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ABSTRACT

Project Yi Jin was developed to provide an alternative route to higher education for students who failed the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination to gain academic status for and access to higher education. The project provides a 1-year full-time program that includes 600 contact hours of instruction in 10 subjects--7 core subjects and 3 electives. The program emphasizes basic skills and study skills. Project Yi Jin's designers gave special consideration to gender and age issues when designing the program's courses. After the project had been in operation for 1 year, it was evaluated through a telephone survey of approximately 3,000 students, of which 2,416 (80%) agreed to participate. The survey established that students who successfully completed the project had better opportunities for further study and tended to pursue further education at higher academic levels than did those who did not complete the program. Those who completed Project Yi Jin also had better subsequent employment opportunities and expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the course. The evaluation further established that the program was neither gender biased nor age biased. Project Yi Jin was also credited with helping students over the age of 21 years obtain formal qualifications for employment and for continuing education. (Contains 28 references.) (MN)

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Project Yi Jin: An Alternative Pathway to Higher Education in Hong Kong

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Abstract

An innovative Project Yi Jin that provided an alternative route for students who failed in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) to gain an academic status for, and access to, higher education was evaluated after one year's implementation. A survey of 2,416 students via telephone found that students who successfully completed the project had better opportunities for further study and tended to do so at higher academic levels than those who did not complete the program. They also had better subsequent employment opportunities and felt more satisfied with the course. The program was found to be both gender and age unbiased. Project Yi Jin has provided a route for those who had completed secondary education in Hong Kong with unsatisfactory results and those mature students who are 21 or above to obtain a formal qualification for both employment and continuing education purposes.

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis worldwide on continuing education and the transition from high school to college (e.g., Bragg, 2000; Burkhalter, 2000; Education Commission, Hong Kong, 2000; Nunley, Shartle-Galotto, & Smith, 2000; Hughes & Smeaton, 2001; Richmond, 1981). In particular, for those at risk and for those who fail at the secondary school level, alternative pathways have been designed for students to proceed to further education. However, most of these programs are more of a vocational than an academic nature such that these students are unlikely to pursue a "proper" academic qualification any further. In Hong Kong, an innovative program was designed and implemented in 2000 to specifically cater for students who have failed in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) that is the threshold for any further academic pursuit. It also welcomed mature students of 21 years of age or above who did not have the opportunity to complete their secondary education previously. The present study evaluates the effectiveness of the program in achieving its major aims of providing an alternative pathway for further education and of improving employment opportunities.

Higher Education in Hong Kong

Conventionally, higher education in Hong Kong means university education. In Hong Kong, entry to university education is unique via the pathway of matriculation; yet entry to the matriculation level

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is contingent upon success in the HKCEE, a standardized examination at the end of Secondary 5 (i.e., equivalent to 11th grade). Because there are a lot more students attending the HKCEE than places available at the matriculation level, a full HKCEE certificate (typically obtaining a pass in at least 5 subjects including Chinese and also English at the higher of two levels) does not guarantee a place in Secondary 6 (i.e., the first of two years' study for matriculation). Since even those who pass the HKCEE may not secure a place in higher education, obviously the chance for those students who fail the HKCEE is an absolute zero. However, the Education and Manpower Bureau (2000) has indicated, Hong Kong will need a substantial increase of "better-educated workers" (i.e., workers with post-secondary education) in the near future. In particular, the manpower requirement projection based on data from 1999 showed that manpower with post-secondary qualifications will need to increase by 4.55%, from 14.09% in the year 1999 to 18.64% in 2005. Like other countries, new jobs in the future knowledge-based economy are likely to require more education (National Alliance of Business, Inc., 1998; HKSAR, 2000, 2001). However, under the present education system where even those who pass the HKCEE may not have the opportunity to higher education, those who fail the HKCEE are unlikely to survive the new era when tertiary education is almost a prerequisite for any kind of employment.

Project Yi Jin: An Alternative Pathway

To provide a channel for those students who have failed in the HKCEE to go on to higher education, the Hong Kong government introduced Project Yi Jin in the year 2000. Since 1960s, the HKCEE has been a formal and official standardized public examination for 11th grade students in Hong Kong. Students usually take 8 subjects in the HKCEE, and getting 5 passes including the English Language and Chinese Language subjects is considered by the community as successful completion of one's secondary education. This also means potential access to tertiary education and opportunities of decent employment. There was virtually no other alternative. Because only about 50% of the students pass the HKCEE upon completion of high school each year (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2000) which means about 50% (i.e., over 70,000 students) fail annually in the secondary education system of Hong Kong, the appropriateness of the curriculum for all the student population has been questioned. This has also led to queries as to whether there should be some alternative pathway for those who did not survive conventional schooling.

