

CENTENNIAL COLLEGE

Written Submission

LegCo Panel on Education Meeting on 18 March 2014

Issues related to the governance and regulation of the self-financing post-secondary sector

As with other tertiary institutions in Hong Kong and elsewhere, Centennial College is very much concerned about issues related to quality assurance (QA) and governance of self-financing post-secondary education institutions. The rapid growth of the self-financing post-secondary sector in recent years is, for the most part, a result of a shortage of places in publicly-funded institutions under a policy of massification of tertiary education. However, as a self-financing post-secondary college, we emphasize the importance of having a high degree of autonomy and flexibility in institutional operation and development. The self-financing sector, by its very nature, has to rely on student recruitment for its development, and successful recruitment of qualified students requires institutions to offer relevant courses of academically high standard. At the same time, institutions must be able to react to the needs of society/employers, and the desires of parents and students, rapidly and efficiently.

We are therefore of the view that regulations and requirements applied to the sector must not be overly restrictive, but allow for enough flexibility for institutions to respond to the changing needs of Hong Kong in a most effective and responsible manner. Those needs are very often not obviously apparent or are by their nature of short-term necessity. There are thus concerns about a system driven solely by manpower requirements. Post-secondary institutions must look much further ahead than this and even take a responsibility in driving societal development. This means that some things that they do might not appear immediately relevant, but will hopefully prove their worth over the longer run. It must also be noted that not all who wish to participate in tertiary education do it for vocational reasons, i.e. to qualify for particular employment. A not insignificant number take part to specially develop their own interests and all-round knowledge and capabilities. Too much concentration on ephemeral manpower requirements can be stifling insofar as societal development is concerned.

Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap. 320)

With regard to the Post-Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap. 320) enacted in 1960, we are given to understand that the Government has in previous years proposed the introduction of technical refinements with a view to removing obsolete provisions of the Ordinance. While we are appreciative of these efforts, we would like to urge the Government to undertake a systematic, comprehensive review of the Ordinance to further streamline the procedures, particularly for registration requirements and student admissions, so as to put in place a more

facilitating legislative framework for the healthy growth and development of self-financing post-secondary sector in Hong Kong. For a self-financing degree-granting institution, not only are the regulations slow, cumbersome and somewhat inflexible at the present time, but the accreditation agency sets its own charges for providing a service which is obligatory for the institutions, i.e. we pay for what we have to do, not necessarily for what we want!

Quality Assurance

Insofar as QA is concerned, we fully support the Higher Education Review Group's (HERG) notion that a robust QA system is essential in the post-secondary sector; that increased articulation pathways between various post-secondary providers, underpinned by a sound QA system, are desirable; and that such a system, if properly effected, can only enhance the international competitiveness of the post-secondary education sector in Hong Kong.

Regarding the Government's recommendation of establishing a single QA body to serve the whole post-secondary system in Hong Kong, we are of the view that only some facets of the current system, in which the QA of the publicly-funded institutions and the self-financing post-secondary institutions is managed by different agencies, work fairly well. This is because programmes offered by different types of institutions at different levels tend to have very different features and hence involve different issues and challenges; the current system of QA which aligns different agencies with different types of programmes is able to take into account the peculiar and unique features of these programmes. Thus, the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) is responsible for QA matters of degree programmes of UGC-funded institutions with self-accrediting status. Most of these are research-led institutions and the important nexus between research and teaching must be emphasized in the QA process. The Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC), on the other hand, reviews the quality of self-financing sub-degree programmes offered by the UGC-funded institutions, and these activities are dominated by teaching. Here, the quality of content and pedagogy must be emphasized in the quality review. The accreditation of all non-self-accrediting institutions is the responsibility of The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ). These institutions will change rapidly in emphasis as they grow, and perhaps are the most difficult to handle insofar as QA is concerned.

However, as a self-financing institution, we are particularly concerned that different regulatory frameworks and QA practices for different categories of institutions might not be conducive to the sustainable development of the self-financing sector. For instance, the self-financing institutions without self-accrediting status have to go through HKCAAVQ for programme accreditation and validation, which is often a long, tedious and inflexible process. As compared to their UGC-funded counterparts who can initiate programmes at their own

discretion, the self-financing institutions might not have the ability to respond in a timely fashion to changing demands by offering new programmes that suit the needs of society, thus hampering the development and even survival of those institutions in general. Another important aspect is how to maintain the quality of programmes across the sector given that the QA methodologies currently adopted by different QA agencies are somewhat inconsistent and confusing in nature. HKCAAVQ, for example, basically looks at issues of programme initiation and conception before delivery; QAC, on the other hand, mainly emphasizes the QA process of the institutions rather than the actual quality of the programmes. The QA methods employed by different agencies could be better integrated to ensure regulatory consistency for different education providers, as recommended by the HERG. Additionally, it is noted in the HERG report that there are concerns about the capability of self-financing institutions to develop and maintain a high quality system. We share these concerns, but believe that, if given sufficient time and resources, these institutions should be able to establish and monitor their QA mechanism independently, just like their counterparts in the UGC-funded sector.

As a conclusion, we support the recommendation of establishing a single oversight body for all post-secondary institutions to co-ordinate the QA activities presently handled by QAC, JQRC and HKCAAVQ, in order to ensure a better level of consistency in QA across Hong Kong's tertiary education sector. By setting up such an oversight body, we hope that QA of programmes offered by all post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong can be conducted within an integrated and coherent regulatory framework, which is instrumental to the healthy development of the sector. This would hopefully ensure much better transfer of 'good practice' both within and between the different types of institutions, one of the major goals of the QA systems. Likewise, looking from the outside, for example as an international student, there would be greater belief in the robust nature of the QA process if it was seen to operate as a single system. None of the present QA agencies can do the job well for all parts of the sector.

Professor John Malpas
President
Centennial College

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