

## HOW FEMALE STUDENTS COPE WITH STUDIES IN OUHK

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### ABSTRACT

In traditional Chinese society, women's subordination is mainly due to their confinement to the home and dependence on the males as the sole breadwinner. Nowadays in Hong Kong, many people think that the inequality gap between men and women, an remnant from this patriarchal tradition, still exists.

This paper will investigate what obstacles a female student will have when studying in OUHK, how she is able to overcome all the difficulties and, based on the experiences of students in one course investigate strategies used by successful female students and what student supports can be further provided to facilitate a woman student to complete the course. The 34 female high achievers were asked to participate in this study and 32 of them responded.

**Keywords:** Women, female, The Open University of Hong Kong's (OUHK).

### INTRODUCTION

In traditional Chinese society, women's subordination is mainly due to their confinement to the home and dependence on the males as the sole breadwinner. Nowadays in Hong Kong, many people think that the inequality gap between men and women, an remnant from this patriarchal tradition, still exists. Instead of attributing women's subordinate roles to sex inequality, perhaps we should think whether the "achievement" argument makes sense or not : ".....within traditional societies, a person's social status is determined very much by her or his ascriptions at birth.....In modern societies, the argument runs.....status is conferred on the basis of the individual's own achievements." (Pearson and Leung 1995, p. 2) In recent years in Hong Kong, although the family roles of women have remained salient, women's increased participation in the workforce has indeed greatly enhanced their status in the family as well as their social status. Education is a channel through which women can empower themselves, whether intellectually, financially or politically, so that they can have the same social status as their counterparts. Several high ranking women working in politics today have proven that women do have the chance to succeed.

While I do not want to challenge the view that ".....the prerogatives of the patriarchal family still circumscribe the lives of Hong Kong women especially those from low-income families." (Leung 1995, p.39), ample educational opportunities do exist in Hong Kong for women and these have been enhanced with the rapid socio-economic development and technological changes. The Open University of Hong Kong's (OUHK) open entry policy provides equal educational opportunities for all irrespective of their age, gender,

qualification or class. According to the statistics, OUHK has more or less the same number of male and female students this year (12359 and 12477 respectively). Last year, 1149 male students and 1026 female students graduated. This shows quite an even distribution of the two sexes since it is at least partly brought about by the fact that in recent years OUHK has introduced more traditionally female-oriented courses (like the primary education and nursing programmes) than before and women have also become more eager to take courses that were originally male-dominated, such as courses in business administration. It is not that a woman is deprived of the studying opportunities, but for a woman to succeed, she needs to have the diligence, determination and perseverance to jump over all the hurdles in front of her.

## GOAL OF STUDY

This paper will investigate what obstacles a female student will have when studying in OUHK, how she is able to overcome all the difficulties and, based on the experiences of students in one course, investigate strategies used by successful female students and what student supports can be further provided to facilitate a woman student to complete the course. Questionnaires (please see the appendix) were sent to female students of a translation course, namely AC254C Fundamentals in Interpreting, which was presented in October 1998. From the academic results of this course, it is found that female students performed better than the male students. In a course with enrolment of 120 females and 40 males, only 2 of the 36 higher achievers who got Pass 1 or 2 (pass with distinction or credit) are male. The main research questions asked include:

- Are there any common patterns in the family backgrounds of high achieving female students, including financial status, family support and authority to make decisions?
- What motivate female students to pursue higher education?
- How did they study this course?
- What are the reasons responsible for their success in this course?

## METHOD

### Participants

The 34 female high achievers were asked to participate in this study and 32 of them responded.

### Data Source

A 29-item questionnaire was developed to find answers to the research questions. Students were asked to tick boxes to show their choices. The questionnaire was sent to all the female high achievers. The response rate was 32 out of the 34 questionnaires sent.

## RESULTS

Due to space restrictions, the results of three of the research questions have been presented in detail. The remaining results have been summarised on page 5.

**Question I:** To what do you attribute the good results you got in this course?

a) I liked studying, so I worked hard to achieve academic excellence.