There are similar situations elsewhere. For example, Conant (1992) estimated that about 25% of the school population is failing in the traditional educational system of the U.S.A. Conant (1992) suggested that a facilitative learning environment should aim at improving student self-esteem, reducing dropout rate, increasing productivity, and enhancing trust, respect and cooperation. Essentially this implies the need for a good alternative to higher education in a conventional sense. To provide a possible alternative, in 2000, the Education and Manpower Bureau, the highest authority for education and manpower policies in Hong Kong, launched a new initiative entitled Project Yi Jin with aims similar to those suggested by Conant (1992). Also, as suggested by Bruce (1992), for higher education programs to be successful, it is essential to develop communication and study skills training. The contents of the Project Yi Jin program has therefore emphasized communication and study skills that would hopefully add value to the students' academic and career potentials.

The project provides a one-year full-time program with a duration of 600 contact hours for those who failed in the HKCEE (Project Yi Jin Program Management Committee, 2001). Rivera (1981) has

pointed out that for non-traditional students to benefit from higher education, it is important for institutions to continue to provide instruction in basic skills. Furthermore, some Western countries have attempted to design programs with a more practical nature to suit the needs of high school leavers. For example, in Australia, diploma courses were designed to attract high school leavers interested in a general course with a vocational component (Aldrich-Langen, 1990). The design of Project Yi Jin was in line with these contentions. Hence the curriculum is designed such that more attention is given to daily experience and applications in addition to basic study skills.

Thus apart from academic concerns, it is also important to cater for career needs. In discussing the development of a career academy model for high school education, Schwager (2001) has noted that the contents of a good program should emphasize general employability and perhaps career-specific standards. Similarly, Dunne and Rawlins (2000) also emphasize the importance of preparing graduates for employment and engagement in teamwork. Thus the contents of a good program should cater for the employment needs in addition to the academic needs of students. The students of Project Yi Jin are provided with ample opportunities to take elective subjects that are related to various industries. This will hopefully enhance the employability of those who successfully complete the program.

A student who passes all 10 subjects (7 core subjects and 3 electives) of the program will get the Project Yi Jin Certificate that is considered by the Hong Kong Government as equivalent to five passes in the HKCEE for employment. Before the existence of the Project Yi Jin program, a failed 11th grade student in Hong Kong did not have much chance for further study in a formal sense and would hardly get a decent job. Under the strong agitation of the Hong Kong Government, the key role of Project Yi Jin as a bridging program between failure and further education has soon become well known in the community. Reasonably, students of Project Yi Jin would be expected to have strong motivation for study, especially because the program is self-financed and not compulsory. Also because the program has a more practical focus, students who have been weak in purely academic work now have better opportunities to exercise their multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993).

Thus for students who failed the secondary school system, Project Yi Jin seemed to be a good alternative not only for educational opportunities on the part of the students, but perhaps also a means to reduce the social burden of looking after these citizens who are likely to be unemployed. The project may also have positive impacts on the psychological well-being of students for life-long learning (Wong & Yeung, 2002).

In designing the program for Project Yi Jin, there were also considerations of gender issues. Studies have shown a gender imbalance in academic attainment. In general, although some studies found no significant difference between boys and girls (e.g., Coley, 2001), some studies have shown noteworthy gender differences in academic attainment in both high school and higher education, favoring girls (e.g., Marsh & Yeung, 1998; Mortenson, 1999). Marsh and Yeung (1998) have shown that girls generally do better than boys in high school education in the USA and in Australia whereas Mortenson (1999) found that a decreasing percentage of male students are awarded bachelor degrees. It would be therefore important to design a program that is unbiased for both sexes.

Finally, successful implementation of the program would require high quality providers. Hughes and Smeaton (2001) have pointed out that among other factors, the success of further education requires a focused mission and strategy, first-rate teaching by expert staff, relevant and coherent course

contents, sustained relationships with employers, and appropriate equipment and accommodation. Thus the Hong Kong government has invited the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong to be the program providers for Project Yi Jin with the hope of providing the best for the revitalization of the students who failed the HKCEE. In 2000, the Project Yi Jin program was offered by members of the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions and is publicly recognized as a life-long education program at secondary 5 level by tertiary institutions and many employers. In its first year of operation, there were around 3,300 students studying the program. In the academic year starting 2001, there were around 3,500 students studying in the program.

The Present Study

One year after the Hong Kong government's initiation of Project Yi Jin, a survey was conducted on the students by the Division of Continuing Professional Education of the Hong Kong Institute of Education, a member of the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions (FCE). The purpose was to investigate whether the project had made any difference to students of the 2000-2001 cohort and how well the program was received.

