

VOCATIONAL TRAINING COUNCIL

**A MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO THE UNION SUBMISSIONS
TO THE LEGCO PANEL ON MANPOWER**

Preamble

In responding to the submissions by some of the unions in the VTC, management places on record that it believes that whilst VTC staff are entitled, and indeed encouraged to provide views about change and developments, it is, however, unusual for unions to comment publicly on academic policy and operational matters which do not affect staff working conditions. It is the senior management, not the unions, that is responsible for the implementation of the policies approved by Council.

2. The VTC has procedures and mechanisms for wide consultation. For example, for its education provision, academic policy decisions are made by the VTC's Institute of Vocational Education (IVE) Academic Board which has 78 members, including elected members, representing all grades of IVE staff and students.

3. The VTC management, over the past three years has been required by its Council and Government to put into effect a far-reaching and significant restructuring and reorganisation of its education and training provision. This was necessary to make the VTC as effective and efficient as possible. In undertaking this, operational systems and academic management have had to be improved, tightened up and staff made more accountable. The VTC has been seeking a greater commitment to quality and a sharper and less traditional culture for its professional staff. Inevitably, a number of the measures which are and have been introduced may be unpopular to some staff.

4. Furthermore, it should be appreciated that the comments provided by the unions, particularly about the education provision have not necessarily been made within the context of the policy objectives, nor are they, necessarily, accurate or representative.

5. Before providing a detailed response to the three papers the VTC provides a background to the changes implemented during the past three years.

Changing the VTC

6. The Government commissioned Segal Quince and Wicksteed (Asia) Limited (SQW) to conduct a "Strategic and Organisational Review of the Vocational Training

Council” in 1996. The Review was highly critical of the VTC and made a number of recommendations to improve efficiency and to satisfy better the manpower needs of Hong Kong. The present Executive Director, Professor Lee Ngok, was appointed in March 1997 with the remit to address the issues highlighted in the Review, to initiate changes, and to improve significantly the VTC’s operational, academic and training effectiveness. This resulted in the ‘VTC Strategic Plan: 1997-2001’ which introduced the concept of the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE) and recommended reviews of the Apprenticeship Scheme and the utilisation of resources. In addition, it recommended new initiatives to improve the quality, flexibility and employability of the VTC’s graduates while maintaining minimum unit costs. The Plan was discussed on many occasions with Council Members, the SEM, and all senior academic staff of the VTC. After incorporating modifications resulting from these discussions, the Plan was accepted for implementation by Council at a meeting held in July, 1997.

Consultation and implementation

7. The implementation of IVE, was considered in detail by the academic staff of the former Technical Colleges (TCs) and the former Technical Institutes (TIs). Exhaustive discussions took place at departmental level, at senior academic management level through many meetings, a two-day Retreat and at two “mass” meetings attended by three to four hundred academic staff held in July 1997 and February 1998. All stages of the implementation of IVE, along with all other major initiatives, were also agreed by the VTC’s Caucus (a committee comprising the senior Directorate and Academic staff) before being placed before Council. Upon Council’s approval, the implementation of IVE was effected over an 18-month period, again with consultation at all levels. In addition, all of IVE’s academic policies were approved, before implementation, by IVE’s Academic Board. (Before academic policies, such as the common first year, are placed before the Academic Board they are considered in detail by an Academic Policy Committee which is composed largely of elected VTC academic members of staff.)

8. It can be seen from the foregoing example that there was extensive staff discussion and involvement at every stage of the recent re-structuring of the VTC. However, although union members in their capacity as academic or administrative members of the VTC would have been consulted on all academic and administrative matters, the unions *per se* would not have been consulted as these matters are outside their remit. Consequently, they were only (formally) consulted on changes which might affect the working conditions of staff such as salary structures and working hours.