50%

b) Others

The examination was easy. (2 students)

I had great interests in this course. (2 students)

My tutor was supportive. (1 student)

I had high language proficiency. (3 students)

I liked reading and reading was good for me. (1 student)

While doing the housework, I listened to radio to broaden my horizons. (1 student)

I cooked simple food so as to save time. (1 student)

I slept late at night so as to save time. (1 student)

37.5%

c) My work experience or job nature helped me to achieve a good performance.

34.4%

d) I had great determination to succeed, so I struggled to overcome the difficulties I encountered and arrange my time properly.

31.3%

e) I had great motivation to build up my career and professional development.

28.1%

f) My family members gave me great support.

25%

g) I put a lot of time and efforts to do the training required in this course.

21.9%

**h) I knew how to combine my family responsibilities with my academic commitments.**

**15.6%**

**i) I was not satisfied to just remain a housewife or do a job of low position.**

**9.4%**

**Hardworking, great motivation and determination are always the keys to success. However, first of all, women need to develop an interest in studying. Otherwise, they will not persevere at resolving all the problems that confronts her and they will lack the drive to study hard. They also attributed their success to family members giving support, so that a student can study seriously in spite of the other burdens**

**Question II: What were the main obstacles to your study in this course?**

**a) I did not have enough time to practise interpretation at home.**

**62.5%**

**b) I was hindered by my language deficiency.**

**43.8%**

**c) Others**

**I did not take any translation course before. (1 student)**

**OUHK did not offer sufficient laboratory tutorials for students. (1 student)**

**I did not know how to find some extra studying materials other than that provided by OUHK. (2 students)**

**I was not familiar with the current affairs. (3 students)**

**I needed to put more effort to master the skills. (1 student)**

**I felt idle. (1 student)**

**My self discipline is low. (1 student).**

**31.2%**

**d) I did not have a quiet place at home to do the tape recordings or practise interpretation.**

**21.9%**

**e) I was too busy to attend the tutorials.**

**21.9%**

**f) I played an important role in the family and did not have enough time to study.**

6.3%

The two main obstacles for students are items a and e. There are many methods of improving one's language ability, however it is a long term process to which students need to pay efforts. To get improvement, students must find ways to squeeze time to do more practice (this will be discussed in Question III), even if they are very busy. In other items also discussed here, some suggestions about solving the problems will be given.

**Question III:** How did you squeeze time to train yourself on interpretation?

**a) I joined the social activities as less as I could so as to save time for studying**

25%

**b) When I was travelling on vehicles, I made use of the time to read more and/or listen to cassette tapes/radio to improve myself.**

15.6%

**c) I need to finish the housework first before I did the studying very late at night.**

15.6%

**d) I employed someone to clean the house for me (whether on full time or part time basis), so that I could have more time to do the studying,.**

12.5%

**e) I made use of the lunch break to read more and/or listen to cassette tapes/radio to improve myself.**

9.4%

**f) Others**

**I woke up earlier to do the studying. (1 student)**

**I switched from full time to part time job. (1 student)**

**I encouraged my family members to watch English TV programs together.(1student)**

9.3%

**g) I need to help my children with their homework first and waited until they had gone to bed before I did the studying.**

6.3%

The methods suggested in the above items and most probably in addition to the flexible mode of studying in the open system can help women overcome the barriers which have prevented them from returning to education. For women to return to school, they often have to make sacrifices, such as to go to bed late and to make full use of their spare time etc, without affecting their family and work. To find ways to balance one's studies and other responsibilities is often the best solution though the burden is much heavier.

### **Summary of Other Results**

From the questionnaires, some of the responses from students are noteworthy and are summarised as below :

- 25% of the students, among whom 18.8% had children, were married.
- 71.9% of the students said that when they were young, their parents had enough money to provide education to all sons and daughters, 25% said their parents did not. Only 6.3% of the students said that their parents chose to provide education to sons first before daughters.
- 62.5% of the students could control household decision-making, though some of them expressed that it was equal decision-making power between themselves and their husband and/or parents.
- Many students (96.9%) were of the opinion that the flexible studying mode at OUHK suited them.
- 18.8% of the students did not pursue higher education at earlier age because the family did not have enough money to afford it or they got poor academic results so that they were rejected by other tertiary institutions. Some (15.6%) said they had needed to take up family responsibilities.
- Some (15.6%) said their husband shared the family responsibilities with them while a small number (12.5%) said their parents took up most of the family responsibilities. The family members supported their studies at OUHK by trying to respect their decisions and interests (37.5%) and they thought that a woman nowadays was more protected if she had a higher educational level (18.8%).
- 71.9% of the students were interested in interpretation. 62.5% of them could have their language abilities improved through this course. 25% said the course was job-related.
- To improve themselves in the course, 75% of the students tried their best to attend the tutorials. 62.5% tried to read more newspapers and magazines while 59.4% spent time to listen more English in television or on radio so as to polish their pronunciation and listening/interpretation capability.