Clearly spelt out by the Project Yi Jin Program Management Committee (2001) is the aim of the Project to provide an alternative route for those "who had completed S5 with unsatisfactory results and those mature students who are 21 or above to obtain a formal qualification, which is comparable to 5 passes in HKCEE, including English and Chinese, for employment and continuing education purposes" (p. 5).

The present study evaluates whether this aim has been achieved in the first cohort of the project. To achieve the aim, the program should make a difference in academic advancement and in career path, be unbiased in terms of gender and age, and the students should feel good about it.

Hence the key questions to address are:

- Did the project make a difference in students' subsequent higher education?
- Did the project make a difference in subsequent employment?
- Did the students think that the program was recommendable?
- Did male and female students differ in their program achievements? and
- Did mature students (those aged 21 or above when they started in the program) differ from younger students in their program achievements and subsequent study and employment?

Method

Participants

The participants were 2,416 students who studied in the 2000-2001 cohort of Project Yi Jin. The survey was conducted via telephone. Consent to participate in the study was obtained from the participants before they responded to the questions.

All students had failed in their previous HKCEE attempts. Similar to Santa Rita's (2001) descriptions of at-risk students, among other negative characteristics, these students are believed to be mostly deficient in certain skills, have an expectation of failure, lack familiarity with academic requirements, and have an absence of role models. Thus to provide a program suitable for such students, according to Hodge (1991) who commented on the design of effective programs for students at risk at the secondary level, the contents should aim at improving skills in reading, writing and mathematics, creating an environment that is conducive to students' sense of belonging, encouraging

students' involvement in learning activities, making counseling services available, maintaining cooperative sharing activities with other students and instructors, offering opportunities for students to socially interact with responsible adult role models, providing programs and settings outside the regular academic environment, and including job-related skills. Project Yi Jin was designed in line with these characteristics. To obtain a full certificate from an institution, a student has to complete and pass 10 subjects of which 6 are core competence areas, namely English, Chinese, Putonghua (also known as Mandarin Chinese), Information Technology Applications, Mathematics in Practice, and Communication Skills.

Most modules in the program adopted a continuous assessment policy. That is, students worked on assignments and were given feedback as the program proceeded. Counts (1992) has suggested that in order to help at-risk students, it would be beneficial to give a temporary incomplete rather than a failing grade to those who fail a subject. Although Project Yi Jin did not adopt this suggestion, any student who failed in any subject would be provided with extra help before they took a re-assessment. They could also re-take any subject until they obtained a full certificate with 10 passes.

Material

A survey form was sent to nine tertiary institutions who were providers of the program. There were seven items in the survey.

- 2 items asked about personal details,
- 2 items asked about the student's previous education,
- 1 item asked about the student's achievement in the program,
- 1 item asked about the student's study and employment subsequent to the program, and
- 1 item asked whether the student would recommend the program to friends.

Upon receiving the survey forms, each of the nine members of the FCE completed the first five items of the survey as far as they could based on the information they had in their records. Then via telephone, they asked their 2000-2001 students to respond to the items about their current study and employment and whether they would recommend the program to their friends. Of 3,119 students in 2000-2001, about 3,000 students were contacted and the returns of a total of 2,416 respondents (63% male, 37% female) were analyzed (i.e., a response rate of about 80%).

The Analysis

Sample representativeness. Because only 80% of the students responded to the survey, it would be important to test whether the present sample was a good representation of the population. A chi-square test was conducted to compare the distribution of number of subjects passed in their previous HKCEE attempt. A statistically nonsignificant difference between the original population and the present sample would provide support for the representativeness of the present sample.

Subsequent higher education. To address this question, patterns of study were examined between students who obtained a full certificate (i.e., those who passed all 10 subjects in Project Yi Jin) and students who did not obtain a full certificate. Evidence of successful implementation of the program would require students who completed and obtained a full certificate to excel in their subsequent higher education. Because the full certificate of the program is officially recognized as comparable to 5 passes in HKCEE, it would be possible for those who obtained a full certificate to move on to further study at higher levels.

Subsequent employment. Patterns of employment were examined between students who obtained a full certificate and those who did not. Evidence of successful implementation of the program would require students with a full certificate to be better in employment subsequent to the program.

Students' acceptance of the program. To the FCE members offering the program, it is important to find out whether the program is well received. To the public, for accountability, it is also important to learn that the investment of public revenue has been worthwhile. Whether the program was successful could be partly reflected by the previous participants' rating on whether it was recommendable based on an internationally recognized rating of around 70% (ACEA NSW & NSW DSE, 1996; Wong & Yeung, 2003) as indication of a good program.

The gender issue. To address the question of potential gender differences, the achievement of the male and female students and their subsequent further study and employment were examined.

