

**Paper on the Accreditation
of Associate Degree Programmes**

Submitted by
Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation

To
the Legislative Council Panel on Education
Subcommittee on Increase in Post-secondary
Education Opportunities

For Meeting on 1 June 2001

The Accreditation of Associate Degree Programmes

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**Information Paper on the Accreditation of Associate Degree Programmes:
Submitted by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation**

**To the LegCo Panel on Education, Subcommittee on Increase in Post-
secondary Education Opportunities**

Section I

**The Proposed Regulatory Framework and the Accreditation of
Associate Degrees**

Our Council, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), is supportive of an expansion in post-secondary education provision and the proposal for a new Regulatory Framework to govern post-secondary education. We are particularly supportive of the emphasis placed on quality assurance and accreditation in the Regulatory Framework, and the naming of the HKCAA as the academic accreditation body under the proposed Schedule 3.

The Council will be pleased to provide detailed information on how academic accreditation in relation to Associate Degrees will be conducted in Section III of this information paper.

In this Section, we wish to highlight what we believe to be issues of overriding significance in relation to the Regulatory Framework.

(a) ***The Significance of the Associate Degree***

The HKCAA believes that there should be particular importance attached to the quality and the quality assurance of the Associate Degree. This is because unlike other sub-degree qualifications, this new qualification is being designed for articulation into degree programmes, and its academic value is being pitched at the equivalence of Year 1 of the 3-year Honours Degree. Further, the Associate Degree is also intended to have international currency as it is also intended that graduates will be recognised by overseas universities for transfer into their degree programmes.

Because of these reasons, the HKCAA advocates that great care must be taken with the accreditation and the quality assurance of Associate Degree

level programmes.

(b) ***The Principle of Using a Local Accreditation Body***

The HKCAA has been established as a statutory body since 1990 to provide professional and independent advice and accreditation service to the Government of Hong Kong in respect of the quality of higher education institutions and their programmes, as well as advice on qualifications and educational standard in general. The HKCAA has performed accreditation at nine local tertiary institutions and for over 125 degree programmes, as well as over 400 non-local courses offered in Hong Kong.

The HKCAA notes, in a previous consultation document on the proposed Regulatory Framework, a suggestion to include non-local/overseas accreditation bodies under Schedule 3.

It appears that this reference has now been deleted in the current revision. The HKCAA fully supports the deletion of references to non-local and overseas accreditation bodies in this exercise.

HKCAA's views have always been to promote the use of a Hong Kong based organisation to uphold standards of the education system for Hong Kong. Using non-local/overseas bodies when there is clearly a competent organisation available locally could be construed as an imposition of foreign standards and requirements, which would impinge upon the independence of Hong Kong's higher education system.

The introduction of foreign accreditation bodies would also undermine the need to achieve consistency in standard across institutions and qualifications in Hong Kong through the proposed Qualifications Framework, and cannot be acceptable.

HKCAA wishes to point out that we already have a well-established accreditation organisation and system in Hong Kong. This system incorporates an effective means to bring in an international perspective through the appointment of non-local/overseas experts in higher education in accreditation panels.

Section II

Issues of Exemption and Recognised Accreditation Bodies

Our Council also wishes to comment on the following issues relating to the accreditation of Associate Degrees – these relate to aspects of the Regulatory Framework which we feel could be deficient in upholding the quality of Associate Degree level programmes.

(a) ***Treating Courses from “New” Educational Providers as Accredited Courses*** (Schedule 1)

We do not agree that Associate Degree level courses conducted by institutions **which are not primarily set up as teaching institutions** e.g. Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong Productivity Council, should be regarded as accredited courses.

We hold the view that this type of institutions should firstly undergo a *review at the institutional level* by the HKCAA to determine that they have the appropriate institutional structure and processes to offer programmes at this level, and to maintain their quality. This should then be followed by the *accreditation of the individual Associate Degrees*. That is, they should undergo the same process as other new private providers.

If this type of institutions can be exempted from accreditation, this opens up the way for any other non-accredited institution to claim the same. The fact that institutions are covered by their own ordinance(s) do not offer sufficient guarantee of the quality of their courses.

(b) ***Treating Courses from Non-Self-Accrediting Institutions as Accredited Courses*** (Schedule 1)

We are concerned that Schedule 1 includes institutions which have not yet achieved self-accreditation status.

Because of the potential importance of the **Associate Degree**, in terms of its articulation with degrees, and in terms of its international currency, we **recommend** that the Associate Degrees or equivalent qualifications (e.g.

Higher Diplomas) offered by these institutions should be subject to accreditation, until such time when these institutions achieve self-accrediting status for sub-degrees.

