

LIFELONG LEARNING FOR THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION: A COMPARISON OF THE VIEWS OF THE ACADEMICS AND THE PRACTITIONERS IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT

Accounting academics and practitioners may not agree on certain issues. The importance of lifelong learning for the accounting profession is presented. This paper aims to compare the views of academics and practitioners of accounting towards the importance of lifelong learning in the accounting profession. If both parties are supportive of lifelong learning, then lifelong learning is a must not only in the accounting profession, but can be generalized for all professionals for the reasons brought forth in this paper.

Keywords: lifelong learning, continuing professional education, knowledge economy, generic competencies

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INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning is important for the accounting profession in an era of globalization and technological advancement, and particularly in Hong Kong as an international financial centre. Accounting practices such as the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) evolve with the dynamic business environment with

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individual localities having the privilege of setting their own variants, if warranted. At the same time, the big-four accounting firms in Hong Kong play an important role in mainland China in the development of necessary accounting practices. Lifelong learning needs collaboration between academics and practitioners. However, accounting academics and practitioners may not always agree. For example, Nelson (1995) reported that the origins of calls for broader and more liberal accounting education in the United States can be traced to the turn of the 20th century. Leaders of the early accounting profession, represented largely by the major accounting firms, believed accountants should be trained to think analytically and critically. However, accounting programmes through the years have primarily focused on technical training and Certified Public Accountant (CPA) examination preparation, ignoring the broad, liberal education that was promoted by the founding practitioners who sponsored the first university schools of business.

The aforementioned then raises the question of whether disagreements exist between academics and practitioners on lifelong learning in Hong Kong. Today in Hong Kong, a majority of university accounting faculty members who are good at teaching accounting may not wish to be involved in teaching professional development accounting courses as per the accounting academics surveyed. There are two factors that contribute to this situation. Firstly, university accounting faculty in Hong Kong in general are under severe pressure to publish for reasons of tenure or promotion as they all strive to be top research universities for research grants purpose. Secondly, any teaching done outside of their regular teaching duties will have to go through a tedious approval process which most faculty members try to avoid. Remuneration for outside practice has to be split with the university beyond a certain level. On the other hand, do these faculty members believe that lifelong learning for accountants is important? Furthermore, how important do practitioners feel about lifelong learning? If both parties appreciate the importance of lifelong learning for the accounting profession, then suggestions can be made to government subsidized universities to work around the aforementioned two hurdles. If agreeing on its importance, are there any perspectives that differ?

To answer these questions, this paper aims to compare the views of academics and practitioners of accounting towards the importance of lifelong learning in the accounting profession. If both parties are supportive of lifelong learning, then lifelong learning is a must not only in the accounting profession, but a must for all professionals.

The findings indicate that both academics and practitioners of accounting are supportive of lifelong learning. However, practitioners do not see any drawbacks in lifelong learning in the form of continuing professional education (CPE) while academics do. In addition, practitioners place even more emphasis on generic skills over technical ones when compared with academics as the latter feel that such skills cannot be easily taught.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Realizing that accountants would need to acquire knowledge in their field continuously to succeed, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) and the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) in 2000 proposed mandatory continuing professional education (CPE), consisting of sponsored learning activities (traditional CPE activities such as seminars and conferences), and self-directed learning activities (based on self-assessments of learning needs).

Pitfall under traditional CPE activities was that credit was given for attendance, regardless of whether learning took place. Hence, the selection of learning activities should be carefully planned and in line with the individual CPA's current work and future work plans. Under the self-directed approach, outcome measurement and its associated reporting and verification would all pose problems (Thomas & Harper, 2001: 30-34).

Economic globalization and technological advancements in information, communication and production have necessitated the transformation of an economy based on primary and secondary industries to one that focuses on knowledge and

innovation (Casey, 2006). This process of economic restructuring resulted in organizations being more customer-focused, less hierarchical divisions of labour, new occupational profiles and skill requirement, as well as blurring the lines that separated traditional industries (Guile, 2002). Key competencies applicable to all professions under the knowledge economy contribute to an overall successful life and a well-functioning society (Rychen, 2002). In different literatures and localities, the term “key competencies” has been used interchangeably with other terms such as generic skills or employability skills (Williams, 2005; Curtis, 2004).

The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) report (Rychen, 2002) in response to global challenges such as rapid social and technological changes and economic and cultural globalization, called for a holistic approach to life whereby individual’s key competencies affect both the individual and the society and can be applied across fields.

