



## **JOINT QUALITY REVIEW COMMITTEE**

**The Present and Future Role of  
Joint Quality Review Committee in  
the Quality Assurance (QA) of  
Self-financed Sub-degree Education in Hong Kong**

**A Paper submitted to  
the Panel on Education of LegCo for  
the Special Meeting on  
Self-financed Sub-degree Education**

**11 January 2013**

## List of Abbreviations

AD	Associate Degree
EDB	Education Bureau
HD	Higher Diploma
HKCAA	Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation
HKCAAVQ	Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications
HUCOM	Heads of Universities Committee
IR	Institutional Review
JQRC	Joint Quality Review Committee
LCQA	Liaison Committee on Quality Assurance
Non SA institutions	non self-accrediting institutions
QA	Quality Assurance
QAC	Quality Assurance Council
QF	Qualifications Framework
SA institutions	self-accrediting institutions
SFSD programmes	Self-financed Sub-degree programmes
SSPUs	Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units
TLC	Tripartite Liaison Committee
UGC	University Grants Committee

# The Present and Future Role of Joint Quality Review Committee in the Quality Assurance (QA) of Self-financed Sub-degree Education in Hong Kong

## **Current QA System for the Self-financed Sub-degree Sector**

There are currently three Quality Assurance (QA) bodies overseeing post-secondary/ higher education in Hong Kong. Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of the University Grants Committee (UGC) oversees the quality of degree-level provision at the UGC-funded institutions; Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC) reviews the quality of Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units (SSPUs) at the UGC-funded institutions; Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) accredits institutions and programmes at the non self-accrediting institutions at both the degree and sub-degree level.

Thus at the **sub-degree level** (levels 1 to 4 of the Qualifications Framework), external quality assurance is the responsibility of two QA bodies, **JQRC** and **HKCAAVQ**.

## **Establishment of Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC)**

The Joint Quality Review Committee Limited (JQRC), an independent corporate quality assurance body formed in 2005 under the **Heads of Universities Committee (HUCOM)** constituted by the eight institutions under the aegis of the University Grants Committee (UGC), oversees the quality assurance processes for the self-financed sub-degree programmes of these institutions. Such programmes are mostly offered through the self-financed arms of the institutions. The establishment of JQRC did not reflect any concerns with the quality of these programmes, but is an initiative to add a further element of externality into the quality assurance processes of the self-accrediting institutions, in respect of their self-financed sub-degree programmes. The Review of the Post-secondary Education Sector Report (2006) has acknowledged that the institutions have “well-

established internal QA (quality assurance) mechanisms and proven output standards”. (P.38)

The UGC-funded institutions, having achieved **self-accrediting status**, do not have to undergo external accreditation by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) (the present HKCAAVQ), which performs a quality assurance role for the non self-accrediting institutions. Thus there might be a misperception that the two types of institutions were not subject to the same rigor of external scrutiny. The establishment of JQRC was in part a response intended to “**align the processes**” of these two quality assurance systems as pointed out in the Review Report, to further ensure comparability of standard. However, this was not just a move to meet public expectations: **improvement** of quality was part of the objectives. The objective of **promoting good practices** in quality assurance is also a stated remit of JQRC.

## **Independent Operation of JQRC as a QA body**

### **Independent governance and funding**

An important principle governing the operation of quality assurance (QA) agencies is the independence of operation. JQRC is funded by the member institutions, which helps to guarantee its independence from government. Secondly, the appointment of the governing JQRC Board of Directors is made by the institutions themselves, and not by government, which further underlines the autonomy of the agency. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the Board is composed of **senior institutional representatives** who are not from the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units (SSPUs) which are the targets of reviews. The Academic Council of JQRC also includes **non-JQRC members**. This ensures that reviews are designed and conducted independently and at “arm’s length” from the offering units.

## **Independent peer review process**

JQRC adopts a **peer review** process which is a common practice of external quality assurance around the world. The review panels which undertake the actual reviews are composed of members who are external to the SSPUs, or external to the institutions, including academics from **non-JQRC institutions, members from commerce and industry, and professional bodies.**

Even though JQRC's review reports are submitted to **HUCOM**, the latter does not interfere with the outcomes or the drafting of reports. The reports are normally received and endorsed for follow-up action.