On this point, we note a similar recommendation from the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions, to put in place an accreditation system for the Associate Degrees offered by non-self-accrediting institutions.

(c) ***Recognition of Professional Bodies to Undertake Accreditation***

We agree there is an important role for professional bodies in relation to the offer of professional courses. We wish to emphasise, however, that there is a distinction between academic accreditation and professional accreditation. *Academic* accreditation examines the macro *institutional issues* to determine whether the institution has the ability to conduct programmes of study at a certain academic level. *Professional* accreditation usually concentrates on specific requirements relating to membership and professional examination issues.

Awards such as Associate Degrees/Higher Diplomas can at the same time be academic qualifications as well as professional qualifications. We therefore **recommend** that, for **non-self-accrediting institutions** which intend to conduct programmes at the Associate Degree or equivalent level, they should first undergo an *academic review at the institutional level* to be conducted by the HKCAA. This would be followed by accreditation of the proposed programme, either as a two-stage, or combined process to be undertaken separately or jointly by the academic accreditation body (HKCAA) and the relevant professional body as appropriate.

We further **recommend** that the recognition of professional bodies for their accreditation role be given only to those professional bodies which are *statutory* and where they are the sole representative body for the profession; and more importantly, where they already have *established accreditation systems and experience*.

Section III

Process of HKCAA Accreditation

For any accreditation at institutions which have not previously been accredited by the HKCAA, the accreditation process will comprise two parts: the **institutional review** and the **programme validation**.

The *institutional review*, which normally precedes the programme (course) review, is a process to determine whether the institution has the appropriate institutional structure and processes, and the appropriate academic environment, to conduct programmes of study at a specific level and to maintain the standards of those programmes at the specific level. The assessment will consist of an examination of institutional issues having a possible impact on the conduct of (proposed) programmes of study and their quality.

These issues normally include:

- (a) Corporate Governance and Institutional Structure
- (b) Academic Decision-Making
- (c) Programme Development and Design
- (d) Academic Plans
- (e) Academic Staff
- (f) Staff Development and Scholarly Activity
- (g) Admission Policy
- (h) Student Services
- (i) Quality Assurance
- (j) Resources

If the HKCAA is able to make a positive recommendation regarding the appropriateness of the institutional environment and suitability of the institution to conduct the proposed programmes of study, this will usually be followed by the accreditation (validation) of individual programmes of study. This is the stage of *programme* validation.

The purpose of programme validation is to determine whether the proposed programme(s) of study will be able to meet specific/international standards and maintained at those standards.

Issues normally considered in a programme validation include:

- (a) Programme aims and objectives
- (b) Programme Structure and Content
- (c) Curriculum and Syllabi
- (d) Admission Requirement
- (e) Progression and Assessment
- (f) Teaching and Learning
- (g) Staffing
- (h) Staff Development
- (i) Facilities and Support
- (j) Quality Assurance
- (k) Links with the Profession/Industry

Stages of Accreditation

The normal stages of accreditation at the *institutional* level and at the *programme* level comprise the following:

- Institution's own planning and self-evaluation
- Submission of documentation to the HKCAA
- Process of peer review and site visit
- Report and recommendation to government/institution
- Follow-up action by the institution and monitoring of outcome of accreditation by the HKCAA

Section IV

Experience and Preparation of the HKCAA for the Accreditation of Associate Degrees

The HKCAA has had ample experience in the quality assurance of sub-degree level courses, for instance, in the context of the upgrade of Lingnan College and Shue Yan College to degree level status and the accreditation of the Higher Diploma programmes at the Caritas Francis Hsu College.

The HKCAA has, in preparation for the accreditation of sub-degree programmes, researched into the sub-degree qualifications and their accreditation in different countries including the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK, and thereby formulated our criteria for the accreditation of sub-degree programmes.

The Council draws upon the experience and expertise of our international Council membership, as well as our Subject Register of over 1,000 specialists from Hong Kong and outside of Hong Kong, from which we select the membership of our specialist review panels, to support the peer review process in accreditations.

The Council has in addition embarked on the drafting of a Definition of the Associate Degree. A survey on overseas Associate Degrees and similar programmes as well as a survey on Associate Degrees currently offered in Hong Kong, have been conducted separately and independently of the study undertaken by the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions (FCE). Our

proposed Definition and descriptors of the Associate Degree have also drawn upon the results of a recent survey conducted by the HKCAA on the heads of academic departments of the local universities/tertiary institutions. The preferred characteristics and features of the Associate Degree as identified in the survey have been incorporated into our definition.

The HKCAA's proposed **Definition and Descriptors of the Associate Degree** is at **Appendix** (proposal subject to final endorsement of HKCAA Council). This has been submitted to the Education and Manpower Bureau for information and comment.

