

Chairman and Members of Education Panel,

The Staff Association of City University of Hong Kong has conducted a number of focus group meetings and open forums to coordinate and collect views from colleagues of the university on the Sutherland Report, with particular reference to the twelve specific recommendations contained therein.

We would like to present our views under the following themes:

- 1) Institutional Development in Research Activities
- 2) Future Development of Associate Degree Programmes
- 3) University Governance

Institutional Development in Research Activities

We would like to focus our discussion on Recommendations One, Nine, Ten and 11 of the Report.

We strongly object to Recommendation One, agree with Recommendation Nine, support Recommendation Ten with modifications and strongly support Recommendation 11.

We consider that Recommendation One represents an unjustified and inappropriate regulation of academic activities of local universities. Adopting Recommendation One would result in a “lose-lose” outcome amongst institutions in the higher education sector. On one hand, the recommendation would bring about immediate suffocation of the healthy development of new and upcoming universities in Hong Kong, due to reduced funding. On the other hand, the objective of “creating institutions capable of competing at the highest international levels” can hardly be achieved in the short to medium term, given the relatively low level of research funding in Hong Kong (see chart on p.33 of the Report). Experienced academics figure that even pooling all research funding to one university and with a bit of luck, it may take more than 30 years to bring the whole university up to the highest international levels.

We cannot stop asking the important questions: How can Hong Kong benefit from this strategy? And is this strategy the most appropriate one for Hong Kong in the short and medium timeframe? Our answer to these questions is: It is good to have dreams, but somehow, we have to address the reality.

Contrary to what is proposed in Recommendation One, we suggest that greater importance should be accorded to research activities that can contribute to the technology, legal, political, economic, social, and cultural development of Hong Kong. This may translate into (1) greater collaboration between Hong Kong based universities on research projects that benefit Hong Kong and (2) greater focus on research that helps Hong Kong to restructure into a knowledge-based economy, including facilitation of the process of economic integration with the Pearl River Delta region. In a knowledge-based society, there is a need for a broad base of expertise and it is not in the interests of society to unduly restrict the scope of research. To the extent that there are special areas more likely to contribute to the technology, political, legal, economic, social, and cultural development of Hong Kong, the UGC should consider the establishment of intra or inter-university Centers of Excellence, as opposed to disproportionately rewarding only a few identified institutions.

Based on the foregoing observations, we suggest revising Recommendation One of Sutherland Report to read as follows:

“That a number of **Center of Excellence** be strategically identified **within the Higher Education Sector** as the focus of public and private sector support with the explicit intention of **contributing to the development of Hong Kong SAR.**”

In this proposed amendment, support is given directly to centers of excellence instead of a few identified universities, and it represents a more flexible and effective means of allocating resources. In addition, the fund allocation is objective driven, based on the contribution of these centers to the development of Hong Kong.

The revised Recommendation One can be supported by an improved and sharpened RAE system, as advocated in Recommendation 11 of the Report, as a means to continuously assess and review areas of excellence amongst local universities and to award funding through a systematic, effective and equitable process. We therefore welcome and strongly support Recommendation 11 of the Report.

As regards Recommendation Ten, we have no argument about the guiding principle for external research funding, but would like UGC to take note of the different nature and forms of funding. As an illustration, responsibility for full cost is appropriate for targeted contract research, but would not be desirable or practical for researches funded through private donations.

Our last comment on the matter of research is that our colleagues fully agree with the Report that all universities and all university level teachers should be engaged in research.

Future Development of Associate Degree Programme

The Report has devoted one whole Chapter to post-secondary education, and in the end, made four recommendations. Recommendation Two clarifies UGC’s future role in post-secondary education, Recommendation Three proposes a new governing body for Associate Degree programmes, Recommendation Four upholds Government’s funding concept, and Recommendation Five introduces a quality assurance system.

We are totally disappointed, not to say that we feel angry over UGC’s ready acceptance of Government’s unjustified and contradicting policies regarding Associate Degree Programmes. As a matter of priority and urgency, we think that there is little value to deliberate on the above four recommendations without seeking clarifications and justifications from Government and UGC on the rationale for not funding Associate Degree programmes.

