

Polytechnic University Staff Association

A Presentation to the Special Meeting of the HK LegCo Panel on Education on Thursday, January 26th, 2006.

The crisis at Baptist University is just one instance of what de-linking has brought. Our own institution made similar threats in 2004 to force staff to comply with a proposed reduction in benefits. There was so much opposition that Senior Management was obliged to retract the proposal. Now it appears that the Baptist crisis has also been resolved (at least in part), but all this has taken up staff and management time, and has sapped morale – and, of course, this impacts on how well we can serve the cause of education.

The background is that tertiary institutions are now living in a constant state of insecurity as to what future Government funding will be. This puts pressure on senior management teams to cut costs, and this pressure is then passed down to staff.

As K.P. Shum has stated, tertiary staff have been under considerable pressure since 1997 and have felt particularly vulnerable since de-linking. De-linking can only bring about lower salaries and worse conditions of service for the majority of staff, and we wonder how soon we will hear the same complaints in Hong Kong that we have been recently hearing in the UK, that Universities are having trouble recruiting staff because a tertiary career brings so few rewards. Here, we already know of staff leaving the profession because it has ceased to bring any pleasure or satisfaction.

Two elements associated with the new employment packages are particularly threatening to good academic practice – insecurity of tenure and performance linked rewards. Insecurity of tenure can easily result in loss of courage, creativity and academic freedom. It creates a climate where the shoe-shiners can thrive, but others have to fight for their position. Performance linked rewards similarly tend to benefit shoe-shiners, primarily. They undermine academics' intrinsic motivation to work for the sake of their students, and for the sake of

knowledge, and jeopardize collaboration and collegiality. As research output is usually the only measurable thing in the evaluation of staff for job retention, promotion or reward, staff can easily be tempted to neglect the interests of students. Further, we are increasingly observing academic dishonesty and plagiarism as a means of survival.

K.P. Shum has stated that making unilateral changes to contracts is illegal. If it is, why do the tertiary institutions feel they can do it with impunity? What does this say about the rule of law, natural justice, and the status of contractual obligations in Hong Kong? If, on the other hand, they are simply exploiting a legal loophole, and it is legal to force consent to a change of contract by threatening employees with dismissal, then how can such behaviour be considered ethical? What kind of message does it send to our students of management, for example, about how employees should be treated? The fact that the senior management of our institutions have not been obliged to accept cuts to their own packages further exacerbates the impact on staff morale.

If nothing can be done about funding cuts, then there should at least be a means of regulating how the Senior Management teams of tertiary institutions respond to them. The Polytechnic University Staff Association therefore supports the stance of the Federation of HK Higher Education Staff Associations.