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May 23, 2006

The Honourable Mr Alan Leong Kah-kit, SC
Chairman
LegCo Subcommittee on West Kowloon Cultural District Development
Legislative Council Building
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Mr Leong,

Re: West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD)

I write in response to your committee's invitation to submit written views on the West Kowloon Cultural District development.

There is a necessary social agenda to West Kowloon, one that integrates arts and culture, education, ecology, architecture and landscape. The Academy is particularly interested in the educational and arts development aspects of the project. Whether or not one accepts that arts education can benefit society as a whole, or that it is a pre-requisite for the growth of creative industries, the importance of arts education to the future success of the West Kowloon Cultural District in developing cultural software alone is self-evident. The first priority of WKCD should be to further arts and cultural engagement among Hong Kong people, both as arts consumers and arts practitioners of the future.

The Academy has previously proposed to the Administration the inclusion at WKCD of a dual-role educational facility that would operate in the daytime as a specialist performing arts secondary school to prepare performers of the future for tertiary level performance training, and in the evenings and at weekends the school would become a centre for community arts education to enhance participation in, and appreciation of, the arts among a broad social cross-section of people.

Please find attached the rationale for such a facility, and why it should be located in WKCD. A detailed schedule of accommodation is also available, if members are interested.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Kevin Thompson
Director

cc Chief Secretary for Administration, the Hon. Mr Rafael Hui Si-yan, GBS JP
Secretary for Home Affairs, the Hon. Dr Patrick Ho Chi-ping
Secretary for Education and Manpower, Prof Arthur K.C. Li
Legislative Council Representative for the Functional Constituency of Sports,
Performing Arts, Culture and Publications, the Hon. Mr Timothy Fok GBS JP

HONG KONG ACADEMY FOR PERFORMING ARTS
PROPOSED PERFORMING ARTS HIGH SCHOOL AT
WEST KOWLOON CULTURAL DISTRICT

Introduction

The Academy has long held the view that more emphasis is needed on arts and culture within the primary and secondary school curricula to stimulate creativity and provided a balanced education. As the creative industries are now accelerating the pace of economic growth in developed countries, Hong Kong should be equipping its young citizens with the capacity for original thought that they will need to remain competitive in an increasingly global economy.

Unfortunately, the long overdue realignment of school curricula in favour of greater creative arts content is already encountering resistance and pressure to maintain the weighting of ‘mainstream’ subjects aligned with careers in business, engineering, medical science and so on. The final outcome may be a marginal shift constraining Hong Kong’s development as a centre for cultural excellence, the complementary dimension in its aspiration to be a world city. In this regard the WKCD cultural facilities will be a bold affirmation, but the district’s future viability will depend as much on audience development as it will on the training of new artistic talent. While the former will be stimulated by an improvement in curricular arts content, the latter needs a more targeted and intensive approach.

Now in its 22nd year of operation, the Academy has achieved academic and performing standards that are, in the case of a few gifted individuals, entirely comparable to standards achieved at the world’s leading conservatoires, and this is best illustrated by success achieved in international awards and competitions by Academy students and graduates. However, the number of students to achieve such standards is relatively small compared with similar overseas institutions, the limiting factor being the under-development of students’ early potential prior to entering the Academy.

Dance

In the world of dance, it has universally recognised that early commencement of intensive physical skills training is required to produce professional dancers. This is especially true of dance training in the styles of classical ballet and Chinese dance. Renowned schools such as the Paris Opera School, Royal Danish Ballet School, London’s Royal Ballet School, Beijing Dance Academy and Bolshoi Ballet School, to name a few, all offer intensive training for children. Commencement ranges from eight to twelve years of age. Early motor skills development and constant attention to developing flexibility and coordination are needed for dancers to reach the technical proficiency required by the world’s top dance companies. Specialized schooling that combines a general education

with specific skills development is needed in Hong Kong if the Academy is to provide an adequate feeder system for Hong Kong's three flagship professional dance companies.

Although many Hong Kong-trained dancers are working professionally throughout the world, Hong Kong has yet to produce an outstanding international dancer. The lack of a suitable training facility for gifted young dancers in Hong Kong and the propensity for young dancers to suspend extracurricular activities to focus on secondary school examinations from form 4 to 7, both mitigate against Hong Kong producing dance stars. A fully integrated professional training school for children from the age of 12 (at the very latest) is essential in Hong Kong's quest to produce world class artists.

