the needs (Tien-Fu, Lin, 2002).

### **EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK AND THE POSITION OF COMMUNITY UNIVERSITIES**

The community universities in Taiwan are a new and developing social movement. The philosophy behind the community universities

lies in the promotion of lifelong learning and the shaping of a learning society. In terms of sociology, the community universities are different from collective behavior, but are typical examples of resources being shared. In terms of education, the community universities are similar to the concept and learning system of adult and continuing education – already well developed in the western society – and they conform to the principle of lifelong education (Tien-Fu, Lin, 2002). Anyone who is at least 18 years-old can enrol in classes and become a student of the community universities. No other qualifications or entrance examinations are required for the admission to the community universities.

### **The concept**

Aiming to educate modern citizens, liberalise the dissemination of knowledge, and advance the formation of civil society in Taiwan, the community universities have realised the purpose of full, societal education, and have created a new vision for adult education (Chuan-Huei, Chai, 2005). Specifically, a community university must have two basic conditions:

1. It must provide appropriate and adequate education opportunities.
2. It must use effective methods to encourage the public to engage with the learning.

## The curriculum design

### A. *The classification and framework*

The purposes of the community universities are to adapt the citizens to the approaching knowledge economy, to the fast changing society of Taiwan, and to the rising demands of lifelong learning (Chung-Hua, Ku, 2006). There

are three branches of courses in the curriculum: academic courses, living skill courses, and club activity courses. Such abilities as knowledge broadening, analytical reasoning, rational judgment, value selection, and mature interpersonal relations are on the “must-teach” list. Table 1 shows the three branches and their expected results.

Branch of Courses	Expected Results
Academic Courses	Broadening knowledge and cultivating abilities of analytical thinking and rational judgment.
Club Activity Courses	Cultivating abilities to participate in the public affairs of the society, raising the awareness and willingness to take care of the community environment, consolidating community consciousness and unity, and advancing toward civil society.
Living Skill Courses	Bring the needs of adult development as a whole into focus, teaching the skill to widen the mind, improving personal work abilities and life quality, and imparting the necessary abilities to participate in the society.

Table 1. The three branches of courses in the curriculum of the community universities in Taiwan.

Note. From “*The Basic Conception of Community Universities and The Development of Wenshan Community University*” by Chuan-Huei, Chai.

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### B. *The goals*

Under the premise that it is right to educate modern citizens, the goals of the curriculum design are: (a) Use club activities to develop civil society, (b) use academic courses to improve students’ abilities of critical thinking and to engage them in societal introspection, (c) use living skill courses to flesh out students’ experiences and reform the values of their private lives (Wu-Hsiung, Huang, 2006).

### C. *The characteristics*

Traditional universities, which focus on elite education and ignore general studies, are unsuitable for the needs of the general public. Community universities are not duplicates of traditional universities but are of a very different form. In short, the curriculum of the community universities in Taiwan has the following characteristics:

1. They focus on education for the public instead of education for the elite whose academic achievement is already well above the average.
2. They emphasise development of general abilities such as communication skills instead of training in vocational skills.
3. They emphasise discussions about public issues and connection with social life.

## ACCREDITATION OF THE COMMUNITY UNIVERSITIES

Wenshan Community University, the first community university in Taiwan, was established in 1998. By 2006, there are more than one hundred community universities around the country (National Association for the Promotion of Community Universities, 2006). The existence of such a great number of community universities in Taiwan has made a great impact on the quality and quantity of lifelong education.

Because of the open-to-all policy and no limit to the years of study, the number of students attending the community universities has increased every year since 1998 when the first community university was established. Table 2 shows the increase of students over the years.

Year	Regular Community Universities (Not including branches and teaching centers)	Aboriginal Community Universities	Estimated Number of Students (Person-Time)
1998	1		3,000
1999	14		20,000
2000	25		40,000
2001	37		60,000
2002	48	9	84,000
2003	55	12	102,000
2004	64	11	110,000
2005	70	11	120,000
2006	75	13	120,000

Table 2. Numbers of community universities and their students over the years 1998 to 2006.

Note : From “Statistics of the Community Universities in Taiwan”. Copyright 2006 by National Association for the Promotion of Community Universities. Adapted with permission.

The community universities in Taiwan are becoming a public domain. The units participating in running the community universities involve a great variety of social resources, such as community development associations, senior and junior high schools, colleges and universities, and cultural organizations. While deciding what courses to offer, the community universities assess the needs of the general public. After making decisions on what courses to offer, the community universities then work with private organizations, such as local clubs and public welfare or social movement groups, and draw on these community resources to recruit professionals as teaching staff. Students can have direct dialogues with professionals from private circles.