We believe that apart from the FCE which has formulated its views from the perspective of course providers, the HKCAA is so far the only organisation which has formulated a Definition on the Associate Degree.

Section V

The Monitoring of Associate Degrees

The outcome of institutional reviews and course validations very often involve the stipulation of **conditions** to be fulfilled either before, or after, the institution starts to conduct the relevant programme.

Therefore, as with the accreditation of degree programmes, the HKCAA will institute a system of monitoring in respect of Associate Degrees, comprising

- Follow-up and monitoring of any institutional issues and required improvements (conditions/recommendations) as a result of the institutional review (for institutions undergoing institutional review for the first time).
- Follow-up and monitoring of any required improvements (conditions/recommendations) as a result of course validations.

The HKCAA will additionally be prepared to assist with any benchmarking of Associate Degree programmes among the self-accrediting institutions, to ensure consistency with other course provisions, should we be requested to do so.

Section VI

Conclusion

The HKCAA is very encouraged by the emphasis placed on the quality of study programmes in the expansion framework, as evidenced by the requirement for accreditation.

For self-accrediting institutions, we agree that their programmes could be treated as accredited if they are approved by the universities' central approval processes. For non-self-accrediting institutions, we propose that the institution should go through a review at the institutional level, and their courses (at the Associate Degree level) should be subject to external accreditation.

We emphasise the importance of using the local accreditation system and established expertise. Our Council will be poised to assist with the accreditation and quality assurance of new courses and course providers to ensure that the expansion of post-secondary opportunities will be paralleled by an equal emphasis on quality. Indeed, a number of private course providers/colleges have already been discussing with our Council their plans to undergo accreditation and we are prepared to start this work immediately.

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Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation

Parameters of an Associate Degree

An Associate Degree normally represents two years of full-time post Form seven/A level study or three years of study following the completion of Form five/HKCEE.

(In future if university degrees are designed as 4 years of study after the completion of Form six, it may be possible to have Associate Degrees designed as two year programmes taken after Form six.)

An Associate Degree programme provides students with a broad academic education, at the post-secondary level, as **general** preparation for the workplace or for middle/upper-level university study. Alternatively, some Associate Degree programmes can offer a vocation-oriented study programme which enables graduates to apply their skills to **specific** types of jobs upon graduation.

An Associate Degree does not have the same intellectual demand as an Ordinary or Honours Degree, but should introduce students to a breadth of knowledge including introductions to the theoretical basis of relevant disciplines, which would enable them to pursue further study at a higher level at a later stage. In this sense it corresponds closely with the first year **of a 3-year Honours Degree**, or the first half of a 4-year Honours Degree.

In the more vocation-oriented programmes, the educational experience should expose students to the nature of the discipline under study, and at the same time equip students with discipline/specific skills to enable them to perform competently at **technical or para-professional levels**. This vocational type of Associate Degree programmes differs from the traditional Higher Diplomas in that they also seek to imbue students with a coherent body of knowledge based on theoretical concepts which can serve as the basis for higher level study.

The educational experience of an Associate Degree should enable students to appreciate the range of possibilities open to them in work and in further study, as well as appreciate the intended limitations and nature of the Associate Degree as an **intermediate** level programme.

The Associate Degree usually also incorporates studies in **general education**, which prepare students for life, for work, and for further study; and which also serve as the foundation for self-learning and life-long learning.

Entry Level

Entry to the Associate Degree programme is normally at the end of Form seven, based on one A level or an equivalent number of AS level subjects, leading to a 2-year full-time programme.

The Associate Degree can also be a 3-year full-time programme taken at the end of Form five or Form six, based on HKCEE achievements, normally with five passes.

One year of study should normally represent no less than 500 hours of contact time.

Associate Degree programmes which plan to admit students at below the normal entry levels should have built in mechanisms in the programme or bridging programmes for remedial work for students admitted through this route.

Objectives and Content of the Associate Degree

The Associate Degree should provide post-secondary preparation for further study, and/or for the workplace. There can be **two** basic types of Associate Degrees: the vocation-oriented and the broad-based programme. Proposed **descriptors** for these two typologies of programmes, together with the expected **competencies** are given below. Some programmes attempt to combine elements and attributes of these two typologies together.

Exit Level

The academic level and intellectual demand of an Associate Degree should largely correspond and be comparable with that expected of the first year of a 3-year Honours Degree, or the first two years of a 4-year Honours Degree.

There can be a wide spectrum of the content of the Associate Degree. However, it would normally be expected to include a substantial component in broad-based/general education studies.

The exit level of an Associate Degree is also expected to be at a comparable level with that for a Higher Diploma. However, the articulation path for an Associate Degree to an Honours Degree may be different from that for a Higher Diploma.

