

The Open University of Hong Kong

Response to the Report of the University Grants Committee – Aspirations for the Higher Education System in Hong Kong (December 2010)

Preamble

The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) would like to congratulate the University Grants Committee (UGC) on the development of a comprehensive report on the post-secondary education landscape in Hong Kong. We broadly agree with most of the recommendations made in the review but would like to respond to some specific areas. We do this in a spirit of constructive criticism and based on over 20 years of experience of operating on a self-financing model. We would like to draw your attention the following areas for consideration:

Issues relating to the self-financed tertiary institutions

“There should be a single oversight body for the non-publicly funded part of the post-secondary education system” – Recommendation 2.

We feel that this recommendation is worth considering. However it is not clear what is being suggested with regard to the functions and responsibilities of the proposed body. For instance, given the Recommendation 35 that *“There should be a single quality assurance body for the whole post-secondary system”*, the proposed body should not involve quality assurance.

The proposed body should be a bridge between the institutions and the government to systematically consider and make recommendations regarding the ideal number and variety of self-funded institutions, the granting of land for campus development and student dormitories, granting of resources for one-off projects, the access to research grants etc.

That said, we still feel all elements of strategy and planning for higher education (with the exception of funding) would benefit from a unified approach. We would reiterate the point we made in response to the 2002 Review that it is imperative not to create a two-tier system with respect to policy and strategy. Any such system would, in our opinion, only further public misconception regarding the relative qualities and worth of the funded versus the non-funded institutions.

“The access of private universities to competitive research funding should be reviewed periodically” – Recommendation 26.

This is a very important issue for the self-financing institutions and we are glad to see that it warrants a mention in the Report. However, we are disappointed by the lack of a concrete recommendation in this area. We are aware that Government has recently significantly increased the funds being channeled to the Research Grants Council (RGC) and feel that now would be an appropriate time to look at amending the system. Furthermore, we would take issue with the statement made in paragraph 3.47 (page 42) that “... *should not preclude them from having access to competitive research funding as their capacity grows...*” as we strongly believe that any university academic, whether in a publically funded or self-financed institution, deserves to have access to competitive funding from the same system at any stage of the institution’s development.

Financial Support for Students – paragraph 3.14

Page 33 of the Report states “*The student grant and loans scheme for self-financed programmes is thus now in good shape, and basically on a par with the scheme for publically funded programmes.*” This statement is not entirely correct. Grants are only available to students pursuing qualifications by distance education who are under 25 years of age and carrying a study load equivalent to full-time study. The majority of our distance learning students do not fall into this category.

Issues relating to the whole tertiary education sector

“There should be a comprehensive review of the future provision and distribution of lifelong learning opportunities throughout the post-secondary system” – Recommendation 8.

As a major provider of degree level education opportunities to working adults we fully support this recommendation and we would certainly support the view stated in the report that “*It may be that greater public funding for certain levels or programmes is necessary*” providing this is done on a level playing field basis.

“There should be a single quality assurance body for the whole post-secondary system” – Recommendation 35.

We fully agree with this recommendation and have been advocating such a move for many years. Many jurisdictions have adopted a single model for quality assurance across the whole of the tertiary education system. Given the relatively small size of the Hong Kong system, in terms of both number of institutions and number of programmes, such a move would prevent the current significant duplication of effort and financial resources as well as assist in the sharing of good practice among institutions. It would also ensure a level playing field with regard to comparisons between institutions.

“The development of a Credit Accumulation and Transfer System for the whole system requires it to be appropriate for articulation between different levels and across different institutions at the same level” – Recommendation 37.

Once again, we fully agree with this recommendation. The Open University of Hong Kong has been practicing such a system since inception. Our system is robust enough to work across different institutions and different levels of programmes and has been accepted both locally and internationally. We would welcome the opportunity to share our considerable expertise on this matter with the rest of the sector in Hong Kong.

Issues pertaining to the UGC-funded institutions

“Public funds should not be used by UGC-funded institutions as cross-subsidies for self-financing educational activities. There should be greater transparency in the financial relations between UGC-funded institutions and self-financing courses either within the institution or in an affiliate, such as a community college” – Recommendation 33.

We fully support this recommendation. However, we also endorse the statement made in the Report “... it is easier to state the rule than to verify and enforce its application” and we hope that strenuous efforts will be made to ensure that the system becomes totally transparent. Institutions and the public alike must be convinced that such cross-subsidy is not occurring. Not only will this prevent the misuse of public funds, but it will also ensure the creation of a level playing field across the whole of the self-financing sector.

“The community college operations of UGC-funded institutions should be completely separated from their parent institutions within three years if the acceptance of this recommendation” – Recommendation 34.

Once again, we fully support this recommendation and feel that it is the only way in which recommendation 33 can be properly implemented. As part of the complete separation process, we feel that an examination of the way such operations use the name and logos of their parent institutions would be warranted.

Miscellaneous issues

Paragraph 3.46 on page 42 states that “Two private universities already exist in Hong Kong outside the publically funded UGC sector – The Open University of Hong Kong and Shue Yan University”. In an area where nomenclature and public perception is all important, we would like to reiterate that the OUHK is not a private university, certainly not in the same way as Shue Yan, as OUHK was established by the Hong Kong Government. Given the negative connotations often associated with the term “private university” we feel the term “self-financing university” would be more appropriate.

We are concerned that all the recommendations pertaining to the issues of Internationalisation and Relationship with Mainland China are contained in the section “*Issues Specific to the UGC Sector*” and we hope that this does not indicate a stance that

the self-financing sector has no role to play. We would wish to remind the Committee that the OUHK has long been active in promoting tertiary education in the Mainland through various partnerships, and in recruiting Mainland students to study in Hong Kong. It is our wish to expand this aspect of our operation but we are being prevented from doing so due to regulatory issues and a lack of dormitory accommodation for students.

Paragraph 3 of the Executive Summary on page 1 states that “*The recommendations of the Higher Education Review 2002, which aimed to improve the competitiveness of the university sector, have been largely implemented*”. We would challenge that assertion. Whilst it may be true that in numerical terms the majority of the recommendations have been implemented, it is not true for many of the major and wide-reaching recommendations such as the development of an over-arching quality assurance body for the tertiary education system or the development of a comprehensive Credit Accumulation and Transfer system.