Test of potential age bias. To test whether mature students did differently from younger students, students' achievement in the program and subsequent study and employment were examined in two age groups: age 21 or above vs. age below 21 when starting the program (i.e., aged>21 vs. age<22 at the time of data collection after the program in 2001). Comparable achievement of more mature students to less mature students in such accomplishments would reflect the usefulness of the program in providing a valid pathway for mature students to obtain a recognized qualification for employment and further education—hence indication of achievement of one of the major objectives of the project (Project Yi Jin Program Management Committee, 2001).

Results

Testing the Sample

Using a chi-square test to compare the distribution of number of subjects passed in previous HKCEE (Table 1) between the original population at the beginning of 2000-2001 and this sample of respondents, there was evidence that the present sample is a good representation of the population, χ^2 (df=5) = 0.17, indicating statistically no significant difference.

Table 1. Comparison of Previous HKCEE Results Between Original Population and the Present Sample

	Original Population	The Present Sample
Number of HKCEE Subjects Passed		
0	25%	26%
1	23%	23%
2	21%	22%
3	14%	14%
4	10%	9%
5 subjects or more	7%	6%
Total	100%	100%

Did the Program Make a Difference in Higher Education?

Figure 1 shows the patterns of study of students who obtained a full certificate (i.e., those who

passed all 10 subjects) and students who did not obtain a full certificate. The results show that the number of students who proceeded to full-time study after the program was four times more for those who obtained a full certificate (64%, $N = 1{,}364$) than for those who only completed the program partially (16%). In pursuing part-time study, the two groups of students were about the same (both 10%). Those who obtained a full Yi Jin Certificate also tended to continue education at higher academic levels than those who did not obtain a full certificate.

Did the Program Make a Difference in Employment Opportunities?

Of the 785 students who reported employment, 41.5% of full certificate holders gained full-time employment and 20.5% were employed part-time. Compared to 26.1% full-time and 11.8% part-time employment gained by students who only partially completed the program, the results show that the number of students who obtained a full certificate tended to gain better employment opportunities, whether full-time or part-time.

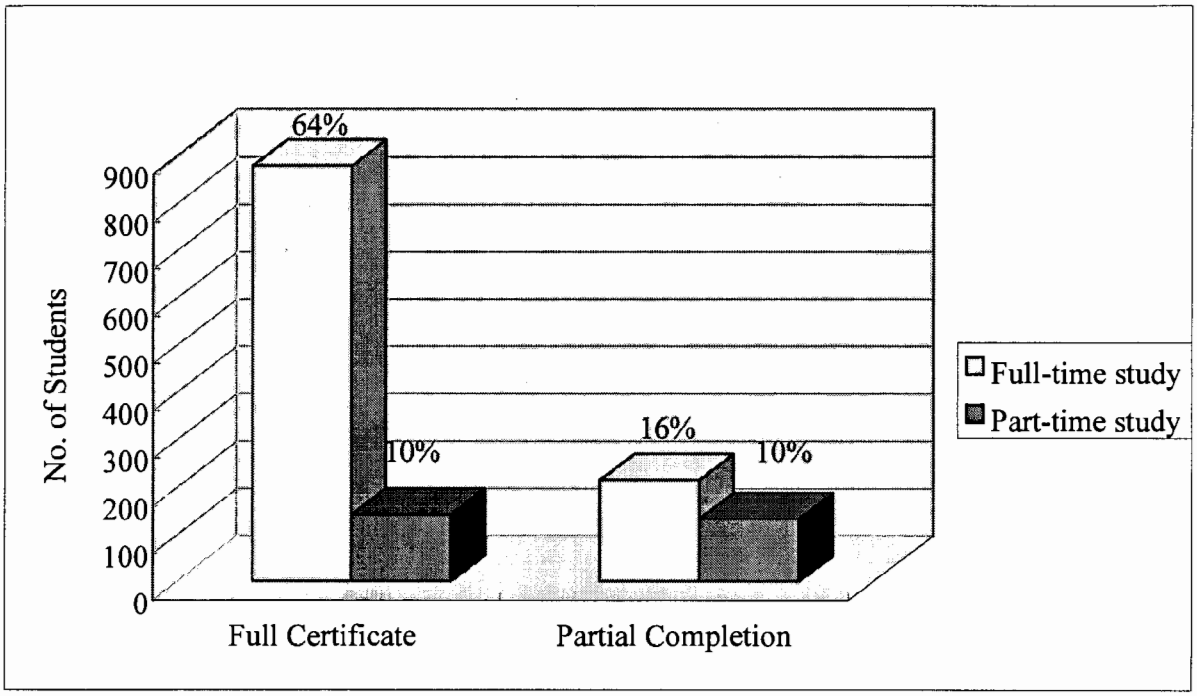

Figure 1. Subsequent higher study of students obtaining a full Project Yi Jin Certificate and those who partially completed the program.

