

For information

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Quality Assurance Council of the University Grants Committee

Introduction

This paper informs Members of the establishment the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of the University Grants Committee (UGC).

Background

2. The UGC is committed to safeguarding and promoting the quality of UGC-funded institutions and their activities. Specifically, it has been performing this role over the years through conducting the Management Review (1998-1999), the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (1995-1997, 2001-2003), and the Performance and Role-related Funding Scheme (2004), etc. These reviews/schemes have served to ensure that effective quality assurance (QA) mechanisms were in place in each of the institutions, and have assisted institutions in improving further in specific areas such as the quality of management, student teaching and learning, as well as performance against role, etc.

3. With the expansion of the post-secondary education sector in the past few years, the UGC-funded institutions are playing an increasingly active role in the provision of higher education opportunities generally, notably through providing articulation opportunities for sub-degree graduates and self-financed programmes at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels. There has also been growing public interest in quality issues. Furthermore, both the Administration and the UGC have observed that it has become increasingly common in overseas QA practices to include third-party oversight over higher education institutions. Against the above background, the UGC has reviewed its role in this respect and decided to set up a new body under its aegis to assist it in discharging its QA responsibilities.

4. A Preparatory Committee was formed under the UGC in August 2006 to study issues pertinent to the establishment of a new QA body. The Preparatory Committee made reference to the practices of respected overseas QA bodies and factored in local considerations in its deliberations. The UGC has also actively engaged the UGC-funded institutions in its thinking and planning, and the Heads of institutions were supportive of the proposed approach and the setting up of the new body. There were in-depth discussions on a number of important areas, and agreement has been reached with the UGC-funded institutions on key issues, including the scope of activities of the new body, the approach and methodology to be adopted, and the processes and procedures governing the operation of the new body and its panels.

Quality Assurance Council

5. The Administration fully supports the UGC's efforts in assuring the quality of programmes offered by the UGC-funded institutions and in setting up a QA body under its aegis. Moreover, the proposed new body will facilitate the development and dissemination of QA good practices in the higher education sector generally through the conduct of quality audits and reviews. The QAC will assume a role in promoting quality enhancement and spreading good practices across the sector as it accumulates experience.

6. On 23 March 2007, the UGC announced the establishment of the QAC. The new QA body will be responsible for assuring QA matters with respect to all taught programmes offered by UGC-funded institutions at degree and above levels irrespective of their sources of funding. Specifically, the QAC's missions are to assure that the quality of educational experience offered by the UGC-funded institutions is maintained at (or improved up to) an internationally competitive level; and to encourage institutions to excel in this area of activities. Programmes that are offered by UGC-funded institutions solely or jointly with other institutions which lead to qualifications wholly or partly awarded by the UGC-funded institutions will also be covered¹. As regards research degrees, the QAC will focus on activities which contribute to the teaching and learning quality of research degree – rather than the subject matter under research or the quality of the research work.

¹ For non-local courses operated by non-local course providers leading to the award of non-local higher academic/professional qualifications, they will continue to be regulated by the Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance (Cap. 493).

7. A small secretariat will be set up within the UGC Secretariat to provide the necessary support for the operation of the QAC and conduct of the quality audits. It is expected that the UGC-funded institutions will have to bear part of the direct cost incurred in the respective institutional audits. The Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) will provide about \$6 million per annum for the operation of the QAC secretariat.

Quality Audits

8. Since all UGC-funded institutions have self-accrediting status, the institutions will continue to be responsible for the QA of their own programme offerings. The QAC will adopt an audit approach in reviewing the institutions' QA efforts through peer reviews. Institutions will be invited to conduct and write up self-evaluation reports focusing on specified areas of institutional activity agreed through dialogue with QAC. Having regard to the different institutional backgrounds, such audits will be conducted using a "fitness-for-purpose" approach, under which institutions will be invited to set out clearly their visions and objectives, the intended student learning outcomes, and the indicators/comparators that are used for measuring and benchmarking their achievements. The QAC quality audits will check and verify the evidence as provided by the institutions to ascertain the effectiveness of their quality assurance mechanisms, and assure that institutions are indeed competent and carrying out what they have undertaken to achieve – and to strive for improvements.

9. We are aware – and wish to encourage – that each of the UGC-funded institutions has its own role and vision, based on its strengths, and has developed its own mission and strategies. It would therefore not be appropriate to attempt an across-the-board approach. The quality audits will be conducted by audit panels established under the QAC at the institutional level, while individual programmes will also be sampled for in-depth audits to verify the position on the ground. During the process, focus will be put on student learning quality and on whether the institutions' work can achieve the intended learning outcomes. It is envisaged that two audits will be carried out each year by the QAC.

The Way Forward

10. The QAC will formally commence operation with effect from 1 April 2007. Taking into account the lead time required for

identification and professional development of audit panel members as well as for the institutions to prepare for the audits, the first QAC quality audit is scheduled to take place in early 2008, and a full audit cycle of the eight UGC-funded institutions will take around four to five years to complete. The QAC will consider conducting other audits and reviews at the request of the UGC and the Administration.

Education and Manpower Bureau and
University Grants Committee Secretariat

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