Economic globalization and lifelong learning is a must for all professions. Bryson (2000) and Dyer (1999) also indicated that environmental and work changes under the knowledge economy necessitated lifelong learning which means that learning is not limited to formal education, but part of life experience by being aware of opportunities for social, cultural and personal development from such changes. In order to function effectively as a professional, an individual must keep abreast of recent developments in the field. A doctor has to prescribe the latest and most effective medication for an ailment just as an accountant has to use International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) instead of the old Hong Kong or China accounting standards in the preparation of financial statements. The OECD reports on Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) (2002, 2003) emphasized on lifelong learning for all among other issues.

Lifelong learning in the researcher’s view, can help to enhance both technical skills and generic skills. Lifelong learning in the form of CPE updates a professional’s knowledge in his or her chosen profession and even more so within the knowledge economy. On the other hand, a professional having the talent and an appreciation in art or music can take painting or music lessons, thus broadening his or her societal contacts

and conversational topics with the end result being enhancing communication and interpersonal skills which are vitally important for any profession.

Lifelong learning in the form of CPE may have its drawbacks. As mentioned earlier, credit is given for attendance regardless of whether learning takes place. Another perceived drawback is that CPE sessions can be offered by any business organization and not necessarily, professional bodies and universities. As such, programme delivery in these business organizations is done primarily by part-time professionals interested in teaching. Quality assurance mechanisms may not be as rigid and effective as those run by universities and professional bodies.

Four conclusions can be drawn from this literature review section as follows:

1. Continuing professional education (CPE) is important for accountants.
2. It includes both traditional CPE and self-directed.
3. Contents of CPE can equip learners with technical skills and to a degree, help in the nurturing of generic skills.
4. It has both merits and drawbacks.

These conclusions are used for partial evidence of academic views and sources of questionnaires.

METHODOLOGY

(a) Participants in Data Collection

Data on academics' views were obtained through relevant literature review as well as interviews with selected senior accounting academics of four selected universities, whereas practitioners' views were solicited through interviews conducted with selected partners of big-four accounting firms. The four selected universities are The University of Hong Kong (HKU), City University of Hong Kong (CityU), Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) and The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK). The big-four accounting firms are PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte, Touche & Tohmatsu, Ernst & Young and KPMG. They are only identified as A, B, C, D (not in the previous order) for reasons of confidentiality.

(b) Criteria for Selection of Universities and Accounting Firms and Interviewees of Universities and Big-Four Firms

(i) Universities and Accounting Academics

Excluding the researcher's home university (the only private university in Hong Kong), there are a total of eight universities, grouped into four categories. The University of Hong Kong (HKU), The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) are the three major research universities. Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPolyU) and City University of Hong Kong (CityU) were upgraded from polytechnics in 1995 while Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) and Lingnan University (LN) were upgraded from liberal arts colleges. The final category consists of one university, i.e., The Open University of Hong Kong whose courses are delivered in both the traditional face-to-face teaching mode and the distance learning mode. In order to match with the number of accounting firms interviewed, four universities were selected, one from each of the four categories.

The selection of the four universities among the four categories was based two criteria used for selecting individual senior accounting academics for the interviews. In other words, one individual is selected from each of the four categories of universities and the four universities are the ones that the individuals are associated with. The two criteria are (a) having taught in at least one North American university and (b) having taught in more than one university in Hong Kong. It is believed that with this exposure, they would have a better understanding of lifelong learning for the accounting profession. An endowed professor of accounting at HKU was chosen as he previously taught at HKUST prior to joining HKU as well as having taught at Washington University. In addition, his exposure extended to Korea where he taught at two universities there, namely Sungkyunkwan and Yonsei. The Head of Accountancy at CityU was chosen as he is a chair professor of accounting at CityU and was an associate dean of the School of Business at HKPolyU as well as the Acting Head of the School of Accounting and Finance. He held the Canada Research Chair in Corporate Governance and Financial Reporting while he was at Concordia University

in Canada as well as having taught at Syracuse University. The Head of Accountancy and Law at HKBU was chosen as he is a professor of accounting at HKBU and was with HKU before joining HKBU. He was also with Stanford University and University of Lethbridge in Canada prior to coming to Hong Kong. The Vice-President (Academic) at OUHK was chosen as he is a professor of accounting at OUHK and was the Head of Accounting at CUHK and HKUST. He also taught at both California State University and Ohio State University.