Student Perception of the Program

Assessment of student perception of the program is important particularly for the evaluation of educational program of a self-funding nature. The percentage of students who found the program recommendable was 62.7%. Of these students, some completed the program successfully while some others did not pass all 10 subjects. It would not be surprising that successful students would tend to give more favorable responses than less successful students. To test this possibility, the responses from students who obtained a full certificate and those who did not were examined separately. When their differential responses were compared, it was found that whereas 70% of the successful students gave favorable responses to this item, only 47% of those who did not complete successfully gave favorable responses (Figure 3). Thus whereas the responses from successful students reflected

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reasonable effectiveness of the program based on an internationally recognized rating of around 70% (ACEA NSW & NSW DSE, 1996; Wong & Yeung, 2003), the Project Yi Jin program was not as well received by students who had difficulty in completing the program in order to obtain a full certificate.

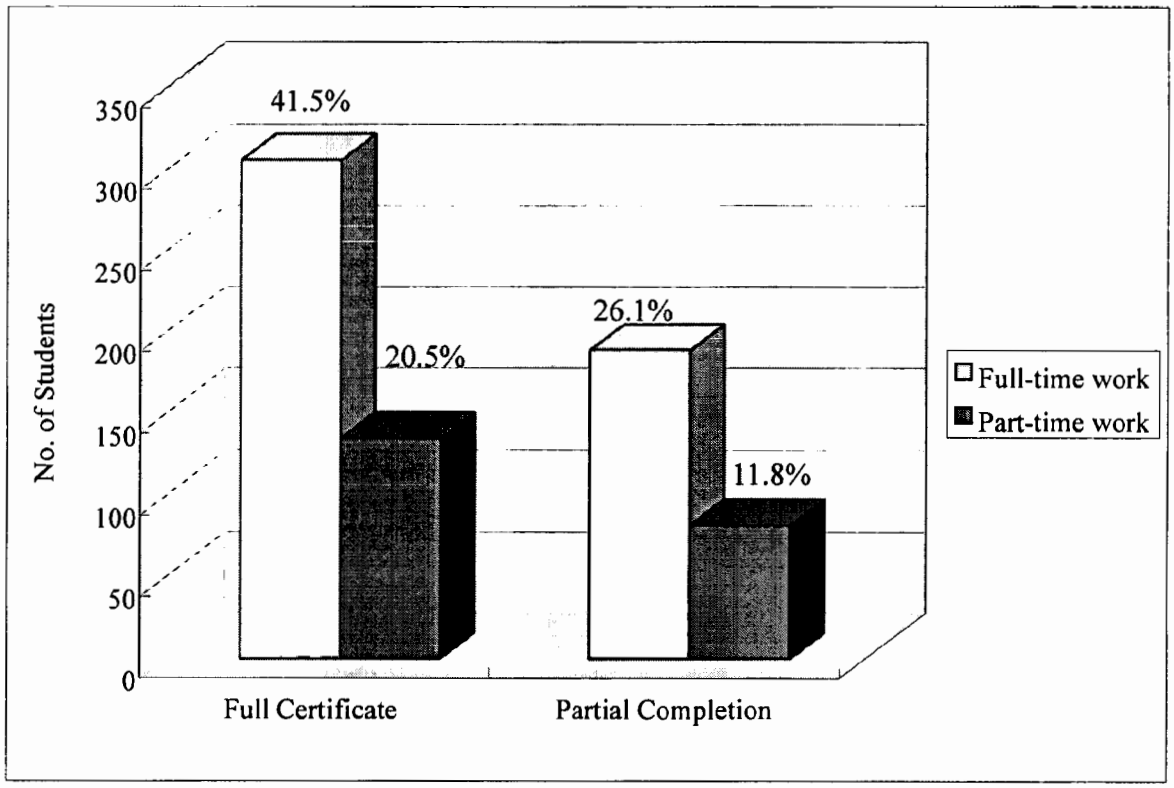

Figure 2. Subsequent employment of students obtaining a full Project Yi Jin Certificate and those who partially completed the program.

Potential Gender Issue

Figure 4 shows the male and female students' achievement in the program. There were more male students (n = 999) than female students in this cohort (n = 482). The results show similar passing rates of around 60% for male and female students (Figure 4). For both males and females, more students continued study (727 males and 364 females) than those who proceeded to full-time work (314 males and 212 females). Of those who continued study, both males and females tended to choose full-time study (about 80%) than part-time study (20%). In essence, no noteworthy gender differences were found in the analysis.

Potential Age Bias

Figure 5 shows that those aged 21 and above (75% full certificate) did as well as their younger counterparts (68.6%) in the program (chi-square value was not statistically significant, χ^2 (df=1) = 2.42). In sum, more mature students did as well as, if not better than, less mature students in the 2000-2001 cohort of the program and there was no evidence of age bias.