As an Institution-owned external QA organization, not only does JQRC have the advantage of being an independent organization, but it also has the benefit of a **collegial** mode of operation which leads to greater **acceptance and cooperation** between the QA body and the Institutions.

## **Review Methodology of JQRC**

The major review feature adopted by JQRC is the **Institutional Review (IR)**, which examines the quality assurance structures and processes of the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units (SSPUs). This is conducted on an institutional basis: **between 2007 and 2009** all the SSPUs of the eight member institutions have undergone IR.

Following international practice, a **self-evaluation** is submitted by the SSPUs, followed by **site visit** by a peer review panel, resulting in a **report** outlining findings and recommendations.

Issues examined in an IR are similar to issues covered by the reviews/accreditations of other QA bodies, such as:

*Institutional Plans and Policies; Institutional QA policies, Processes for academic planning, Relationship between SSPUs and central academic authority;*

Programme Approval, Delivery, and Monitoring: including processes for admission, assessment, and benchmarking;

Institutional Support for Programmes, such as Staff appointment, appraisal and development, Allocation of resources to programmes, and Student support services

Information Access and Management, and Indicators of Quality/Quality Assurance

Following the first cycle of IR, JQRC conducted a review of **Interim Reports** submitted by the SSPUs between 2010 and 2012 in response to the recommendations in the IR reports.

JQRC also performs an assessment role for Self-financed Sub-degree (SFSD) programmes submitted by member institutions for the **Qualifications Register** of the Qualifications Framework (QF) - it assesses and endorses the proposed QF level of programmes.

## **Comparability in Standard**

To facilitate communication with the Education Bureau (EDB) and the HKCAAVQ, JQRC has invited the **EDB to send a representative as observer** at the meetings of its Board of Directors and the Academic Council; and **invited HKCAAVQ to send a designated representative** to join its Academic Council as full member. The Chairman of JQRC has also been appointed as a member of the HKCAAVQ Council.

To help promote the comparability of standards in the two sectors, the Education Bureau (EDB) has set up the Tripartite Liaison Committee (TLC), comprising EDB, HKCAAVQ, and JQRC, to provide a forum for exchange and promotion of the quality of SFSD programmes. More recently, the QAC/UGC has joined the TLC, which is transformed into the **Liaison Committee on Quality Assurance (LCQA)**. Through the LCQA, various initiatives related to quality assurance in the SFSD sector have been accomplished, including the formulation of the **Common Descriptors for Associate Degree (AD) and Higher Diploma (HD)** programmes (which

govern programme structure and objectives, entry requirements and exit standards), the implementation of the Qualifications Framework (QF), among others.

Comparability in standard is further guaranteed by application of common benchmarks by the QA bodies – e.g. the Common Descriptors for AD/HD programmes, and the **Generic Level Descriptors** for various levels of the QF. Both JQRC and HKCAAVQ make reference to these Descriptors in their accreditation/assessment of programmes.

## **Future of QA for Higher Education/Sub-degree Education in Hong Kong**

### **One Size Does Not Fit All**

The SAR Government of Hong Kong has on many occasions pointed to the positive contribution made by the various QA agencies, and highlighted the comparability in standard among the QA bodies. The UGC Report has put forth a recommendation for establishing a new quality assurance body comprising HKCAAVQ, Joint Quality Review Committee and the Quality Assurance Council. However, we do not see an immediate case for one single agency being more efficient, more cost-effective, or necessarily providing a better safeguard of quality. Although **in the long term, it might be possible to contemplate an integration** of the different quality assurance approaches, and to consider the model of one QA oversight body, in the meantime, we need to consider the present stage of development of the post-secondary education system – the existence of two groups of institutions, *viz.* the self-accrediting (SA) institutions which have a longer history and established internal quality assurance systems and newer non self-accrediting (Non SA) institutions.

With the growth of private degree-awarding institutions, and a large number of private providers offering lower-level vocational programmes, it is appropriate to maintain this distinction between two types of institutions for the near future, whilst planning for future integration of the

different methodologies for quality assurance adopted across the sector. This would require a greater understanding of the processes employed by each of the present quality assurance agencies and their effectiveness in application to institutions at different levels of maturity. As the UGC argues, this would best be achieved by rationalizing the functions currently performed by each of those agencies, perhaps by operating an oversight body which coordinates their activities for some period, rather than simply turning the whole process over to any one of those bodies as it presently exists.