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study examined some feelings and beliefs about their studies of the female high achievers in one OUHK course. The purpose was to investigate how they were affected by their family and how they could balance the burden of study, work and family responsibilities. It was also intended to find out some important ingredients to women's educational success and how female students can be helped by OUHK to lessen their burden.

From the above results, the patriarchy in traditional society seems to have little effect on the new generation of women. The women's husbands, parents and families appeared to support the shift of the woman's values from restriction to housework to include career development. The desire to build up their careers was one of the reasons why these students persevered with their courses.

To have the desire to build up their career does not mean women are willing to sacrifice their family, as in a Chinese society, women still identify themselves as having the primary responsibility to care for their family. However, the burden can be greatly reduced by ways of employing domestic helper, shifting from full time to part time job or sharing of responsibilities with husband etc. From the outcomes in this study, it is noticed that students as many as 71.9% were unmarried and those who were over 31 and unmarried comprised 50% of the total students. Of the 25% who were married, only 18.8% had children and none of them had more than 3 children.

Therefore, late marriage and low rate of fertility may be also two of the reasons responsible for women's success in modern society. However, for those who have family commitments (whether married or unmarried), they need to find ways to balance their studies with their family duties.

To climb up the ladder of success, a woman has to pay as much the efforts as a man does. For a practical course like interpretation, students have to spend a lot of time on practical training as "the interpreter training course should concentrate on the methodologies and techniques that would be used by professional translators." (Golden 1995, p. 1075) That means a student has to dedicate a large part of her time to train herself in various aspects like listening comprehension, discourse analysis methods, note taking strategies and sentence reconstruction skills etc.

Some people think that in a language course like this, female students usually get better results than male students because women are born with better language abilities. However, interpretation is something more than the manipulation of languages. It has been correctly pointed out by Cheng that "an interpreter has to have a logical and analytical mind, good short-term memory, composure, broad general knowledge, and a firm grasp of cultural background of the countries of his working languages." (1995, p. 465) The results of this study show that for a woman to succeed, it depends on what she determines to achieve, how much efforts she is willing to pay (including drawing a plan to fulfil all her commitments).

From the results of Question II shown on pages 3-4, many students claimed that they had problems finding a quiet place at home to practise interpretation and attending the tutorials (this may due to the reason that they could not turn up at a fixed time), to help ease the burden of female students, it is helpful for the university to provide self- training facilities to them, so that they can do the training at a time convenient to them. In the long run, OUHK should have more sophisticated laboratories, not only to meet the

demands of new courses, but also to allow its students to book the laboratory for doing interpretation with the tutorial materials at any time they like. If they have problems with the interpretation techniques etc, they can consult their tutors through telephone counselling.

Some students expressed that they did not know how to do research and their knowledge of current affairs was poor. To help students to develop the ability of self-learning, each student can take turn to give a talk on a heated topic of around 20 minutes, another student will interpret what he says.

The interpreter will be informed of the topic by the speaker beforehand, so that both of them will do some preparation work. By this way, they will be trained on how to do research through which they can familiarise themselves with the subject matter as well as the bilingual usage of terms and terminology relevant to that topic.

With the establishment of an open learning institution, Hong Kong women's opportunities of receiving education are greatly enlarged as "open university is people university ..... within the reach of everybody in all corners of the nation or for that matter of the entire world....." (Hommedi 1997, p. 12) No woman should regard herself as subservient to the males. In fact, her future is in the hands of herself, not anybody else.

**Editor's note:** This article published in TOJDE with the same title in TOJDE April 2002 ISSN 1302-6488 Volume: 3 Number: 2 issue. The aim of republishing it is to be inform intWOJDE readers' "How was important seeing distance education for women learners and how was researched 10 years before around the corner of the world". E.D.

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