

Increase in Post-Secondary Education Opportunities

Response of the Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions (FCE)

May 2001

Priority for the Upgrading of Human Resources

1. Human resources are Hong Kong's major asset but to remain competitive in a globalised environment it is imperative that HK must move to a high value-added, knowledge-oriented economy if it is to maintain its prosperity and competitive edge. An educated society is required to support this transformation and so **widening access to higher education** to young people and providing lifelong-learning opportunities are priority tasks.
2. Government has already set **60% participation** in post secondary education as a target for 2010 compared to 30% now. The **Federation fully supports** this initiative and is committed to contributing to its achievement.
3. Compared with advanced economies such as the USA and Canada, to neighbouring economies such as Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Singapore, and to leading Chinese cities such as Shanghai, this target of **60% may even be a modest figure**. Nevertheless, given practical constraints it is an achievable one given the present stage of development.

Feasibility

4. It is understood that this expansion will need to be principally on a **self-financing basis**. The Federation agrees that this should be **achievable** and offers the following comments:
 - Firstly, current self-financing providers of tertiary education in Hong Kong (of which Federation members are leaders) have been successful in part because courses are offered on a part-time basis to mature, working adults. Teaching has been based on part-time tutors in converted commercial premises used as downtown learning centres - this has helped to keep costs relatively low. However, to provide full time courses to secondary school-leavers requires a campus environment with library, study, counselling, sports and other supporting facilities – this is far beyond the means of current providers. It is suggested that the only viable solution is the OUHK model with **Government providing start-up costs** for an ultimately self-financing operation;

- Secondly, the expansion needs **the support of the whole community**. The EC's call for

“a more diversified, flexible, multi-channel and multi-layered higher education system”

requires the commitment of students, parents, employers, business and legislators if it is to succeed. Government has backed the EC's vision and should now keep up the momentum for change by promoting the philosophy, necessity and desirability of this development so that the whole community can be mobilised to work towards a common goal;

- Thirdly, in particular, **recognition of the qualifications** by Government will encourage employers to accept the new qualification;
- Fourthly, it is necessary to adopt measures to prevent social exclusion. **Assistance** should be provided **to needy students** so that opportunity is open to all who wish to pursue post- secondary opportunities. Grants, loans and tax rebates are amongst the measures that can be considered;
- Fifthly, **the 60% target** requires about 3,000 places per year over the next ten years. From the experience of Federation members in the past decade, actual rates of growth have exceeded this number and so there is every confidence that it **can be achieved**.

Quality of the Provision

5. It is the strong belief of the Federation that quality should not be sacrificed for quantity in the expansion of post -secondary opportunities. The University members of the Federation have self-accrediting status and have **quality assurance mechanisms** in place both to validate and accredit new courses and to continuously monitor the quality of approved courses.
6. The Federation was commissioned by EMB to prepare a report on the Associate Degree and in so doing the members agreed a **“common descriptor”** of the award. This includes quality criteria such as entrance requirements, curriculum design, contact hours, teacher requirements etc. Indeed, the curriculum design itself, with its emphasis on a broadly based programme including generic as well as subject content, can lead to a better quality of provision. It is hoped this common descriptor can provide a model for development of quality programmes. In addition, Federation members will plan to offer Higher Diploma and Professional Diploma programmes that will be more oriented to specific professions/careers though still providing some generic content.
7. For new providers without self-accrediting status, it is suggested that a proper QA mechanism be established (perhaps with external assistance) to accredit post-secondary, sub-degree programmes such as Associate Degrees.

Quality of the Students

8. Concerns have been voiced that with the widening of access, the average quality of the students will decrease irrespective of the quality of the programmes. There are a number of responses to this:
- First that the **expansion** is in **sub-degree places**. Performance should not therefore be compared with expectations of first degree holders but with those who do not have a chance to undertake post-secondary study. This additional opportunity will provide higher quality human resources in HK;
 - **Articulation** of these sub-degree graduates to university places will be **based on the academic criteria** imposed by the universities and once admitted they will have to perform at the level expected of first degree holders to succeed;
 - Each year a large number of **students score reasonable results** in the HKCEE examinations but cannot proceed further because of the lack of opportunity to enter the highly competitive, because scarce, government funded places. This does not mean they are incapable of higher achievement;
 - Moreover, the **broader based curriculum** inherent in the Associate Degree concept should help such students to succeed. While the secondary school graduates are not so well prepared for employment, the **emphasis on generic and transferable skills** in the Associate Degree will prepare them better for the world of **employment** as well as fitting them for **further study**. Experience elsewhere is that about 40% of students in Community Colleges progress to further study whilst the remaining 60% enter the job market.

Overseas Providers

9. The presence of a large number of overseas educational providers in HK is testimony both to the **high demand** and the **shortage of locally provided opportunity**. This external competition can be healthy, especially if it is from high quality overseas providers who seek a global role. It is vital, however, that there is adequate regulation to ensure that a high standard of provision is maintained. Overseas providers may lack local experience and perspectives and this should be a factor in assessing the suitability of their programmes. In this context, **the alliances between local education providers and overseas institutions** can be very positive in supplying both local and global perspectives.

Prospects for the new post-secondary graduates

10. **A lifelong-learning philosophy** views every qualification as a step in a learning career no matter what level is involved and envisages no 'terminal' qualification.

Indeed, learning need not involve qualifications. Even so, a flexible system, particularly one with multiple entry levels also needs to provide multiple and meaningful exit qualifications. The aims of Associate Degree and Higher/Professional Diploma level awards in this context are threefold:

- To be a **standalone qualification** that denotes a good basis for entry to the job market;
- To be a solid academic foundation for articulation to **further study**;
- To mark a good **preparation for lifelong learning** in the future.

In addition the Higher and Professional Diploma awards are more geared to specific vocational areas.

11. In the US system some 44% of high school graduates progress to Community Colleges – Hong Kong can usefully emulate this model. As mentioned above, some 60% of the students subsequently enter the workforce with a better preparation whilst 40% go on to further study. Government should welcome and promote such a scenario.

Conclusions

12. The Federation **fully supports** Government's call to widen access to higher education. To succeed, there should be community wide support, financial assistance to students, particularly to needy students, and start-up assistance for not-for-profit providers. With these pillars the target is achievable on an operationally self-financing basis.

The Federation for Continuing
Education in Tertiary Institutions
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The members of the Federation are:

Caritas
City University of Hong Kong
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong Baptist University
Hong Kong Institute of Education
Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Lingnan University
Open University of Hong Kong
University of Hong Kong
Vocational Training Council