

QEF : OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Submitted by the Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood Education and Services (CECES)
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OBSERVATION	RECOMMENDATION	QEF'S RESPONSE
<p><u>Prosecutor, judge and jury</u></p> <p>Unnecessary tension exists between the QEF and some applicants because the rules of the QEF game are unfairly in favour of its own decisions.</p> <p>The whole QEF set-up contradicts the principle of Natural Justice for it is playing the role of prosecutor, judge and jury - confusing and abusing these different roles, mixing up the rules and then hiding behind them, declaring conclusions without impartiality and certainly without transparency or accountability.</p> <p>It reviews itself, according to its own judgment and its own self-defensive urges. The outcome is that it finds itself never wrong and always right .</p>	<p>If the QEF is to have public credibility, it must be prepared for assessment against a set of standards. Its management, principles and decisions must be opened to public scrutiny.</p> <p>In order to show good intent, the QEF must set up this mechanism BEFORE another bout of public criticism descends upon its vetting and management procedures, and not be seen to do so only because it has been placed in an embarrassing spotlight.</p>	

<p><u>“Peer Review”</u></p> <p>The Chairman called the QEF vetting procedure a "peer review" system, and that we should be "partners" in our efforts to improve education in Hong Kong. If this is so, we must, with urgency, arrive at a consensus as to the meaning of these sentiments.</p>	<p>In all systems of peer review that we know of, the reviewees have at least some say in the composition of the review panels and there is, therefore, a genuine acceptance that the “peers” are actually peers.</p> <p>Also, the process of the review is quite transparent in the sense that even draft reports made by the reviewers are deliberately shown to the reviewees for their comments and for the correction of any factual errors. In the case of the QEF, applicants are asked simply to take on trust the expertise, the interests, and the impartiality of groups of people, the grounds for whose selection are, to say the least, uncertain.</p>	
<p><u>Different committees, different criteria</u></p> <p>There are several parties vetting different categories of applications. Each party adopts its own criteria which are unlike those of another party. This makes the vetting exercise subjective and is confusing to applicants, for there is no sense of uniformity in how the</p>	<p>Applicants must have prior knowledge of the criteria for vetting in whatever category the proposals are allotted and must be given reasons that explain and justify the particular allotment as well as the basis of conclusion.</p>	

<p>committees operate.</p>		
<p><u>Official letters of rejection cavalier and irresponsible</u></p> <p>The official reasons for rejecting a project are frequently “standard” answers. In the case of at least three major proposals submitted by CECES, they did not apply to the particular circumstances. This acts as a mockery to the applicants who spend an enormous amount of energy and time developing each proposal.</p> <p>The irresponsibility becomes even more pungent when the applicants have been called up on the telephone by QEF officers to explain certain points, usually over long and extensive phone calls (commonly as long as an hour at a time). The official written rejection comes back saying that those particular points were unexplained.</p> <p>Other examples of irresponsible rejection makes it look as if the vetting committee</p>	<p>Projects requesting an amount of \$500,000 and above should have the opportunity of a presentation in person to the vetting committee, so that the applicants may speak on their own behalf and not through a “go-between”.</p> <p>Officers from the QEF who are entrusted to speak on the telephone to the applicants should be responsible to relay messages back and forth between the vetting committee and the applicants accurately.</p> <p>It should also be openly understood whose interest the messenger represents – the applicant or the vetting committee.</p> <p>If reasons are to be provided at all, those explaining the rejection of a proposal should be relevant and responsible.</p>	

<p>did not even read the proposal because it gave as its reason for rejection points that have been clearly addressed at length in several pages in the proposal.</p> <p>This cavalier manner of dealing with an applicant's proposal wastes everyone's time. It is like speaking to deaf ears and a blank wall!</p>	<p>This is the only way that the QEF can convince the education community that it respects each proposal that is brought forward for vetting.</p>	
<p><u>Massive numbers of applications reduces vetting quality</u></p> <p>In 2000 – 2001, there were over 3,000 proposals to be vetted. This is too large a number to do justice to the proposals. Comments made by members of the vetting committee showed that they did not have sufficient knowledge of the needs in the field. Their opinions were from their individual points of view and, therefore, their objectivity could be questioned. The large number of proposals to be vetted proves to be an unrealistic heavy workload for the vetters.</p>	<p>A system should be devised to ensure that worthwhile projects receive the support they should while mediocre projects are given the chance of improvement for future consideration. Improving education in HK is everyone's responsibility. The QEF's aim of encouraging innovations should enable it to seek novelty and distinction in a fair and sensible manner.</p> <p>A thorough and careful vetting system should mean that vetters become intimately acquainted with the contents</p>	