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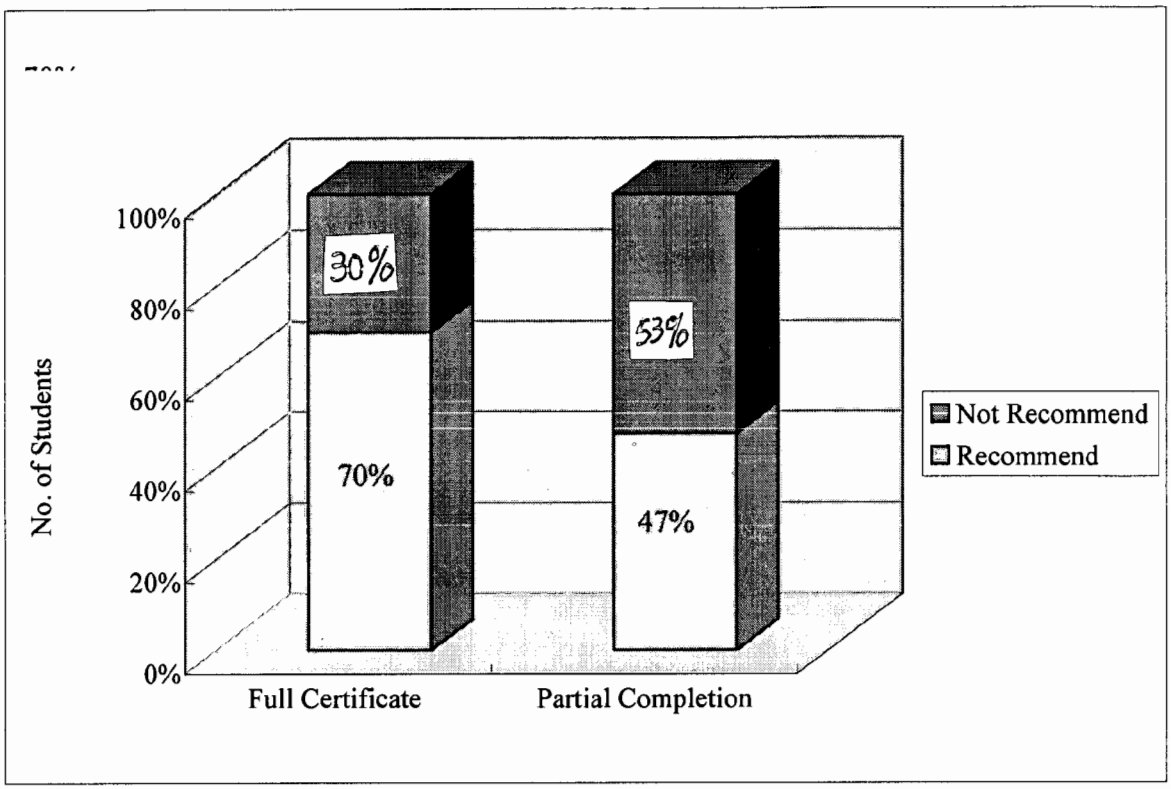

Figure 3. Recommendation of students obtaining a full Project Yi Jin Certificate and those who partially completed the program.