### **Academic Autonomy**

Self-accreditation status is a recognition of the maturity and achievement of an institution. It is a position held by most of the world's leading universities and is a feature which underpins the concept of academic freedom and protection from outside interference. Self-accreditation means that an institution has control not only of the quality of its programmes but also of their content. In safe-guarding this status, only if improvements to quality can be achieved without impingement upon the self-determination, position, and confidence of the institutions, or the confidence of the public in the institutions, can they be regarded as better alternatives.

### **Advantages of the current QA system**

- The current system of having three QA bodies with separate responsibilities is an effective division of labour, which **recognizes the difference in maturity of institutions**, and the need for different approaches in quality assurance.
- The division in labour respects the **self-accrediting status** and **academic autonomy** of institutions; thus the system is supported by the institutions.
- Each of the QA bodies has **experience** with its client institutions and the respective mode of operation: audit/review as conducted by



QAC/JQRC, and accreditation as practised by HKCAAVQ. Thus any immediate change of the supervising QA organization, or an adoption of different QA methods, would not be effective.

- JQRC, as an institution-owned QA body, is **independent in its operation, following international peer review methods**. But it is also collegial in its approach and thus has the **allegiance** of member institutions.
- There is evidence to show that Institutional Reviews conducted by JQRC has **resulted in improvement** in the quality assurance processes of the self-financed sub-degree programme units. **Internal supervision** by the Heads of Universities Committee ensures compliance and improvement.
- Poised to conduct the second cycle of Institutional Reviews, JQRC will be able to **build upon the experience and results of the first cycle**. Any premature change to the system will lose the experience of the previous reviews.
- JQRC is **cost-effective** in its operation, as it focuses on the quality assurance processes of the institutions, rather than accredits individual programmes. Any premature transfer of work to another body/a single body might result in a **costly, bureaucratic** and probably ineffective organization.
- The **input of government** into the operation of JQRC (through EDB's observers on the Board and Academic Council), and JQRC's participation in government initiatives (through the LCQA, policy advice, and related projects commissioned by EDB) help to ensure support for government policies and comparability in standard among QA bodies.

### **Suggestions for Improvement to the present system**

- Further and more regular **exchange and communication among the QA bodies** will help to further align standards in Self-financed Sub-degree (SFSD) programmes, such as through the Liaison Committee on Quality Assurance (LCQA) and joint projects.

- Subject to the advice of HUCOM, JQRC will formulate a suitable approach in its second cycle of Institutional Review, and will **focus on areas of concern, such as student admission, and SSPUs' internal management and supervision**. JQRC's investigation into the incidents of "over-enrolment" in 2012 showed that there are areas requiring further review and improvement – these might also include SSPUs' internal mechanisms to prepare for and cope with change and unexpected situations, such as the double-cohort year and unexpected demand. JQRC has reason to believe that recent incidents of over-enrolment were isolated incidents resulting from specific circumstances and do not necessarily detract from the rigor of established quality assurance processes.
- JQRC has released summary reports of its Institutional Reviews in the past, and will make recommendation for **releasing full review reports** in future. Transparency, public opinion and consumer choice will act as further catalysts for improvement – in addition to the rigor of internal supervision through Senior Management of the institutions/universities.
- JQRC will make improvements upon its operational mode, such as by **including more independent experts** from external organizations in its Reviews in future, to bring in more expert opinion, reinforce its image of independence and enhance public confidence.
- Government and the QA bodies should provide **more public information** on both internal quality assurance processes at the institutions/SSPUs, and the operation of external quality assurance (i.e. work of the two QA bodies), to enhance public confidence in the quality of SFSD programmes.

JQRC welcomes further advice from government, and other stakeholders, for making improvements to its present mode of operation.

JQRC believes that the present system of having diverse responsibility for QA in the sub-degree sector can continue to work and improve, with the support of government and the institutions. We believe that a system where institutions have a sense of ownership and have allegiance towards

the external QA system will always work better towards quality improvement, rather than a system which is imposed and where academic autonomy appears to be undermined.

**Joint Quality Review Committee**  
**8 January 2013.**