(ii) Accounting Firms and Partners of Big-Fours

The interviewees were selected by the Human Resources Partner or Director of each firm. The criteria for selection were the partners' familiarity with the mission and business practice of his or her firm and active participation in activities pertaining to accounting education such as serving on university's accounting advisory committees or educational committees of professional accounting bodies.

In the case of the practitioners, only the big-4s were surveyed, as the four firms out of over 1,300 CPA firms in Hong Kong recruited 55.4% (530 / 956) of accounting graduates in Hong Kong in 2006. See Tables 1 and 2 as follows for 2006.

TABLE 1 Breakdown of total HK 2006 accounting graduates

Name of university	Number of accounting graduates
University of Hong Kong	96
Chinese University of Hong Kong	150
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	116
Hong Kong Polytechnic University	203
CityUniversity of Hong Kong	244
Hong Kong Baptist University	69
Lingnan University	78
Total	956

Source: HK universities web-sites, faculty office and student affairs office

Notes: Table 1 shows only accounting major graduates and excludes those in joint programmes. Of the nine institutions surveyed, the big fours did not conduct campus recruitment for OUHK and Chu Hai as a result of limited resources of the latter. The former did not have a student affairs office either. Hence, only seven institutions are shown.

TABLE 2 Total graduates hired by big-4s in 2006 by category

	HK Accounting graduates hired	HK Non-accounting graduates hired	International returnees
Totals	530	378	294

Source: HR of big-4s (PriceWaterhouseCoopers; Deloitte, Touche & Tomatsu; Ernst & Young, and KPMG)

Notes: Table 2 shows the big four figures by category in aggregate for confidentiality reason. Non-accounting graduates included primarily those from non-accounting business disciplines, although one firm included some non-business graduates. International returnees were Hong Kong residents returning to Hong Kong after obtaining their degrees elsewhere. The 55.4% is calculated using the total local accounting graduates recruited by the four firms as the numerator and the total local accounting major graduates as the denominator for 2006 since our study pertains only to accounting graduates. The other two categories of figures are provided to show the large absolute numbers that these firms recruit. In addition, two of the four firms reported a total of 2,245 mainland graduates recruited by their mainland offices for use in the mainland. This category of figures was not available for the remaining two firms. The numbers in Table 2 represent total offers accepted and not total offers given as bright graduates in accounting may receive multiple offers from the big fours.

As major employers of accounting graduates, their views on lifelong learning for accountants carry more weight than employers hiring only a small number of accounting graduates. The Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants (HKICPA) regulates the profession in Hong Kong. Members of committees on qualification, examination matters and continuing professional education are primarily partners of the big-four firms.

(c) Data Collection Procedure and Rationale

Based on relevant literature reviewed, a questionnaire consisting of seven questions (see APPENDIX) was sent to the selected accounting academics and partners of the big-four firms. This was for the respondents to gather some thoughts from the questions. Depending on the availability of the individual, interviews could be conducted in person or by telephone. Although respondents might complete the questionnaire in writing, this option was not preferred as a dialogue could cover more points than a written response could provide. A follow-up interview by telephone was conducted for those who chose this option and where the written responses were not clear.

Conversations in person were recorded with the permission of the respondent. Interviewees were reminded that they did not have to answer all questions or parts of a question if they did not feel qualified to do so. The questionnaire merely served as a guide in their oral or written responses and they were at liberty to elaborate beyond the framework of the questionnaire. Data collected were summarized for the academics and separately for the practitioners and differences if any, identified with implications of such differences discussed. Any possible enhancements to lifelong learning as a result of any differences, or otherwise, were recommended.

IMPORTANCE OF LIFELONG LEARNING FOR THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION IN HONG KONG

As Rychen (2002) pointed out earlier in the literature review that in response to global challenges such as rapid social and technological changes and economic and cultural globalization, one must call for a holistic approach to life whereby individuals' key competencies affect both the individual and the society and can be applied across fields. He also indicated that these key competencies applicable to all professions under the knowledge economy contribute to an overall successful life and a well-functioning society. The knowledge economy as prescribed by the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has been in existence for over a decade. It provides the impetus for citizens in this Region to acquire an intellectual horizon and an international perspective beyond the immediate environment. Without lifelong learning, the citizens would fall behind the Region's pace of advancement. Accountants are certainly not an exception.