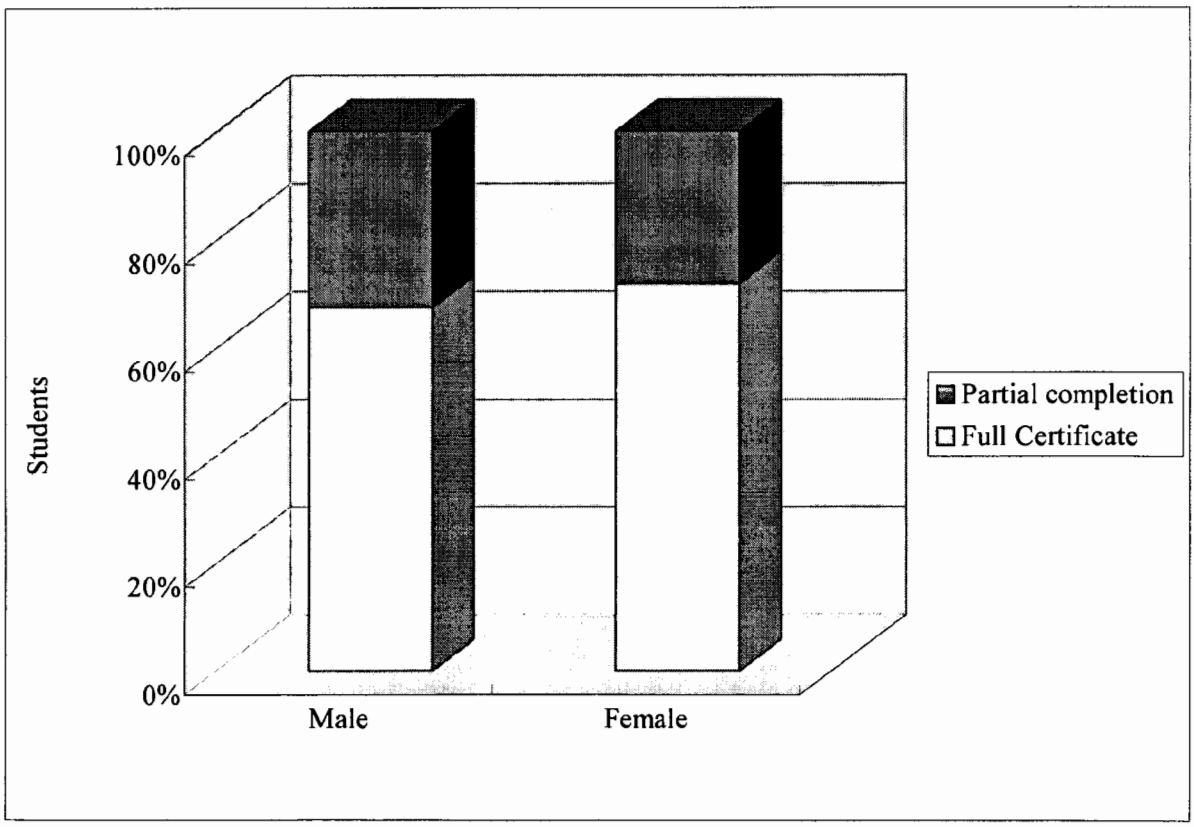

Figure 4. Passing rate of male and female students.

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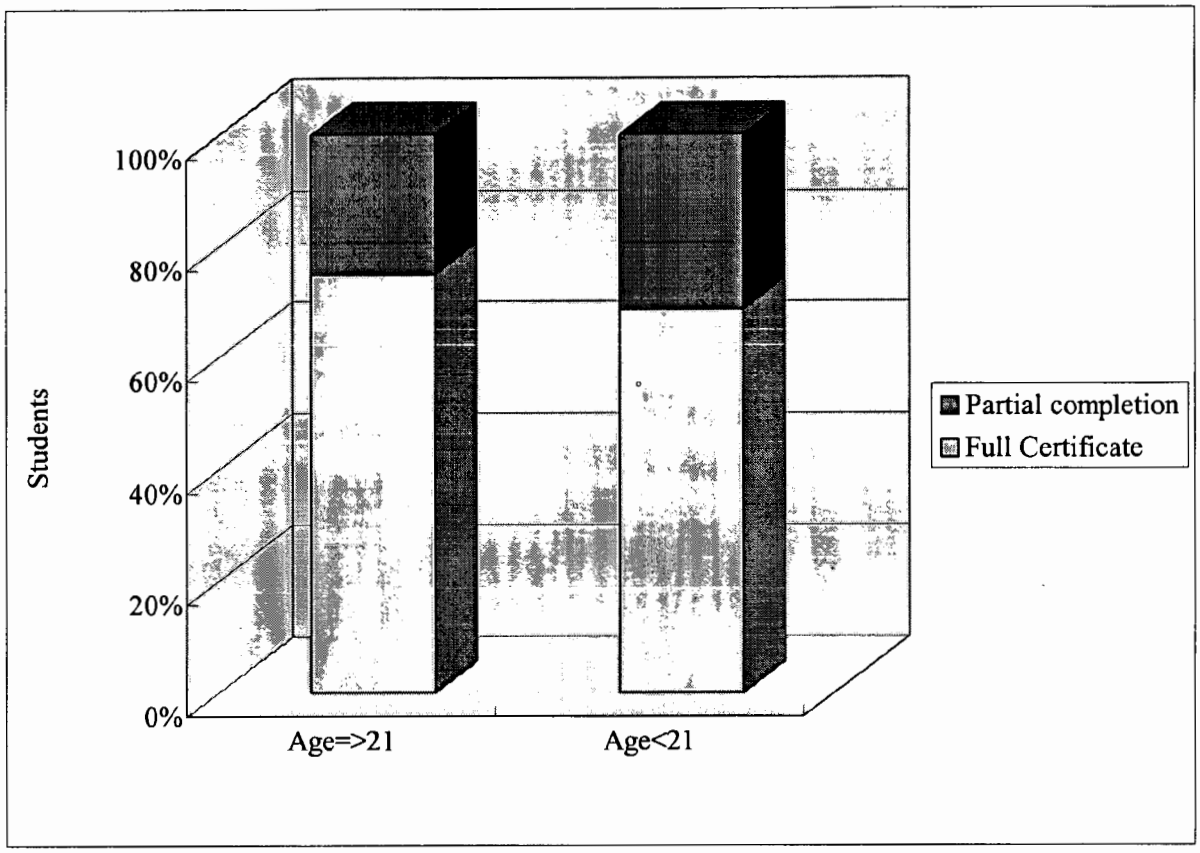

Figure 5. Students aged 21 or above vs. students below 21 in passing rate.

