

For information

Legislative Council Panel on Education

**The Administration's Responses to the Motion
passed by Members at the Special Meeting on 28 April 2008**

At the special meeting of the Panel on Education held on 28 April 2008, Members discussed issues relating to the academic and professional accreditation of sub-degree courses, with reference to the application made by the Hong Kong Institute of Technology (HKIT) to the Nursing Council for the accreditation of its Associate Degree in Nursing Programme. Members passed a motion to urge the Administration to adopt measures to improve the accreditation process. This note provides the Administration's responses to the motion.

Members' Motion

2. The Panel urges the Administration to adopt the following measures -

- (a) the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) shall enhance its co-operation with relevant professional bodies to conduct joint assessment; if any part of a particular programme that can be assessed in advance, such as teachers' qualifications, student entry requirements and quality, has failed, the programme shall not commence;
- (b) if the accreditation of a programme involves both teaching and practical training, the findings of the interim report shall be made available to the community and the students within one year; if the programme has failed in the assessment, no further student intake shall be allowed and a refund mechanism should be put in place to compensate students for their loss in tuition fees;

- (c) the Administration should subsidize the affected students of HKIT so that they may complete their studies in the programmes offered by the Hospital Authority; and
 - (d) an independent inquiry panel should be set up to investigate into various issues concerning professional accreditation of degree and associate degree programmes, such as the Associate Degree Programme in Nursing offered by HKIT, as well as the eligibility criteria for taking the Chinese Medicine Practitioners Licensing Examination and the right to attend examinations”
3. Responses from the Administration to the proposed measures are set out below.

Academic Accreditation and Professional Accreditation

4. HKCAAVQ is an independent statutory body established under the HKCAAVQ Ordinance, Cap.1150, to conduct accreditation of academic qualifications. As explained in the information paper submitted by the Education Bureau to the Panel on 28 April 2008, academic accreditation is conducted by a panel appointed by HKCAAVQ, which consists of specialists in the relevant subject or discipline as well as experts in quality assurance and education. They will work together with registrars of HKCAAVQ to examine the quality of the learning programme and ascertain whether the programme meets the academic standards required for a particular qualification level, e.g. an Associate Degree award. The accreditation panel makes its determination independently on the basis of all relevant evidence available to the panel. Accreditation approval is granted for a fixed validity period and the programmes are subject to re-validation before the validity period expires.

5. Academic accreditation conducted by HKCAAVQ is different from professional accreditation which is done by the relevant professional body in accordance with its own statutes and rules. The two processes are conducted separately with different objectives. Academic accreditation is concerned with whether a learning programme is capable of meeting the academic standards required for a particular qualification

level and is conducted before the programme commences. On the other hand, professional accreditation is focused on the ability of an individual to perform a specific professional role (often pursuant to specific legal provisions) and, in some cases, the accreditation exercise could only be carried out after the commencement of the programme especially when the professional body deems it necessary to examine how practical sessions of the programme are conducted. This will be a decision of the professional body concerned, and is independent of how the academic accreditation process is to be conducted by HKCAAVQ. It is therefore not appropriate for HKCAAVQ to conduct joint accreditation with professional bodies. Joint accreditation is also not the international norm.

6. The above notwithstanding, HKCAAVQ is prepared to further enhance its cooperation and communication with the relevant professional bodies. In future academic accreditation exercises where it is clear that the programme concerned will be subject to professional accreditation, HKCAAVQ will consider requesting the provider to provide evidence or plans on how basic criteria prescribed by the relevant professional body, such as teachers' qualifications, students' entry requirements, etc., would be met. The provider could also be required to produce records of its consultation with the professional body and the opinions expressed by the body on the standard of the programme and the resources provided. HKCAAVQ would, where appropriate, take such information into account when conducting the academic accreditation for the programme.

7. In this connection, Members may wish to note that in conducting academic accreditation of a programme preparing a student for a professional job, it is already the practice of HKCAAVQ to appoint members from the relevant professional body and specialists in the relevant field, in their personal capacity, as members of the accreditation panel. HKCAAVQ will also continue to maintain regular dialogues with professional bodies.

Interim report on professional accreditation process

8. We agree that there is scope to improve transparency of the professional accreditation process. In collaboration with the relevant policy bureaux, we will request the professional bodies to consider giving provisional approval for operating a programme upon fulfillment of basic criteria prescribed by the professional bodies, and issuing periodic interim reports on the professional accreditation process within one year after the learning programme has commenced operation, particularly for those learning programmes that involve practical training. Professional bodies will also be requested to consider publishing the progress of accreditation in their own websites. Providers should explain clearly to their students the progress of the accreditation both at the time of enrolment and whenever interim reports are received from the professional bodies. The providers should also make available findings of the interim report, insofar as they are relevant to a learning programme subject to academic accreditation, for publication in the information portal (iPASS) set up by EDB for information of the public.

9. We will also seek to incorporate the practice of explaining clearly to students the progress of professional accreditation in the “Handbook on Good Practices for the Sub-degree Sector” for reference by providers and accreditation bodies.

10. As far as nursing programme is concerned, the Nursing Council of Hong Kong (Nursing Council) is reviewing its accreditation process. After the new process is in place, upon fulfillment of certain basic criteria, the Nursing Council may consider giving provisional approval to a new programme so that it can commence operation by a gazetted training school. The remaining accreditation process will be completed within 12 months after the programme is in operation. In addition, the Nursing Council will remind institutions to explain clearly to students the progress of the accreditation as well as the risk of enrolling in a programme that is yet to be fully accredited. The Nursing Council will also consider publishing in its website the latest status of institutions’ applications for accreditation. These measures seek to enhance the transparency of the accreditation process.