Facing change

9. It is understandable that a small proportion of staff may be against the changes being made within the VTC, as they are concerned over an apparent loss of status, the pressure of extra work or an increase in accountability. To understand this better and the problems associated with the integration of the two former TCs and seven former TIs to

form IVE, it is necessary to understand the situation that existed at the time of the SQW (paragraph 6 refers). At that time, although both the TCs and TIs came under the Executive Director they were operated as two independent operations. The separation was exacerbated by the fact that the TCs employed academically and professionally better qualified staff on higher salaries and offered higher level courses than the TIs. This, coupled with the fact that the TCs were established with better resources than the TIs served only to consolidate the division. However, despite their difference the TCs and TIs both offered courses with similar entrance requirements. This issue was addressed in the "Strategic Plan 1997-2001" by the introduction of IVE with the objectives to improve the academic standards and course provision in the TIs and to focus the TCs on their mission to provide sub-degree qualifications. In addition, integrating and rationalising the education provision was implemented to improve the overall quality of courses, facilitate a more flexible, cohesive system of course provision responsive to economic needs, and facilitate a more effective use of resources to maintain minimum unit costs. All these objectives were identified by the SQW review.

10. It is appreciated that there are many ways in which the problems associated with the former restrictive and outmoded academic structure of the VTC could have been resolved. For example, unlike other educational institutions the VTC offers two types of full-time course to cater for secondary 5 graduates; the two-year Diploma and the three-year Higher Diploma courses. Naturally, the vast majority of students prefer to study on the Higher Diploma courses, but the numbers are restricted by Government for resource reasons. This sets up the challenge of ensuring that all qualified secondary 5 graduates can maximise their opportunities to get on the most advanced course which suits their capabilities. The way in which the VTC has handled this is to provide all students entry to the first year of a discipline specific common D and HD course, and to select the most able students for promotion to the second year of a HD. This also had the advantage of providing greater choice. Such an academic structure, besides giving all entrants the opportunity to compete for HD places, is cost effective and provides a basis for future development. It should also be borne in mind that under this structure the VTC has improved significantly staff development opportunities and provided extensive teaching and learning support that did not previously exist.

11. The example provided, relating to the implementation of IVE, is one of the many changes being made to the VTC's education and training provision. However, underpinning all the changes are the facts, supported by the reviews carried out in July 1996 and 1997, that the VTC's previous arrangements were inefficient and outmoded. The VTC cannot go back to them and must evolve, develop; and reorganise to become a vocational education and training organisation which can respond properly to the demands and requirements of the twenty-first century. Positive feedback, as reported by the Technical Institutes Teachers Association, is that the calibre of students attracted to the new VTC courses has been significantly higher over the last year.

Response to the Submission by the Federation of Trade Unions in the VTC

The academic system of IVE

12. Management reiterates that it is outside the remit of the unions to make formal comments about academic policy, unless these relate to staff working conditions. Nevertheless, responses to the comments which have been made are given below.

13. The common first year approach is designed to be less examination-oriented than the previous system. Staff are encouraged to introduce more continuous assessment and not to over examine.

14. It is accepted that the new system introduces greater competition amongst students. However, this is inevitable because the new system introduces more opportunities for the students for which they must compete.

15. There is no evidence that greater competition between students leads to them providing less mutual support in their studies.

16. It is incorrect to state that students cannot choose a course according to their own interests. On enrolment they have a wide choice of courses and subjects.

17. It has always been the case that if students find they are following a course in which they are not interested and wish to pursue another, that it may be difficult to transfer. This is not a consequence of the new system.

18. Examination results have always been important and students will always seek the most effective way of passing. However, the new courses have been designed to contain more student-centred learning. This is generally more structured and less 'fact' based than previously.

19. The unification and rationalisation of courses has the objective of improving the teaching packages to enable the teaching staff to motivate the students better.

20. There is evidence that many students are more motivated to learn with the new system. Some Discipline Leaders have commented that the students have never worked so hard.

21. The system should not be any more examination orientated than the previous one.

22. The time and effort spent in rationalising and unifying courses was a necessary development to make the VTC's education provision more effective (staff were taken off teaching duties to accomplish this). One objective of the redesign of the courses is to improve teaching quality.