Discussion

The result showing that the program did make some significant differences is pleasing. In the present study, not only did a full certificate of the program enable students to move on to further study, but the full certificate holders seemed also to be able to pursue higher levels of academic work (e.g., higher diploma and pre-Associate Degree). The students' hope of pursuing study at these levels may not have been realized without the introduction of Project Yi Jin. Holding a qualification comparable to 5 passes in the HKCEE, the full certificate holders are now able to move on if they want to, and the statistics show that many of them did move on. In employment, full certificate holders clearly had some advantage in getting full-time and part-time employment over those who only partially completed the program, although the amount of salary may not differ. The advantages in both study and work are sufficiently attractive for potential applicants in the years to come. Course providers may need to be aware of a sudden boom of course applicants if such advantages are announced to the public.

The fact that many students who did not complete all subjects successfully in the year 2000-2001 repeated a certain number of subjects in the year 2001-2002 is also pleasing because it indicates that these students are willing to invest further effort in trying again. It indicates not only the students' belief of possible success as a consequence of perseverance but also their trust on the importance of the qualification for academic and career advancement.

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It is pleasing that the program has been reasonably well received by the clients. It is not surprising for higher achievers to evaluate a course more favorably, and the recommendation rate found in this cohort should have reflected the good effort of the course providers in making the program a success despite its innovativeness and perhaps arbitrariness. Furthermore, it is also remarkable that the program proved to be unbiased in terms of gender and age. It is rather surprising that there was almost no difference between the outcomes of males and females and between mature and younger participants. One might expect, based on findings in high school examinations in many countries (e.g., Marsh & Yeung, 1998), that an educational program such as this program would be gender biased, probably favoring female students. Interestingly, the finding in the present study did not find such speculated bias. This finding is encouraging, and yet it would be essential but may not be easy for the program designers to keep up the good work.

The present study shows that the students who did better in previous HKCEE were more likely to get a full certificate. This result provides good support for the validity of the program as a bridge to further advanced academic programs. However, overly strong support for such validity could defeat the whole purpose of the Project Yi Jin program of providing an alternative route for those who had completed S5 with unsatisfactory results to obtain a formal qualification (Project Yi Jin Programme Management Committee, 2001). Hence, in designing the program, the designer is faced with a serious issue of striking a balance between the academic and the more practical components of the program. On the one hand, the program needs to be sufficiently different from the conventional secondary school curriculum so as to serve the purpose of providing an alternative pathway; on the other hand, the program needs to prepare the students with a sound academic foundation for even more advanced education. The analysis in the present study shows that so far the program designers seemed to have somehow tactfully attained this balance. Whereas the students' previous HKCEE achievements were found to be reasonably associated with their achievement in the program, some 50% of those who were unable to show any achievement after the whole secondary schooling were able to achieve the full qualification via this alternative path. For the Project Yi Jin program to be successful, it is crucial for this balance to be maintained.

Although the present study shows some promising findings, it is important to note that only two of the major objectives of the program have been evaluated. Evaluation of the other objectives that are associated with perceptions, beliefs, values and issues of psychological well-being call for more sophisticated designs and analyses, and may be more costly. However, it may be worth investigating because accomplishment in those other objectives is likely to enhance the students' life-long learning and development into valuable individuals who contribute to the society of Hong Kong. For example, Wong and Yeung (2002) found some interesting changes in the motivation and self-concept of Project Yi Jin students. These changes may have important implications for further improvement of the program. The missing evaluation on these objectives is a major limitation of the present study.

To conclude, the findings of the present study may be summarized as follows:

- Students who obtained a full certificate in the program had better opportunities in further study and at higher academic levels than those who only partially completed the program.
- Students who obtained a full certificate had better subsequent employment opportunities.

- Students who successfully completed the program tended to recommend the program to their friends, indicating a well-received educational program.
- The program was gender unbiased. The passing rate was similar for males and females.
- The program was age unbiased. Mature students age 21 or above did as well as other younger students.

In essence, the results indicate that the aim of Project Yi Jin and some major objectives have been achieved. The program has provided a route for those who had completed S5 with unsatisfactory results and those mature students who are 21 or above to obtain a formal qualification comparable to 5 passes in HKCEE for employment and continuing education purposes. Further evaluation of the program should include the other important objectives stipulated by the Project Yi Jin Programme Management Committee (2001).

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