The Conflict between Academic Research and Teaching: A Brief Report

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Academic research, a notoriously difficult term to define, is the foundation of a modern university education. For an academic institution, high quality researchers are essential for success in the intensely competitive globalised university sector. For research students, active research projects provide valuable opportunities for learning and self-development. However, 'research' means different things to faculty and post-graduate students, and thus conflicts may arise in the research process. This short article considers such conflicts at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). One-to-one interviews were conducted with eight experienced faculty members to discover the potential conflicts between the goal of finishing a research project and the goal of training students. The paper addresses the following questions. In which discipline is conflict more likely to occur? Is the conflict really a conflict for the faculty? In what circumstances might it be a problem? Is there always a conflict between research and education? The subsequent paragraphs are divided roughly into two parts, delineating the goal of research and the challenge of time.

There is no denying that the *goal* of research is different for faculty and students. To maintain a position in their fields, faculty must have research projects that are on schedule and of high quality, whereas students need to conduct research under a supervisor to fulfil the requirements of a post-graduate degree. In an interview, Professor Lee Hun-Tak, the head of the graduate division of the Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, stressed the importance of *attitude*. The 'sense of mission', according to him, is the first thing that needs to be instilled in a student. The goal of research is not only personal improvement, but also to contribute to the larger scholarly community. He argued that in many fields of the humanities or social sciences, it is essential that students have such a mindset. Students should 'have a larger goal, a commitment to his or her own field; he or she must also see the important contribution one's scholastic achievements can make to the larger civilization', he said. In this sense, the issue is one of attitude.

With regards to goal conflict, Professor McBride in the Department of Psychology extended the discussion to *authorship*. Publications are the main 'product' of academic research in many disciplines, and are very important to academic institutes, faculty and students. Like Professor Lee, Professor McBride argued that supervisors and students have different reasons for doing research. Faculties have to prove that their research is important enough to qualify for grants and thus they should be the principal author. Research students also need to publish as much as possible, to gain employment after graduation. According to Professor McBride, the conflict leads to the problem of credit attribution. In psychology, research datasets can be large and are collected by both professors and students. The joint effort to some extent blurs the question of authorship.

As Professor McBride said, 'it's easier to show that you are an authority in the field if you are first authored or senior in the field you authored. But you also want your students to do well and so you want your student to publish so that they can get hired later . . . there is a tension in publication'. For her, the challenge is to find a balance.

In addition to conflicting goals, *time* was identified as another common challenge for three reasons: research takes time, students need to be trained and given time to do research, and faculty have commitments other than research. First, there is the time needed to implement a research project, especially for research that involves a large amount of contextual evidence. Law, for example, focuses heavily on case-based research, but most cases cannot be easily studied in isolation; they are studied within a wider context. Professor David Donald said, 'for every aspect of what you are doing, you have to understand the whole. And tasks are not easily delegated and answers tend to be holistic. Thus a student's work will not border too closely on one's own'. In other words, both the research itself and student training take time.

Professor Yiu Wing-Yee from the Department of Management raised concerns about the time needed for student development. In addition to the students' research projects, Professor Yiu also involves students in her own projects to let them acquire more tacit knowledge. However, knowledge and skills cannot be acquired instantly, especially the skill of conceptualising phenomena in the real world, which is a very important skill in Business Administration. The training is a long-term process that needs step-by-step planning and guidance; thus the project may need to slow down to accommodate students' needs. 'We can't expect them to be knowledgeable and experienced researchers—actually they are still very green. We need to be patient, to train them up, and can't expect them to accomplish all that we expect all at once', she said.

Furthermore, research is not the only thing that takes time; there is also the ordinary work of the department. Teachers at universities have hectic work schedules. Professor McBride stressed, 'there are only a certain number of hours in every day. So being a research supervisor, you have some tensions there, between the needs of students and the needs of your own research'. With limited working hours, faculty have to balance teaching, learning and research, which are equally important at universities.

Based on the above notions, it seems that there is a clear distinction between 'faculty research' and 'graduate research', and that conflicts can arise for a number of reasons. Yet, the situation is not the same in all disciplines. For example, two teachers in the field of science believed that there was *no conflict* between faculty and student research. 'We do the research, so we train our students, and that is part of a university education', said Professor Xie Zuowei, Professor of Chemistry at CUHK. He argued that training students and doing research are two sides of the same coin. This demonstrates the relevance of the type of research being done to this issue. In the field of chemistry, most research is laboratory-based and it is mostly done by post-graduate students. During their research projects, students learn the practical skills of designing an experiment and collecting and analysing data. Also, students 'learn from failure'. In this field, research is a self-learning process. Teaching and learning are complementary to each other.

Similarly, in Medicine, Professor Tang Leung-Sang from the Department of Chemical Pathology highlighted 'common responsibility' in research. According to him, research is not a one-man job; it relies deeply on collaboration between supervisor and student and both parties bear certain responsibilities: 'I don't see any conflict . . . students have their own responsibility, teachers too'. Responsibility, according to Professor Tang, refers to the roles of both parties, which are mutually beneficial to each other. The role of a supervisor is to guide and enlighten the student; the student's role is to assist the supervisor in the research project. Thus, research can be facilitated through communication: 'I have to convince them, it is their project and they take control of it. Then the project will be done causally', he said. In this regard, the relationship and mutual understanding between the two parties is the key to a successful project. Success is highly dependent on how the supervisor guides the students and recognises their interests and personalities. This echoes Professor Xie's sentiment that there is no real conflict between research and training; the only difference is Professor Tang's emphasis on interaction. Research is not only a process to acquire new knowledge, it is also a medium to explore the character and the potential of a student.