Financial Assistance to HKIT Students

11. Students who enroll in Hospital Authority's (HA) Higher Diploma in Nursing programme may apply to the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) for loans under the Extended Non-means Tested Loan Scheme (ENLS). Meanwhile, HA is considering applying to HKCAAVQ for academic accreditation of the programme. If the programme is eventually accredited, students may apply to the SFAA for financial assistance under the Financial Assistance Scheme for Post-secondary Students (FASP) and the Non-means-tested Loan Scheme for Post-secondary Students (NLSPS). Besides, if former HKIT students successfully complete an HA programme that is accredited by HKCAAVQ and obtain a qualification at sub-degree level or above within 6 years from the first disbursement of the FASP grants, they are not required to repay the grants, including the grants disbursed when they studied in HKIT.

12. If HKIT students choose not to pursue the HA's Higher Diploma in Nursing programme but continue to pursue other programmes recognised under the FASP, they may continue to apply for financial assistance under the FASP and NLSPS. If they obtain a qualification at sub-degree level or above within 6 years from the first disbursement of the FASP grants, they are not required to repay the grants.

13. In any event, there is mechanism in SFAA to consider deferment of repaying grants and loans for reasons of further studies, financial hardship, or serious illness. Students can apply to SFAA for a deferment of his repayment during his study at HA on grounds of further studies.

14. On the other hand, students who enroll in HA's Enrolled Nurse Training Programme need not pay fees as the programme fees will be waived.

Proposal of Setting Up an Independent Inquiry Panel

Accreditation Application from HKIT

15. The accreditation carried out by the Nursing Council is a

professional assessment aiming to ensure the professional standard of a training course to safeguard public health.

16. The Nursing Council has set up an independent accreditation mechanism. An Accreditation Committee (AC) has been established to handle applications for accreditation. The AC consists of Council members, as well as co-opted members appointed by the Council in consideration of their expertise. To maintain objectivity in the accreditation process, members with different backgrounds are appointed to the AC. They include experts from the nursing field, the academic field and the medical field. Members of the AC are divided into several panels. Each application for accreditation is assigned to one of the panels on condition that the assigned panel members do not have any affiliation with the programme under consideration. The accreditation panels will act in accordance with the process and procedures set out in the Handbook for Accreditation of Training Institutions.

17. The Nursing Council noted that HKIT first submitted an application for accreditation of its Associate Degree in Nursing programme in August 2005. The Council rejected the application in February 2006 by reason of its failure to meet the professional standard required. HKIT submitted a fresh application in April 2006. The Nursing Council had subsequently been informing HKIT about the shortcomings of its programme and the areas of deficiencies requiring improvement. As HKIT still failed to meet the standard expected for accreditation after rounds of correspondence, the Nursing Council decided to reject HKIT's application in March 2008, with detailed reasons given in writing in early April 2008.

18. The Administration notes that HKIT's accreditation application has gone through the established process of assessment by the Nursing Council, which is vested with statutory power under the Nurses Registration Ordinance to recognize nurse training programme independently. As such, we do not see the case for initiating an investigation into the matter.

Chinese Medicine Practitioners Licensing Examination

19. The registration system for Chinese medicine practitioners (CMPs) under the Chinese Medicine Ordinance aims to ensure the professional standard of CMPs and protect public health. Under the system, any person who wishes to apply for registration as a registered CMP must first complete a recognized Chinese medicine undergraduate degree course and pass the Chinese Medicine Practitioners Licensing Examination (the “Licensing Examination”).

20. The practice of CMPs is closely related to the health of the public. Therefore, the Chinese Medicine Practitioners Board under the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong (the “Practitioners Board”) considers that for students to complete satisfactorily an undergraduate degree course in Chinese medicine, they should have received comprehensive and fundamental university education as well as undergone full-time learning. Students should also be provided with adequate opportunity to practise continuously in order to complete all the relevant clinical training and experiments. A full-time on campus learning environment is an important component of quality teaching. To maintain the professional standard and status of CMPs, and with regard to the corresponding licensing requirements for other healthcare professions (e.g., medical practitioners and dentists), the Practitioners Board considers that the full-time mode of education should be adopted for the recognized courses for the CMP Licensing Examination.

21. In 2001-2002, the Practitioners Board assessed the part-time degree courses in Chinese medicine offered by the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Baptist University since 2000 and 1998 respectively. In view of the historical circumstances of Chinese medicine education in local universities, and after careful consideration, the Practitioners Board decided that students enrolled in the two courses in or before 2002 could sit the Licensing Examination after satisfactorily completing the courses. However, that was an exceptional and one-off arrangement and should not be extended to other part-time degree courses in Chinese medicine, especially non-local courses.

22. Such a decision of the Practitioners Board was scrutinized by the court in a relevant judicial review, and was accepted and approved of. A student of the part-time degree course in Chinese medicine offered by Jinan University in collaboration with the Hong Kong College of Technology applied for judicial review of the decision of the Practitioners Board not to approve the course concerned. The judicial review and the subsequent appeal were dismissed in June 2006 and March 2007 respectively. Noting that the Practitioners Board has all along been rejecting part-time undergraduate degree courses in Chinese medicine jointly run by non-local universities and local education institutes, the Court of Appeal of the High Court considered that it was justified for the Practitioners Board not to approve part-time degree courses in Chinese medicine offered by non-local universities and it could not be faulted for making a limited exception only in respect of universities in Hong Kong. We therefore do not consider it necessary to initiate an investigation into the case.

Education Bureau
Food and Health Bureau
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