	and spirit of the proposals.	
<p><u>Throwing the baby out with the bath water</u></p> <p>In 2001 – 2, the sudden bar placed on organizational applicants meant that the dissemination of the project could not proceed. This defeated the original purpose of the QEF to spread good practice to a larger number of schools. This move was like throwing the baby out with the bath water.</p> <p>Tens of thousands and into the millions of dollars have been spent on projects that did not have real merit, while those justifying continuation are left to die out. This seems extremely wasteful of public money and professional expertise. It also frustrates and demoralizes those who are making an honest attempt to bring about changes.</p>	<p>There should be a mechanism in place to distinguish the worth of projects.</p> <p>There should be clear and openly expressed indicators and benchmarks for both the vetting committees and the applicants to gauge the worthiness of their projects.</p> <p>The determining factor of whether or not a project should be supported should not be arbitrary and made from a few individuals' personal inclinations.</p>	
<u>No feedback, no learning</u>		

<p>The original intention of the QEF was to provide a learning opportunity for all who applied to the fund. The learning experience was to be concerned with (i). how to write a proposal; (ii) how to carry it out; and (iii) how to improve on the project.</p> <p>In 1998, when the QEF was set up, the plan was for the secretariat to help all applicants achieve success in applying to the fund.</p> <p>In fact, CECES has found it extremely difficult to obtain any form of feedback from the QEF. The Chairman said the reason for the vetting committee's rejection of a project could not be revealed.</p> <p>Even with the help of Fanny Law, who agreed with the importance of open communication between the vetting committee and the applicants, it has not been possible to obtain an interview with the people involved. After several</p>	<p>Serious applicants are especially serious about learning and improving on their projects.</p> <p>Changing classroom practice is a long and arduous process (which may take as long as ten years). If applicants are prepared for this long journey, the QEF should be obliged to match their commitment. It should be mandatory that the QEF make verbal, as well as written, responses to the work of the applicants.</p> <p>The QEF should openly state its indicators and benchmarks in its assessment processes. The applicants should play a full part in responding and commenting on the QEF's opinion of the project.</p> <p>It should be remembered that we are talking about millions of dollars entrusted to the QEF. The way this money is allocated to the various proposals must be rationalized and accountable.</p>	
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<p>requests for the external expert's comments on a project, and even with the expert's own agreement, CECES has not been made privy to the expert's report.</p> <p>No feedback from the QEF means that the applicant has no idea of its standing in the assessment of the QEF.</p>		
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For queries, please call Amanda Kwok

Comments about the Quality Education Fund

June 21 2001

The Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood wish to congratulate the QEF for another year of contribution to the quality of education in Hong Kong. Since the formation of this fund, many individual schools and organizations have benefited. We have all learnt a great deal about our own projects, as well as from those undertaken by others in the field.

We are, however, concerned about some aspects of the QEF's procedures, criteria for vetting and the general method of communications between the applicants, the secretariat and vetting committees. We are aware that with such a heavy load of projects to vet, it is not easy to solve everyone's concerns. We bring the following issues to your attention in the hope that we may reach more understanding of each parties' views and situation, and that we may all help to achieve the aims and objectives set out by the Quality Education Fund.

Transparency needed

The vetting process seems arbitrary to many applicants of the QEF. Our observation is that sometimes a rejected project can be revived simply because a person with high community status likes it and praises it, usually on a brief and superficial visit to a school or centre. On the other hand, occasionally a project is rejected because the vetting committee lacks awareness of its implications for the community.

There needs to be much more transparency in the vetting process. Organizers of significant projects should have opportunities of face-to-face meetings with the committee members in order to explain the details of the project. The applicant should know the thinking of the vetting committee members so queries may be dealt with more effectively.

Meaningful dialogue

Large projects require in-depth planning and careful attention to the design of the proposal. When they involve the participation of many schools, the vetting process must solicit a two-way communication channel with the organizers of the project so

that both parties gain better insight from the feedback, facilitating the smooth implementation of the project.

Sometimes, a great deal of paper work is required of the applicants by the vetting committee to explain points of detail. Often points have been explained in the original documents, but the committee seems either not to have read them or not to have understood their significance. This requires a duplication of work and the production of more documents on the part of the applicants.

The QEF secretariat should arrange meetings where meaningful discussions with the applicants may be achieved, without such unnecessary paper work. However, if projects are rejected or truncated in mid-stream, the applicants should have the right to written explanations of the reasons for the decision from the vetting committee. This will have the additional advantage of ensuring that the vetting committee is a responsible body, capable of justifying its decisions, rather than an arbitrary and possibly careless group.