In a practical sense, lifelong learning includes not only CPE that is work-related, but also non-work related learning from the environment as well as retirement learning. In Hong Kong, big-four partners often occupy significant non-paid or paid board or committee work after retirement, many of which would have a significant impact on the society at large. For example, a former Chief Executive of Ernst and Young is the Chairman of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority. Serving employees also have a significant impact on society as many serve on the councils and committees of

professional accounting bodies. In terms of implications to the profession, as partners of these firms are requested to retire at age 55, many would continue on with smaller accounting or consulting firms. Hence, lifelong learning to the fullest extent would be helpful. Serving employees are required to cross-sell services of other departments in accounting firms. To facilitate the establishing of a good working network with clients, these discussions are often conducted during lunch with clients, at which time clients would wish to include non-business aspects in their dining conversation. A significant exposure on the part of these employees to music, fine arts, sports and recreational activities would certainly broaden the number of topical areas during conversation. A sound business relationship can easily be established, particularly if there are common hobbies between the client and the firm's employee.

VIEWS EXPRESSED BY THE ACADEMICS

Accounting academics all regarded lifelong learning for the accounting profession as essential as a result of economic and technological globalization and the gradual adoption of the IFRS in various parts of the world. In addition, they felt that all professions face similar situations as accounting, under the new knowledge economy and hence, lifelong learning is a must for all professionals. With the exception of HKU whose representative has not taken any CPE courses, academics in general agreed with Thomas and Harper (2001) that the content and structure of CPE courses are important and that learning must take place. Suggestions such as using Internet study tools, dissemination of reader-friendly research output and the holding of seminars and conferences to explore possible collaboration opportunities between academics and practitioners to enhance life-long learning, have been made. They all believed that CPE benefits both technical and generic skills development, but some would lean more on the technical side as generic skills cannot be easily taught and should be nurtured through various channels such as having a broad-based education, conducting group case discussions, taking life-related courses and on-the-job exposures. Academics in general are interested in teaching professional development courses, but would not be

involved with a heavy research agenda and the approval process for outside practice. Nevertheless, they do not oppose to having practicing professionals or university teaching fellows teaching these courses, as these individuals, having the necessary experience, can take a more pragmatic approach to teaching than the professors can.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES FROM THE ACADEMICS

HKU

Lifelong learning for the accounting profession is important as the accounting profession should adopt new ideas and methods through lifelong learning to adapt to changing business environments; otherwise, the profession cannot survive. This is also important for all professionals under the new knowledge economy as they must understand new knowledge in practicing their business. I believe that updated knowledge has direct impacts on the accountants' compensation and career path. I personally have not attended any CPEs as my knowledge has been updated by attending academic conferences and workshops and by reading papers on a regular basis. However, I believe that attendance at CPEs is important to have an awareness of what is new in the accounting field and hence, I cannot fault the CPE system. I conjecture that accountants may be more interested in technical skills related to accounting, but I believe that lifelong learning benefits both technical and generic skills. Archival financial accounting is my research area and I am interested in explaining how accounting numbers are used by investors, managers, board members and professional accountants. As far as I know, there are few common interests between professional accountants and myself. However, if professional accountants find some issues or topics that I can deal with, I will be happy to be involved in teaching professional development courses. I am aware that other colleagues may not want to be involved with outside practice because of the heavy research agenda universities impose on faculty members. As professional accountants face accounting issues during their practice, they often find solutions on their own. However, I believe that the accounting academics may help them find solutions by providing lifelong learning

services. I also believe that practitioners should frequently hold conferences on current accounting issues and find whether the academic profession can provide something new to practitioners. If there is common interest, there may be a good starting point for collaboration.

CityU

Lifelong learning is definitely essential for the accounting profession as accounting exists in certain institutional environments that change constantly as a result of globalization. Hence, there is the need to update oneself not only in accounting, but all the peripheral areas related to accounting such as finance, law, etc. I believe that a similar situation exists within all professions in that there are disciplinary and inter-disciplinary changes for the same reason. A professional cannot survive without updating his or her knowledge. I think the 40 hours of CPE required by the Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants (HKICPA) is good, but should be relevant to the accountants' needs and well-structured under specific themes. Seminars and conferences organized by various accounting bodies should provide an intellectual interaction between accounting academics and practitioners whereby there is mutual benefit. Otherwise, it would be merely a social interaction at these gatherings. I believe that CPE would benefit both the technical as well as the generic skills of accountants as depending on an individual's needs, one could take the technically related accounting courses or the non-work related or life-related courses for personal development. I think employers should give employees the choice and support both. Most of us would be interested in teaching professional development courses, but not with a heavy research agenda and not with the red-tape involved in the approval process. I think that the teaching fellows would be more suitable in teaching such courses as they do not have to do much research and most of them have practical experience as well. We in the mainstream departments do not teach lifelong learning courses as they are taught exclusively by the continuing education arms of universities. Hence, I cannot see any controversies associated with life-long learning. On the other hand, I feel that our research publications do benefit the accounting profession immensely, e.g., earnings