On one hand, the Government intends to provide opportunities for 60% of senior school leavers to have access to tertiary education. On the other, it intends not to provide public funding for the Associate Degree programmes, advocating that majority of them should be self-financed. The combined effect of these two intentions would result in another “lose-lose” outcome for our society. This is a classic example of trade off between “quality” and “quantity”, and between “effectiveness” and “efficiency”. As an experienced provider of sub-degree education, we feel obliged to caution the society of the detrimental effect of this kind of trade off.

We would like to offer two arguments in support of public funding for sub-degree programmes, one on the ground of social responsibility and social justice, and the other on quality of education.

On the ground of social responsibility and social justice, we consider that there is no reason not to fund sub-degree programmes, especially when funding is provided for primary, secondary and degree education. Prospective students would have immense difficulties in funding themselves for expensive sub-degree programmes, especially for the full-time mode, since they will have had no opportunity to earn money. Punishing students financially for failing to get on to degree programmes is an inhumane, discriminatory and divisive policy. A system which labels students as failures simply because they do not score well in a particular set of examinations is incompatible with contemporary views of the multi-dimensionality of intelligence and, indeed, with the Government's expansionist education policy. The decision not to provide public funding for sub-degree programmes can be construed as an abdication of responsibility on the part of the Government.

On the ground of quality of education, the Associate Degree programmes offered by the City University can be used as a ready and relevant case to illustrate the quality issue. Our AD qualifications can readily and unquestionably be accepted by universities worldwide as having completed 1/3 to 2/3 of their three year honors degree programmes. The worldwide recognition is attributable to the following critical success factors:

- (1) Students are learning in an university environment
- (2) Students are learning courses highly comparable in content, teaching pattern and assessment method as in degree programmes
- (3) Programmes and courses are managed and their quality controlled by the same mechanism, care and professionalism as degree programmes
- (4) Students are learning in a fully IT enabled environment
- (5) Students have full access to university library resources including electronic resources and research journals
- (6) Students have whole person development as for students in degree programmes, accessible to student development service, sports training and medical and dental care.
- (7) Students are fully integrated with students in degree programmes in student activities of an intellectual, recreational, sports or social nature.
- (8) Students are lectured and tutored by qualified and experienced full time lecturers, who are allowed intellectual exposure, enrichment and growth through academic research, consulting and participating in international academic conferences.

These critical success factors in fact represent only the minimum quality assurance requirement for Associate Degree programmes. In fact, the Higher Diploma programmes offered by the City University for over 15 years also have the same quality assurance features and have worldwide recognition because of that.

We have the social responsibility to alert the general public that we do not have a cheaper alternative to achieve similar quality standards. Under the self-financing policy, most of the critical success factors would disappear from Associate Degree Programmes. The quality of education will go down to the extent that most Associate Degree graduates cannot further their study in the more advanced years of the degree programmes and those who go out working will require employers to invest heavily on basic job training. The society would have to decide whether this is the sort of educational experience you wish your younger generation to go through.

University Governance

We have no disagreement over the need for the review proposed in Recommendation Six of the Report, as we also see a need to have legislative changes, for example, to increase employee participation at University Councils. However, we have reservations over the preferred concept and structure of university governance spelt out in the content of Chapter Three. The university should install an effective, transparent, and open accountability system if its governance philosophy drifts towards Model B. As such, the proposed audit committee should also be empowered to audit the governing body, to ensure the controller is also under control. In general, we feel that adopting a market-driven model of governance and management for universities is not a coherent or defensible public policy.

On the issue of de-linking of university salary scale with that of civil service, we are unable to see the need for such a change, especially for the purpose of enhancing university management's ability to compete internationally for high quality staff. In fact, under the prevailing system, flexibility in remuneration package is already allowed for the appointment of Chair Professors. It should also be borne in mind that it would need enormous efforts in setting up a new remuneration system that has internal and external equity and is equally viable, fair and consistent with the existing one. The process of consultation and negotiation would attract unnecessary industrial relations problems and create morale problems and sectional conflicts amongst employees of the university.

Submitted by:

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