Level of expertise

The public should know the identities of members of the vetting committee when they are entrusted with such an important function and the level of their expertise should be explicitly stated. This will better convince applicants that the committee has sufficient knowledge of and insight into the projects they are asked to judge. Many projects are innovative and are experimental in nature, where the outcome may be uncertain and risks may be involved. In the spirit of the QEF, which is intended to encourage innovations, there is all the more reason that the vetting process has to be open, fair and far-sighted.

Delays have serious consequences

The vetting process of the QEF is too slow. When projects involve the participation of numerous schools, they need to be told of the outcome by early June at the latest. The ordering of materials (sometimes from overseas), recruitment of personnel and the planning of schedules are thrown into disarray when issues arise in the vetting process and decisions are delayed. Schools become so irritable with waiting that they will often drop out of a project they originally felt enthusiastic about.

Appeal mechanism

There should be an appeal mechanism for applicants who wish to make appeals. As public funding is involved, the final decision should not be in the hands of only one group of committee members. An appeal process is especially necessary when large amounts of funds, manpower and planning are at stake.

Coordination and cohesion

The QEF's procedures should be reviewed so that they are consistent, coordinated and coherent. The criteria for successful or unsuccessful bidding for funding are presently unclear and frequently unknown to the applicants. Therefore, applicants are at a loss as to how to make improvements on proposals for future consideration. Often no explanations are given by the official representatives to legitimate questions, leaving the applicants frustrated and annoyed. As is true in other areas, justice needs not only to be done, but also to be seen to be done.

Out of control

We observe that the various vetting committees use different criteria in their decision-making processes. One committee does not seem to be aware of the criteria another operates by. The Project Officers responsible for the different applications vary in their treatment of the applicants. Some are consistently very polite and helpful; some are not

The people in charge may hold a point of view and make suggestions to potential applicants which are not necessarily the same as those advanced by the vetting committee members, and applicants can therefore be misled. They express sympathy and encouragement towards all those attempting to contribute to education reform, but their hands seem tied to correct flaws inherent in the QEF system. Senior officials who support certain projects are unable to exercise sufficient clout in the vetting committees when it comes to the clinch, due possibly, to a lack of in-depth vision of the projects.

The proliferation of vetting committees has pulled the QEF out of control when each function is performed according to its own set of standards. The public feels that the Chairman of the Fund, the Secretary of Education and Manpower Branch and the Education Department Officials allow the vetting committees to take overall power. The public wants to know the answers to two very important questions:

- Does this power come with any accountability?
- Who vets the vetters?

Good, mediocre and poor

Applicants would benefit if they knew what factors determines a “good”, “mediocre” and “poor” project. The QEF should produce a set of standards so that future applicants may know how they are judged, praised or rejected. As was the original intention of the QEF, applicants should be assisted to make improvements and not simply be categorized as unacceptable, without any reason offered. Applicants should also know why some projects are funded for a period of years while other similar projects are not. New members should be better informed of the backgrounds of long projects, so that they may gain a better understanding of the interface between the different aspects and phases from year to year. Fast results may not be possible in some cases and the QEF must set realistic expectations.

Many applicants have spent an enormous amount of time, energy and manpower on their projects. They have also identified their own distinguishing features that make them pioneers of these projects. They are, themselves, the “experts”, and are more intimately in tune with how their projects affect the field than the members of the vetting committee. They are, in fact, the *true* supporters of the QEF, because not only do they devote time to conceiving the project, they also implement and nurture them to fruition, an effort that requires hard work and dedication. However, the QEF has developed into a state that leaves participants confused and demoralized. Some have declared that they no longer wish to make further applications to the fund in the future.

Assessment

At the same time as the QEF assesses proposals, the project organizers should also be given the opportunities to assess themselves. These two sets of assessments should be looked at in depth and simultaneously. If disagreement arises between the organizers of the project and the QEF, an unbiased group of moderators should be called upon to adjudicate the final outcome. This should be a necessary procedure in the first stage of vetting, as well as at the stage where projects are evaluated for continuation.

Dissemination

The QEF's stated intention was to **disseminate** good practice. What is the QEF's opinion of "good practice"? How is "good practice" determined? What does a project have to show in order for it to be disseminated? How wide and extensive should the dissemination be? Who makes the decisions? Where does funding come from for the dissemination process? Why are some projects invited to continue and others not?

Answers to these questions must be spelt out. The QEF is in its fourth year of operation. Many projects are more than ripe for dissemination. However, project organizers have no knowledge as to where and how to locate resources for the continuation of their projects. For an organization that aims to stimulate good practice in education, we feel that it is imperative that the QEF also establish its own indicators and benchmarks as a matter of urgency, and clarify these with future applicants.

Good will

We assure the QEF that our organisation is prepared to participate in and contribute to educational reform in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood Education and Services