

Polytechnic University Staff Association

Submission to LegCo Education Panel

(13 May 99)

Council of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU Council)

- (1) The PolyU Council is the governing body of the University. PUSA is registered with HKSAR Government as a trade union. There is no PUSA representation on the PolyU Council.
- (2) Two members of the Council are elected by eligible staff of the University. At present, these two staff-elected Council members are heads of departments.

Co-operation between PolyU Senior Management and PUSA

- (3) Co-operation between PolyU Senior Management and PUSA has improved considerably in the past two years. In particular, the PolyU President and Vice-President (Institutional Advancement) have kept PUSA informed about various developments in the University.
- (4) There are regular formal meetings between PolyU Senior Management/ Personnel Office and PUSA through the PUSA Consultative Group (教職員協會諮詢委員會), where broad staff concerns and specific staff grievances are discussed. There are also frequent informal contacts between Personnel Office and PUSA on various aspects of staff's conditions of service.
- (5) Nevertheless, some PUSA Officers and also PUSA Executive Council Members (particularly those with relatively fixed working hours are concerned that the heads of their departments might not be entirely supportive of their involvement in PUSA activities. This is now a serious potential problem as heads of departments play a central role in determining staff's employment and promotion prospects.

Other Channels of Communication between Staff and Senior Management

- (6) Outside the academic structure (Faculty Boards, Senate, etc), the PolyU has a number of official channels for staff to convey their views to Senior Management. These channels include the Non-Heads of Department Consultative Group (非部門主管諮詢委員會) and the General Grade & Ancillary Staff Consultative Group (一般職級及輔助員工諮詢委員會).

- (7) As can be expected, staff's views on the effectiveness of these channels vary considerably. Some staff members feel that these committees are useful channels for them to air their concerns and grievances. Other staff members feel that these channels are not effective.

Pressure on Staff due to Budget Cuts

- (8) Budget cuts over the years have brought considerable staff anxieties. An increasing number of staff members are worried about their employment prospects.
- (9) Staff members have reported experience of intensified office politics within departments, with colleagues trying to grab resources in order to safeguard their jobs.
- (10) Staff members have also reported that they are under intense pressure to take up a defensive stance when their department heads, colleagues or students make any comments which might be regarded as complaints against their professional competence.
- (11) Staff are particularly worried that comments that might be seen as negative are recorded in their files, which are then later interpreted in an out-of-context manner and used as a weapon to terminate their employment.

Devolution of Power to Department Heads

- (12) Decision-making powers on departmental matters, including staff performance appraisals and renewal of staff's contracts of employment, resides effectively at the level of the department head. Most of the staff grievances that came to PUSA's notice in the last two years appear to have arisen from the way department heads exercise their powers.
- (13) Department heads are themselves under heavy pressure to manage the budget cut and at the same time raise work productivity in visible ways and within short durations of time. Some department heads might find it necessary to take harsh actions in order to achieve what they perceive PolyU Senior Management expect them to do. When not handled properly and with sensitivity, such harsh actions often cause injustices, damage staff morale, and have a negative impact on teaching and learning quality.

Non-renewal of Staff Contracts of Employment

- (14) One particular grievance has been the non-renewal of staff's contracts of employment so that a department can change its future directions.
- (15) This is particularly unfair to staff members who have served the PolyU for a considerable number of years, often contributing the prime years of their lives. In the case of academic staff, it is also extremely difficult to see why certain subject-teaching jobs should disappear suddenly, considering that academic courses do not normally disappear suddenly and the level of government funding does not fluctuate drastically.
- (16) PUSA is of the view that in these cases, the staff members concerned should be given at least an additional contract of employment so that they can develop new skills to suit new departmental needs, or make better preparations for change of employment.
- (17) The PolyU President has assured PUSA that the number of these contract non-renewal cases each year is extremely small, and that PolyU Senior Management reviews each and every case in a very careful and humanistic manner.
- (18) The good intention notwithstanding, PUSA is concerned that PolyU Senior Management may not be able to fully consider all the relevant facts related to these cases and may not wish to interfere with departmental operations.

Appeals and Grievance Committee

- (19) There is PUSA representation on the Appeals and Grievance Committee, but this committee does not deal with contract non-renewal cases.
- (20) Current procedures are such that staff grievances are handled in the first instance at the department heads' level. For various reasons, staff may be reluctant to confront their department heads for fear that this would make matters worse.
- (21) On the other hand, attempts to avoid "stirring up troubles" early through the Appeals and Grievance Committee might eventually contribute to contract non-renewals, by which time the Appeals and Grievance Committee becomes irrelevant.
- (22) In other words, while there is apparently a policy of goodwill within the PolyU Senior Management, there is no formal mechanism for contract non-renewals and related grievances to be examined openly and independently.