



JOINT QUALITY REVIEW COMMITTEE

The Gate-keeping Role of Joint Quality Review Committee for the Self-financed Sub-degree Sector

**A Paper for Submission to
the Panel on Education of Legislative Council
for the Meeting on
Self-financed Sub-degree Education
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Paper for Legislative Council Education Panel

Meeting on 18 March 2014

(for agenda item “Issues related to the governance and regulation of the self-financing post-secondary sector”)

“The Gate-keeping Role of Joint Quality Review Committee for the Self-financed Sub-degree Sector”

1. Introduction: Role of Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC)

1.1 **Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC) is an independent External Quality Assurance body** established by the Heads of Universities Committee in 2005, to provide a quality assurance framework for the Self-financed Sub-degree (SFSD) programmes offered by the UGC-funded institutions.

1.2 JQRC conducts reviews of the institutions under its remit in an independent, fair, and transparent manner, using external experts on its review panels. The independence of JQRC is further guaranteed through the appointment of external members on the JQRC Academic Council which oversees its review activities, and also the presence of Education Bureau observers on the JQRC Board of Directors and its Academic Council.

1.3 JQRC provides oversight of the Quality Assurance (QA) of the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units under its remit through two routes:

- **Conducting Institutional Review** - using peer review panels and site visits, reviews the institutional and programme arrangements and QA processes for SFSD

programmes at each of the institutions. Issues examined include *governance structure, academic planning, QA policies, programme approval and delivery, student admission and assessment, staffing and resources, student support services*, among others. The Institutional Review is followed up by the submission of **Interim Reports** from the institutions.

- **Vetting and endorsing SFSD programmes for placement on the Qualifications Register** of the Qualifications Framework (QF) – with reference to the Generic Level Descriptors of the QF.
- 1.4 JQRC has completed the first cycle of Institutional Review at the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units (SSPUs) of its eight member institutions, followed by the review of Interim Reports from the SSPUs; and has vetted and endorsed/ re-endorsed over 2,500 Self-financed Sub-degree (SFSD) programmes for the Qualifications Register.
 - 1.5 JQRC will continue to work closely with the other QA bodies and with government for further refinement to the present system.

2. The Self-financed Sub-degree Sector

- 2.1 Self-financed Sub-degree (SFSD) programmes are offered through two types of institutions:
 - At the continuing education divisions and community colleges of the UGC-funded institutions, which are Self-accrediting
 - At the Non Self-accrediting institutions
- 2.2 SFSD programmes include Associate Degree and Higher Diploma programmes which are at level 4 of the Qualifications Framework (QF). Member institutions of JQRC offer around

89% of Associate Degrees, and around 54% of Higher Diploma programmes in Hong Kong. (Figures for 2012/13)

- 2.3 SFSD programmes also include lower level programmes from level 1 to level 3 of the QF.

3. Current QA Arrangements for the Self-financed Sub-degree Sector

- 3.1 There are currently three External Quality Assurance (QA) bodies overseeing higher education/sub-degree education in Hong Kong.

- i) **Quality Assurance Council (QAC)** of the University Grants Committee (UGC) oversees the quality of degree-level provision at the UGC-funded institutions through a process of Audit;
- ii) **Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC)** conducts Reviews on the quality of Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units (SSPUs) at the UGC-funded institutions;
- iii) **Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ)** conducts accreditation for institutions and programmes at the Non Self-accrediting institutions at both degree and sub-degree level.

The division of labour among the three QA bodies **recognizes the difference in maturity of institutions**, and the need for different approaches in quality assurance. There is the use of the audit/review model for the more mature **Self-accrediting** institutions, while the **Non Self-accrediting** institutions are required to obtain approval (to offer programmes) through external accreditation.

Comparability in QA Processes

- 3.2 Despite the difference in QA approach, **JQRC operates with the same rigour and independence as the other External QA Bodies in Hong Kong**, and the well-established External QA bodies in other parts of the world. All three QA bodies in Hong Kong adopt a **peer review process** following international models of appointing academic and professional peers to conduct independent reviews.
- 3.3 For the **Self-accrediting institutions**, the creation of QAC and JQRC has added further externality to the QA processes of the institutions --- there is already a rigorous internal process of quality assurance and programme approval, prior to the institutions undergoing external audit by QAC (for degree level provision), or reviews by JQRC (for SFSD programmes).
- 3.4 Rigorous **internal QA processes** are adopted for the Self-financed Sub-degree (SFSD) programmes of the UGC institutions. The same authority (e.g. the University Senate) -- which is responsible for degree awards -- has responsibility for the SFSD programmes, which lead to awards of the University/Institution, or awards of the Community Colleges which are part of the University/Institution.