Descriptors of an Associate Degree

The Associate Degree

- Equips students with a broad theoretical basis for advancement onto further study at the middle/senior levels of degrees.
- Equips students with proficiencies in a variety of skills which can be directly applied to para-professional, technical positions, or junior executive positions.
- Provides students with a general understanding of the scope of the chosen disciplines/areas of study, and the opportunities for further study; as well as a broad knowledge base in other disciplines including general education/liberal arts or sciences.

Competencies Developed by a Vocation-oriented Associate Degree

Graduates from a **vocation-oriented** Associate Degree are expected to possess

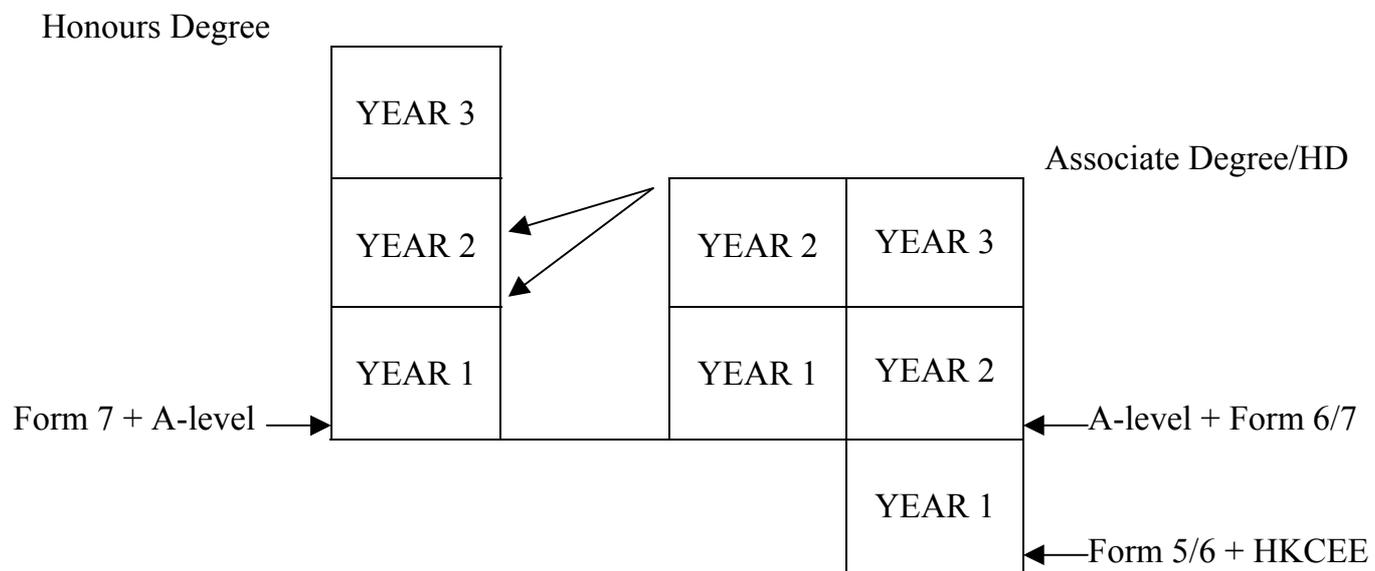
- a broad theoretical understanding of the chosen discipline and its application.
- focussed, vocational knowledge of the applications of the discipline, including latest developments in applications with an emphasis on hands-on expertise at the para-professional/technical level.
- a theoretical foundation upon which further study in the discipline at the degree level, or professional level, can be built.
- an appreciation of the scope of the discipline under study, the limitations of the present programme of study, as well as the prospect of advanced study.
- an appreciation and basic understanding of other disciplines/areas of study including liberal arts/general education, and the sciences.

- the broader skills of communication, computer literacy, and IT processing, language proficiency in English and Chinese, fact-finding and basic research and analytical skill, to enable fairly independent work to be undertaken with some initial supervision.
- an appreciation of the major socio-political, cultural and economic issues and an awareness of the wider regional/international context.

Competencies Developed by a Broad-based Associate Degree

Graduates from a **broad-based** Associate Degree are expected to possess

- a broad theoretical understanding of some major areas/disciplines in the arts and/or sciences.
 - a theoretical foundation upon which further study at the degree level, or professional level, can be built.
 - the broader skills of communication, computer literacy, and IT processing, language proficiency in English and Chinese, fact-finding and basic research and analytical skill, to enable fairly independent work to be undertaken with some initial supervision.
 - an appreciation of the major cultural, socio-political, and economic issues and an awareness of the wider regional/international context.
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A Possible Model for Associate Degrees in Hong Kong