No cancellation of new system; no reverting to old system

23. Whilst the new academic system incorporating the common first year is being implemented a modification to earmark students as ‘Diploma’ or ‘Higher Diploma’ from the outset has been introduced. It must be reiterated that this is not a cancellation of the new system and it is not reverting to the old system. New systems are monitored all the time and modifications to them often result from staff and student feedback. The change was not unusual, neither was it hasty.

24. The surveys in April and May 1999 about the new system were considered by the management to have been launched too early as the new system was not implemented until September 1999. Management is unable to accept the validity of surveys carried out about a system before it has been implemented.

25. Management does not accept that the new system “has caused serious problems”. Any new system has to settle down and be given a chance to succeed. All new systems should be subject to modification as the effectiveness of their operation is monitored. Such modifications do not necessarily represent faults, but often reflect improvements and evolution (paragraph 4).

26. Management notes the proposed Federation’s advice that it should listen to its front-line workers. However, it believes that it does indeed do this. Management does not refuse at any time to discuss a relevant issues with staff, or to meet union representatives and there is in existence a formal structure to ensure that this is achieved.

The role of the VTC in the education system of Hong Kong and its system of technical education and vocational training

27. The proposed Federation makes the point about a rearrangement of periods and working hours resulting from the introduction of the Foundation Diploma course. The two matters are not related. The rearrangement of periods and hours was necessary to use VTC resources more efficiently and responsibly and nothing to do with the introduction the Foundation Diploma. Previously, many of the seven former Technical Institute (TI) campuses operated teaching hours between 8.45 am to 4.10 pm during the day, often with a fixed one and half hour lunch break. This situation represented an obvious waste of accommodation and an archaic way of operating an educational institution and limited the availability of staff. Consequently, the hours were changed (requiring a change in periods).

28. It is important to realise that staff working hours were not increased, if anything, most members of staff have had their teaching hours reduced to allow them to spend more time on quality issues and the development of courses. Also, students do not have any increase in class hours, and in general there is a planned reduction to encourage more student centred learning. It is for the various campus managers to organise the timetables including student break-times.

29. The previous arrangements in the former TIs was like a school-culture. However, management is cognisant of the fact that the students have moved into an adult stage and is encouraging the development of a more substantial teaching and learning environment.

30. The ‘unhappy incident’ at the Tuen Mun campus to which the Federation refers was a student who attempted suicide. Management believes it entirely improper to link this event with the introduction of IVE. There is no evidence to suggest a link.

31. The formation of IVE and its name were widely discussed with staff over a period of 18 months. Regarding the latter, this was also discussed by Council in detail and Government advice was sought. The new name is becoming well-known and does not appear to be causing any confusion. The Federation’s comment in this context implies an undesirable wish to return to past practices.

The vocational training system

32. The management confirms that it will keep the unions informed of progress with discussions relating to the proposed redeployment of the Inspectors of Apprentices.

33. The management would point out that whilst the apprenticeship schemes and their arrangements are under review, due attention is being paid to the VTC’s responsibilities with regard to the provision of education and training for secondary 3 school-leavers.

34. The assumption that Basic Craft Course (BCC) students do not have an appropriate progression route is untrue. The BCC is promoted and designed to be a ‘terminal’, trade specific course. However, if secondary 3 school leavers have a priority for progression beyond a craft course, they could opt for the Certificate in Vocational Studies (CVS) instead of the BCC. Also, should a student wish to acquire (and be appropriate for) further education after a BCC, bridging arrangements may be made.

35. The Federation has some misunderstanding about the old and present progression routes and the Appendix illustrates the correct version. It can be seen that the time scales to achieve an Higher Certificate are much the same as previously.

36. The proposition that the BCC is extended to two years has been discussed briefly and can be considered further. While the VTC believes more basic vocational generic skills elements should be introduced into such courses, there are two major constraints. First, the resources to extend the course, and, secondly, the ambivalent attitude of some employers. Namely, requiring such skills but an (incorrect) suspicion that ‘generic’ means a drift away from a vocational focus.

Submission of the Association of Inspectors of Apprentices

37. There is no intention to do away with the Apprenticeship Scheme. The present proposal of deployment of IAs is simply in response to the diminishing member of apprentices.