## ACHIEVEMENT OF COMMUNITY UNIVERSITIES

Since their inception in 1998, the community universities have had many achievements. The following are a few of them.

### Changes of viewpoints on learning

#### A. Students' learning attitudes and characteristics

Autonomous study and discussions of common reading are two of the primary teaching methods that the community universities set out to develop. With regard to learning attitudes, students in the community universities have remarkably strong learning motives. The students see the community universities as a very important source of lifelong learning – if not the only one. Since students have total freedom in the selection of courses, they can

choose courses according to their interests and needs. As a result, students usually enjoy their learning deeply. Generally speaking, they engage in classroom discussions more enthusiastically than do students in traditional universities. Such a learning atmosphere as exists in the community universities is hard to find elsewhere nowadays, and is, therefore, very precious.

#### B. Diversification of learning styles

Striving to seek societal recognition of their education quality, the community universities have been actively diversifying their learning styles. The following are some of the common learning styles:

- Work Studio: Suitable for practical and more interactive learning content.
- Community Involvement: Involve students practically in the transition of community characters and culture, appreciation of local colour, and solutions to problems of the community.
- Practical Topic: Assisted by a group of teachers, students engage in periodic reports and discussions about a topic.
- Peer Study: A recognition of each student's different talents, this method enables students to learn from one another by taking turns to play the role of teacher.
- Reading club, or self-study club.

### Summation of achievements and contributions

To sum up, the community universities in Taiwan have made the following achievements

and contributions (Dakeng Community University, 2006):

1. Recognised and responded to the learning needs of the communities.
2. Realised the idea of lifelong learning and promoted the concepts of learning families and learning communities.
3. Participated in building a better community ambience, enhancing the quality of modern citizens, and facilitating a reform of social values.
4. Advanced towards lifelong learning for personal enhancement.
5. Helped in the passing down of the community characters, arts, and literature, and promoted proper recreations and living skills.
6. Established an experience-based and a life-problems-solving oriented education for adults.
7. Encouraged involvement in public affairs, integrated community resources, and facilitated sustainable development in the communities.
8. Combined with media and technology to promote information and distance teaching.
9. Cared for the underprivileged families and individuals and enhanced the quality of their lives with education.
10. Established quality control systems to enhance the teaching quality and effectiveness of the community universities.

## **DIRECTIONS AND PLANS**

There are still no serious rules and review mechanism for the appointment of teachers to the community universities to date. As a consequence, quality and status of teachers in most of the community universities in Taiwan still cannot compare with the quality and status of those in the traditional higher education institutes. Nevertheless, directions and plans for the development of the community universities have been mapped out in the following way (Jung-Tsun, Huang, 2004):

### **1. Strengthen supervising functions of counties and cities**

Because counties and cities are legal supervisors of the community universities, they are responsible for the supervision of the community universities in their territories. At the present, the Ministry of Education is “beating the drum” for checklists and supervisory evaluations to ensure the quality of the community universities.

### **2. Establish an assessment system for the community universities**

Assessments of the community universities, whether they are internal or external, are beneficial to their development. For this reason, the Ministry of Education has drawn up “Assessment Guidelines for the Community Universities” to effectively examine the institutions, and has required local governments to assess the community universities every year.

### **3. Promote “non-traditional education learning achievement certification”**

Certification is used to recognise students’ learning achievements; therefore, it is recommended that the relevant authorities establish a system for certifying the learning achievements of non-traditional education. In the future, credits earned in an accredited community university might be applicable to a school of higher education.

### **4. Promote strategic alliance between community universities and traditional universities**

To enhance their overall quality, the community universities should actively seek alliances with traditional universities for resources sharing and credit recognition.

### **5. Connect the concept of an open university**

The main concept of an “open university” is to establish a complete and popular higher education system for adults. Through the learning mechanism of the community universities, the concept of an open university can be channeled into the community universities (The Community Universities Credits Allowed to be Certified, 2005).

## **CONCLUSION**

The goals of the community universities are to educate modern citizens and establish a higher education pathway for common people. The community universities have provided people

with a convenient channel to learn, realised the social education function of civil society, and liberated knowledge dissemination.

The community universities have opened up a new world for adult learning in Taiwan. We expect continuing promotion and growth of the community universities, and hope they will become an open public domain and support a lasting social reform agenda for shaping a new society and a new culture. The positive ramifications and contributions that the community universities have made towards community affairs are certainly far greater than those made by schools within the boundaries of traditional education.

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