management issues, but they are not disseminated to practitioners. I believe that we should re-write our papers without the technical jargon to make them more reader-friendly for not only the practitioners, but also the government policy makers that may find many of the topics useful for their purpose. I have already convinced the Hong Kong Institute of Chartered Secretaries on this and I think the HKICPA would be even more receptive to this.

HKBU

Yes, I believe that lifelong learning is a must for the accounting profession with the development of new accounting issues and the constant updating of IFRS. In addition, the global economy changes every now and then with innovative financing methods being rapidly introduced. Lifelong learning is not confined to the accounting profession, but is applicable throughout all professions under the knowledge economy as all professions are affected by the globalization of business and technology, etc. Although I am a strong supporter of CPE, I am not happy with the way that accounting bodies prescribe it. For example, 40 hours of CPE is mandatory each year for membership renewal without stipulating the specific themes or topics that members should learn or update themselves in. I believe that the content of CPE is most critical, not just fulfilling the hours as a formality. Learning must therefore, take place. I am happy with experienced professionals teaching CPE courses on a part-time basis as they can take a more pragmatic approach to teaching, while academics teach from textbooks and their research findings. Lifelong learning benefits both technical and generic skills, but I believe it is primarily technical as generic skills can be nurtured through a broad-based education. The fact that universities today emphasize general education in any professional programme is an indication of the society's emphasis on generic skills. Besides, I believe that interactivity in the classroom through group case discussions is essential for the nurturing of generic skills as well. There must be incentives for faculty members to have an interest in teaching professional development courses. I think most colleagues are interested, but there are no incentives with a heavy research agenda. Furthermore, teaching these courses adds nothing to contract

renewal. There are no controversies at all with lifelong learning for professionals, but the bottom line I repeat, is the effectiveness of the courses in terms of their contents and structures. I strongly suggest that professional accounting bodies should adopt the approach used in the US, in designing Internet study tools on topics deemed to be essential for the year, e.g., ethics. The course materials and test questions are all online and the learners can continuously study and attempt or re-attempt the tests without anyone being aware of this. Passing the test will result in the obtaining of a certificate which will in turn lead to membership renewal. Another beauty of this is that physically, instructors are not involved in the teaching and grading of tests. Hence, the problem associated with instructors' experience and qualifications are alleviated. I also recommend that the course and test design be outsourced to professionals who are up-to-date with current issues instead of using accounting academics to do this.

OUHK

Accountants need to keep up with new developments in all aspects of life, including but not limited to those directly related to their profession. Therefore, I think lifelong learning is a must for the accounting profession. This could be generalized to all professionals, but not to the extent required of accountants, as other professions may not be affected as much from the globalization of business as accountants do. Although CPE may have some drawbacks, it is still a good way to ensure that professionals, including accountants, keep abreast of developments in the field as well as keeping up with lifelong learning. I think lifelong learning helps in the development of both technical and generic skills as through lifelong learning, accountants not only can keep up with new developments in their profession, but also with the general political, social and economic environment. Although academics may be interested in teaching CPE courses, only a few, if any, academics are willing or good at teaching these courses. This is mainly due to heavy demand in their research output. The need to carry out theoretical and publishable type of research has taken away their attention from new developments in professional practices and even the environment at large. Hence, some of them may not be equipped to teach CPE courses. Lifelong learning is a lifetime

commitment for everybody, particularly for professionals. It should be regarded as a way of life enjoyment and not a burden. One should share the experience, joy and rewards of lifelong learning with all professionals.