Comparability in Standard

- 3.5 **In conducting reviews, JQRC maintains comparability of standards** through the following:
 - Use of common benchmarks - Comparability in standard is guaranteed by use of common benchmarks - e.g. the **Common Descriptors for Associate Degree/Higher Diploma programmes**, and the **Generic Level Descriptors** of the Qualifications Framework (QF). JQRC applies these

common benchmarks and also ensures that institutions adopt the standards in their programme design and review.

- Collaboration and exchange - JQRC works closely with government and the other QA bodies in monitoring the quality, and formulating policies for SFSD programmes -- through the **Liaison Committee on Quality Assurance (LCQA)**, comprising the Education Bureau (EDB), QAC, HKCAAVQ, and JQRC.
- Appointing academic and professional experts - JQRC draws experts from the academic and professional community in Hong Kong for the formation of review panels, to ensure that the required standards in QA and comparable programme standards are applied.

4. The Development of Quality Assurance (QA) for Higher Education/Sub-degree Education in Hong Kong

Different QA systems for two types of Institutions

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 **We see the advantages of an integration** of the different quality assurance approaches, and the model of one QA oversight body in the longer term. However, in the meantime, we are mindful of 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.
- 4.3 With the growth of private degree-awarding institutions, and private providers offering lower-level vocational programmes, **it might be appropriate to maintain this distinction between two types of institutions for the near future, subject to different external Quality Assurance methodologies - audit/review for the Self-accrediting institutions, and accreditation for the Non Self-accrediting institutions.**
- 4.4 We note at the same time the latest development in the establishment of a Tripartite Working Group to Plan for and Oversee **“External Quality Audits”** on the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Operations of the UGC- funded institutions, and its work to establish a mechanism for quality assurance. This would no doubt strengthen the external element in the existing oversight of Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units, which is being provided through the Joint Quality Review Committee. This might also be **a step forward in planning for future integration of the different QA methodologies /QA bodies.**
- 4.5 **However, we hope this does not mean that in the meantime, the distinction between Self-accrediting and Non Self-accrediting institutions is being removed.** Self-accrediting institutions should retain their autonomy in offering study programmes without the approval of external accreditation.
- 4.6 Thus the planned **“external quality audits”** upon the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Operations of UGC-funded institutions is **a positive development following the tradition of the “audit” model** for the Self-accrediting institutions. **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.

- 4.7 Any future integration of the QA agencies would require a greater understanding of the processes employed by each of the quality assurance agencies and their effectiveness upon institutions at different levels of maturity. As the UGC argues, this might 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.

5. Planned Improvements and Looking Forward

- 5.1 JQRC is continuing with its monitoring role and stands ready to assist the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Units (SSPUs) further improve their internal Quality Assurance (QA) systems and also increase transparency and accountability. There is an obvious need to further respond to concerns in the community and to imperfections in the system.
- 5.2 Noting the planned “external audits” upon the Self-financed Sub-degree Programme Operations of UGC-funded institutions, JQRC will plan to support the work of the Tripartite Working Group. This new development might lead to a more transparent system of Quality Assurance for the self-financed sub-degree sector, and perhaps also a more integrated and optimal system for the sector in the longer term.
- 5.3 Although JQRC has also been planning ahead for the **second cycle of Institutional Review (IR)**, this would be put on hold pending the outcome of developments in “External Audit”. The Second IR would be conducted when considered appropriate by the Heads of Universities Committee and in line with these other developments.

- 5.4 JQRC's current proposals for The Second IR intend to focus more on the effectiveness of internal QA systems at the institutions, and identify special themes and issues in the light of past experience and concerns expressed by the community.
- 5.5 JQRC will also work closely with the other QA bodies, such as the **Quality Assurance Council** of the UGC, and learn from their experience and review methodology.
- 5.6 JQRC believes that its external review of the SSPUs has led to improvements in the internal QA of institutions. Feedback on the **performance of sub-degree graduates** has also been encouraging. The most recent survey on employers showed that 93% of respondents found the performance of sub-degree graduates "average or above". According to surveys conducted by institutions in 2012, **53%** of sub-degree graduates went for further study, while **42%** took up employment. (*EDB Press release, 20 Feb. 2014*)

Joint Quality Review Committee
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