38. The Training Boards and industry are being consulted about new “designated trades”, however, despite this only two new trades have been identified through VTC’s consultation with training boards/industry over the past 10 years. The VTC will continue to undertake such consultations.

39. Job placement and student counselling are not on the duty lists of the IAs. Other staff with the right expertise to undertake these tasks (e.g. student counsellors, placement officers, etc.) are available.

Submission by the Technical Education and Industrial Training Staff Association

The role of the VTC in the education system of Hong Kong and its system of technical education and vocational training

40. Management did not make the changes identified by the Association owing to the introduction of the Foundation Diploma. The (disciplines) subjects the VTC offers depends upon the requirements of industry. As the requirements in the mechanical engineering and textiles areas are declining so must the VTC adjust its provision for them.

41. The issue of periods is addressed in paragraph 27 of this paper.

42. As was stated previously, management considers it inappropriate to link the “unhappy” incident at Tuen Mun with changes in the VTC. There is no evidence of such a link.

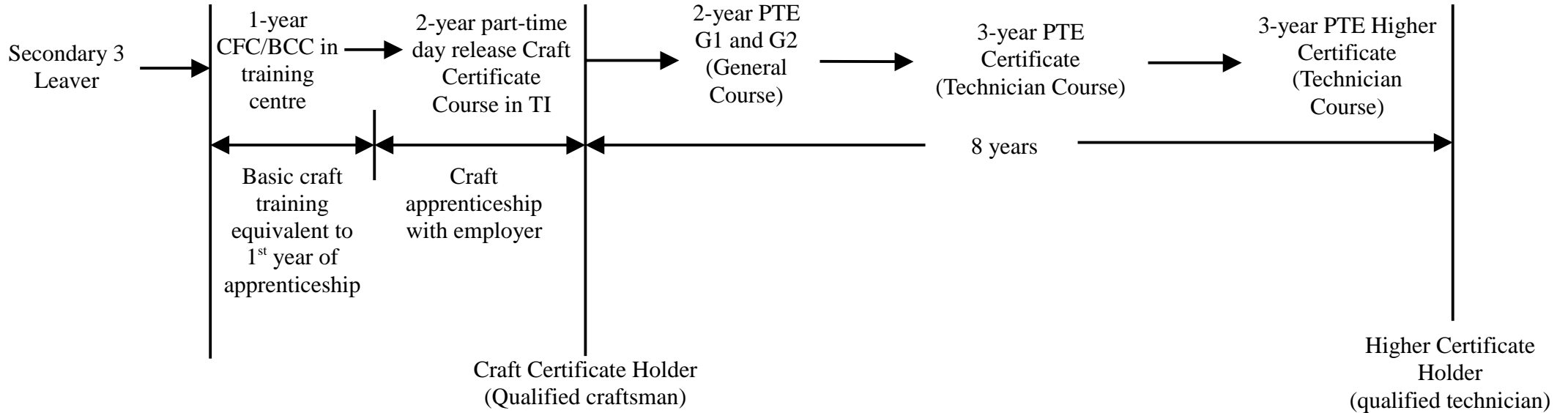
43. The development of IVE and its name have been addressed in paragraph 31 of this paper.

The vocational training system

44. Consultation with the AIA has been undertaken regarding the deployment of Inspectors of Apprentices. Now that Government has finalised the Abolition of Office arrangement, VTC will examine the feasibility of a package for its staff so that all inspectors can be formally consulted at the same time.

45. Management believes that the statement that civil servants staff associations have been discriminated against is incorrect. Due account has been taken of the Manpower Panel’s deliberation by the Council, which comprises representatives from industry, unions and Government departments. Considerable resources have been put into running training programmes for secondary 3 school-leavers; these include the Pre-employment Training programme, Certificate in Vocational Studies courses, additional training places in the electrical and mechanical trades, and the hotel trades. The newly launched IT Assistant Training course also provide opportunities for secondary 3 school-leavers.

Old Progression Route (Part-time evening basis) for Craft Certificate Holders



Present Progression Route (Part-time evening basis) for Craft Certificate Holders