VIEWS EXPRESSED BY BIG-FOUR PARTNERS

Practitioners indicated that lifelong learning is a must for all professionals. CPE does not have any drawback. Individual responses from the big-four firms are provided in the following section. There is unanimous agreement among the four firms that lifelong learning is a must or a fact of life for any professional as a result of changes taking place constantly. This supports the views of Bryson (2000) and Dyer (1999) who felt that environmental and work changes under the knowledge economy necessitated lifelong learning which means that learning is not limited to formal education, but part of life experience by being aware of opportunities for social, cultural and personal development from such changes. Furthermore, the firms all agree that CPE does not have any drawback as the extent of learning taking place very much depends on the individual in spite of the fact that it may be conducted by part-time professionals interested in teaching and offered by organizations with limited quality assurance standards. The focus is on creating an awareness of what these changes are and if professionals do not take full advantage of the opportunity given them to update themselves, they will soon find that they become obsolete. Hence, they disagreed with Thomas and Harper (2001) that traditional CPE activities' pitfall was that credit was given for attendance regardless of whether learning had taken place and that under the self-directed approach, outcome measurement and its associated reporting and verification would all pose problems. Firm D put it very nicely by saying that "generic skills are lifetime skills". This is in line with the view of Larkin and Sherman (1993) who supported the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) initiatives in nurturing generic skills, as lifetime learning skills.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES FROM THE BIG-FOUR FIRMS

Firm A

I feel that lifelong learning is a must for all professionals and benefits both technical and generic skills. Generally speaking, new technical knowledge is updated immediately at professional firms. With the environmental changes happening so quickly under the knowledge economy, lifelong learning can be viewed as a platform for learning provided by a company for continuous observations and awareness, so that professionals do not end up asking stupid questions in front of clients, particularly with the big fours having large client bases. With Internet, this updating of knowledge can also take place on the web-sites in addition to taking seminars and workshops. In terms of whether any in-depth learning takes place in these CPE seminars and workshops, it is not a great concern to this firm as an awareness of the subject matter will take place at any rate and the extent of learning very much depends on the individual (HR and Resourcing Director).

Firm B

Lifelong learning is viewed as very important by us. With environmental changes taking place rapidly, focus on self-added value is a must. Most professionals of any kind would belong to a professional body. The self-regulated nature of the professional bodies would dictate the updating of professional knowledge. There are no perceived drawbacks of CPE as it deals primarily with adding of self-value (Learning Partner).

Firm C

Lifelong learning is extremely important for any professional as environmental, legal, regulatory and governance requirements change every now and then. There are no drawbacks of CPE, despite the fact that learning may not take place to the fullest extent. Some learning will take place in fulfilling the minimum requirement of CPE (Assurance Partner).

Firm D

Lifelong learning for any professional is a fact of life. One needs to be updated constantly with new knowledge, rules and regulations. In the absence of lifelong learning, a professional would not be able to advise clients effectively. CPEs do not have any drawbacks. Once the opportunity has been given for professionals to update themselves, the extent of learning taken place would not be an issue, as this is an individual matter. Those that are not thoroughly familiar with new rules and regulations may find themselves at an disadvantage to the point of being obsolete (National Learning Partner).

The implications in this interviewee's response are that CPEs on their own have no drawbacks from the practitioners' point of view even with less qualified instructors delivering the courses or whether any in-depth learning has taken place. The essence of CPEs is to obtain an awareness of current issues and be updated on these issues. This view can be upheld by the fact that even in formal university learning, there are students obtaining grade A in a course while some students may fail the same course taught by the same instructor, regardless of the qualifications of the instructor as successful learning is dependent on a variety of factors such as attendance record, attentiveness in class, critical thinking skills, etc. The interviewee indicates that the opportunity for CPE should be provided.

OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

There are similarities and differences between the views of accounting academics and accounting practitioners.

Similarities

Both the academics represented by the four universities and the practitioners represented by the big-four accounting firms in Hong Kong strongly support lifelong learning for the accounting profession. They also have pointed out that lifelong learning is a must for all professions under the knowledge economy as per Bryson (2000) and

Dyer (1999). However, with the exception of OUHK whose representative is at the Vice-President (Academic) level and may have a broader perspective in the understanding of lifelong learning and CityU whose representative has taught in three different countries, both sets of respondents have not mentioned anything about non-job related learning and retirement learning despite leads given from the researcher during interviews or follow-up interviews. This may be due to the accounting academics and practitioners not understanding the full meaning of lifelong learning. Surveying education specialists from a Faculty of Education may create different outcomes. This however, is beyond the scope of this study.

Difference

The majority of accounting academics in Hong Kong as well as Thomas and Harper (2001) believe that learning must take place in attending CPEs. Unlike accounting practitioners, they feel that it is not enough just to be aware of the new issues in accounting and related areas. Some uphold this point so strongly that they even suggested ways and means to accomplish learning.

Points Raised by Accounting Academics Alone

Accounting practitioners have avoided discussions on skills development, who is best to teach lifelong learning courses and suggestions for improvement, as they do not regard themselves as experts in these areas. Their main concern has been on learning that is job-related. The following presents important considerations from the accounting academics.

- (a) Mainstream faculty members do believe in the importance of lifelong learning and are interested in teaching CPE courses. Their reluctance to be involved in teaching lifelong learning courses is primarily due to lack of time as a result of a heavy research agenda and the university approval process for outside practice.
- (b) Accounting academics and firm A feel that both technical and generic skills development can be benefitted through lifelong learning, although with the exception of OUHK, many feel that the main thrust is on the technical side as they do not appear to

understand the full meaning of lifelong learning. On the other hand, both CityU and HKBU have suggested channels for the nurturing of generic skills as this is an important area that major accounting employers are looking for.

The following is a summary of responses on lifelong learning:

TABLE 3 Summary of responses on lifelong learning

Questionnaire	Academic views	Practitioners' view
1. Lifelong learning is must.	Yes	Yes
2. Lifelong learning can be generalized to all professionals.	Yes	Yes
3. CPE has drawbacks.	Yes	No
4. Lifelong learning benefits both technical and generic skills.	Yes, but generic skills cannot be easily taught.	Emphasized more on generic skills

Items 1 and 2 invite unanimous agreement and no further elaboration is required. The difference in item 3 shows that academics in general prefer in-depth learning whereas practitioners prefer awareness. As CPE is job-related, the researcher agrees more with the practitioners in that accounting is a dynamic discipline whereby accounting practices change along with changes in business practices. It is important to be aware of what is happening first as in-depth learning can take place later in accordance with needs. As far as item 4 is concerned, there is not much of a difference between academics and practitioners. Although practitioners emphasize more on generic skills than technical ones, they do not disagree that such skills cannot be easily taught, but will have to be nurtured through practice. Firm D put it very nicely by saying that “generic skills are lifetime skills”.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher is not overly concerned with the fact that big-four

accounting firms do not regard in-depth learning as an essential component of CPE. In-depth learning, nevertheless, is important in order for learning to be effective so that learners can apply what they learn to their practice. On the other hand, all big-four firms in Hong Kong have sizeable Learning Departments where on-going new issues are being taught on a formal basis. This is further evidenced by the fact that 40% of the big-fours' new recruits are non-accounting graduates (Human Resources Department of firms A and C) with little or no prior training in accounting. These learning departments then sponsor accelerated programmes for these graduates. However, small and medium-sized practitioners (SMPs) may not have such training facilities and it is the recruits of these firms that the HKICPA should pay more attention to in developing Internet study tools. Fortunately, the negative impact would not be substantial in the absence of such professional development opportunity as there are over 1,300 SMPs in Hong Kong with the majority of the accounting graduates recruited by the big-fours.

The researcher is more concerned with the respondents not having an understanding of the full meaning of lifelong learning as the importance of non-job related learning and retirement learning is described in detail in the section on Importance of Lifelong Learning, both from the literature reviewed and from a practical sense. These types of learning would not only benefit the accountant's personal development and life enrichment, but also the society at large pre and post retirement. Such holistic and whole person development would also benefit the accounting employers.

Recommendations

The following are recommended:

- (a) Major accounting employers should consider sponsoring non-work related learning and recreational activities for its serving employees as well as those that have retired. CityU feels that employers should give employees the choice of taking technically related accounting courses or the non-work related or life-related courses for personal development and support both.
- (b) Major accounting employers should encourage lifelong learning by employees by

providing financial support. A follow-up discussion with one of the big-four firms indicates that these firms all have strong cash flows and healthy balance sheets. They are aware of their social responsibility and certainly would be able to consider this aspect as part of their human resources benefits.

(c) The HKICPA should consider designing Internet study tools with tests and make the passing of such courses a condition for membership renewal. This is a specific recommendation of HKBU.

(d) The HKICPA should sponsor more seminars and conferences on topics relevant to current accounting practice and seek accounting academics' collaboration in providing lifelong learning services. This was specifically pointed out by CityU and HKU, although the latter referred to practitioners instead of the HKICPA as sponsor.

(e) The universities should cultivate professional students' interest in lifelong learning by allowing as many credits as possible for electives within the accounting programme and by increasing the number of credits assigned to courses in fine arts, music, sports, etc. The researcher serves as an expert for the Hong Kong Council of Academic Accreditations and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ). Such questions on how universities can develop students' interest in lifelong learning are often asked during on-site accreditation exercises.

(f) The universities can consider disseminating reader-friendly research findings on current accounting issues to practitioners and to those in government responsible for policy making. This is a specific recommendation from CityU.

(g) The universities can consider encouraging teaching fellows who have practical experience to engage more in professional development services for the profession as they devote not more than 20% of their working time to research rather than the 50% that faculty at the professorial ranks spend on. Furthermore, they do not have to be concerned with the tier level of the journal that they publish in. This is a specific recommendation from CityU.

(h) Accreditation bodies should exercise more stringent criteria when assessing the professional development programmes offered by business organizations as opposed to universities and professional accounting bodies. Currently in Hong Kong, all courses

including vocational ones, e.g., reflexology, will have to be accredited by HKCAAVQ. The latter's former name is HKCAA.

Limitations of This Research

The 2006 percentage is provided as at the time of the survey, only the 2006 recruitment statistics used for Table 2 were available for all 4 firms. The latter were reluctant to release such statistics to a researcher and some took several months to compile the requested information. If it is difficult to update figures in Table 2, there would be no rationale in updating the figures used for Table 1 as the total is used as the denominator in the calculation of the 55.4%. The November 2008 issue of A Plus (HKICPA's journal) however, reported higher percentages of total recruits for some major universities. About 80% of HKU's and 2/3 of HKUST's accounting graduates join the big-4 firms (Micaller, 2008). This and the researcher's computed statistic, provide conclusive evidence of the significant impact of big-four recruitment of university graduates, accounting and other disciplines. The researcher is comfortable in using the 2006 recruitment statistics as in more recent years, the recruitment figures would be even higher as many of these firms are recruiting Hong Kong graduates for the mainland because more of their clients are having operations, particularly manufacturing, in the mainland. The fact that Ernst & Young has made five offers to accounting graduates from the researcher's home university in 2011-12, as per the Senior Human Resources Manager, points to a substantial increase from the past.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire on Lifelong Learning for the Accounting Profession

1. Is lifelong learning essential for the accounting profession? Why or why not?
2. If the answer to (1) above is yes, can this be generalized to all professionals under the new knowledge economy? Why would you say so?
3. Do you feel that CPE has any drawbacks? Why or why not? Are there any pitfalls associated with CPE? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel that lifelong learning for accountants benefit both technical and generic skills and if so, in what way?
5. Do you think that a majority of university accounting faculty members who are good at teaching accounting wish to be involved in teaching professional development courses? Whether your answer is “yes” or “no” to this question, what in your view would have contributed to this situation?
6. Are there any issues and controversies associated with lifelong learning in the accounting profession that you wish to share with the researcher?
7. What would you suggest that accounting academics, practitioners and other stakeholders do to enhance lifelong learning for the accounting profession in Hong Kong?

Biographical Sketch

Theodore T. Y. Chen is Professor and Head of Department of Accounting at Hong Kong Shue Yan University as well as a member of University Council in addition to serving as Chair or member of a number of university-wide committees. Having received his degrees from McGill University (B.Com.), the University of British Columbia (M.B.A.) and the University of Hong Kong (Ph.D), he has taught at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and Trinity Western University in Canada. He has contributed to international academic refereed as well as practice journals. In 2003, Chen was honored by the Certified Management Accountants Society of Canada as a Fellow and by the Association of International Accountants in the United Kingdom as an honorary fellow member for his international contribution to the accounting profession. In 2010, he was honored by the Certified Management Accountants in Australia as a Foundation Member in Hong Kong. As a practicing Certified Management Accountant in Canada, he is also a Fellow of the Hong Kong Institute of Directors.

Aside from being an academic, Chen has served on various committees and boards of professional accounting bodies and government in Hong Kong and Canada as well as providing consultancy services to a variety of industries and to academic institutions as external academic assessor, external examiner, external advisor, etc. He has held middle to senior management positions in a spectrum of Canadian industries, including retail and distribution, automotive manufacturing, oil, forest, banking, insurance, real estate and public practice.

會計業的終身學習：比較香港會計學者與執業者所持觀點異同

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中文摘要

會計學者與從業人員可能在某些問題上意見不一。終身學習對會計專業十分重要。本文的目的是比較會計學者與從業人員對終身學習重要性的意見。如果雙方均支持終身學習，認為會計界不可缺之，則終身學習還應推廣至其他專業，本文乃基於此理念而發。

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