Music

In educational planning around the world, it is recognised that training for a life in music has to start at an early age. This is not a new idea - it has been an essential part of the education of musicians for centuries. It came into conflict with educational systems when universal education became the accepted norm and governments started specifying the content of curricula within a State, as it became clear that the best child musicians needed to spend more time at their musical studies than was available within the standardised curriculum. In many countries around the world since the 1950's this issue has been addressed by setting up special schools for musically talented children, where they can be nurtured in an environment of small classes and a specially tailored educational programme that allows time and space for their musical studies, as well as carefully planned academic courses that provide sufficient general education for a well educated individual's life.

The USSR was probably the first state to systematise the training of musicians and dancers, and the huge success that resulted from these special schools was copied in Europe and America in the 1960's and 70's. The basic standard of training of performers rose extraordinarily, and the idea caught on in the Far East in Japan, Korea and China, to such an extent that it would now be unthinkable in these countries that a brilliant young pianist or violinist would be expected to learn their instrument in their spare time, while spending all their daylight hours studying conventional school subjects. This system of music tuition is now an accepted part of the education system in all countries where there is awareness that art and culture are not just peripheral elements of interest only to a minority, but are a vital part of a rich society and a quality of life second to none.

The benefits of this approach are very clearly illustrated when the Academy auditions string players who have studied in China at specialist secondary schools. Most of them are at a far higher level of technical proficiency than their contemporaries in Hong Kong who apply to enter the Academy, and in the case of the majority of the local students, it is by then too late for them to catch up. The finely developed motor skills required to be a top quality performer on a musical instrument have to be developed at an earlier age than tertiary education, and it will only be when Hong Kong has a specialist school to give its talent the chance to flourish, that it will be possible to regularly produce top quality musicians.

Drama

The need for early development of dramatic actors arises in the training of performers for musical theatre. The objective is to develop the so-called 'triple threat' performer – one who can sing, dance and act with consummate skill in all three disciplines. Developing these skills in parallel requires longer and more intensive training than rising to a similar level of competence in any single discipline. Accordingly, it is not possible to squeeze the required preparation into four or five years of tertiary education. On the other hand, there is little point in coaching singers before their voices have broken, so training should commence at senior secondary level. It is desirable to base musical theatre training in a school where dance and music are taught at a high standard.

Technical arts

Applicants from local schools have very limited knowledge of Technical Arts when they first enter the Academy. It is evident that prior exposure to any form of technical theatre environment has been scant. Students have been recruited mostly on the basis of their art training (in art classes), and for some, on limited drama club experience. In both cases, such training or experience has been largely unguided by theatre professionals. Many candidates had never seen a live theatre performance, let alone gone backstage to be given any notion of how the technical areas operate.

The Academy is therefore obliged to use the first two years of study (the Diploma programme) just to introduce the basics of Technical Arts to newcomers. This time could be better spent in tackling broader areas of technical arts training and producing a better pool of theatre technical professionals with wider knowledge in a shorter time.

The solution – a dedicated performing arts high school

The difficulty in recruiting sufficient numbers of talented students from the output of the existing secondary education system is reflected in the performing standards of Academy graduates. To catch up with arts educational practice around the world, a specialist performing arts high school is needed to prepare gifted young performers in dance, drama and music for careers in the performing arts. The school will also develop creative talents in theatre technical arts alongside the performing disciplines. A total population of 450 students is envisaged.

Educational philosophy and ethos

The school will be open to all, irrespective of financial or social background. Pupils will apply to the School between the ages of 12 and 16 and entry will be solely through audition. Students accepted will necessarily be considered capable of undergoing a demanding performing and academic programme.

Students will spend half of each day studying the general curriculum, and the other half studying specialist subjects and practice related to their specific discipline. By arranging Forms 1, 3 and 5 to study the general curriculum in the mornings, and Forms 2, 4 and 6 to do so in the afternoons, the requisite number of general classrooms, specialist studios, music practice rooms, workshops and laboratories is effectively halved.

Upon leaving the school at the age of 18, the majority of students will compete for places at the Academy, having already established long-term working relationships with Academy faculty. The school will be unique in Hong Kong, not only in the range of arts covered but also in the opportunity for seamless integration of young performing and technical artists into the life and curriculum of the senior Academy. Students will be able to develop their talents at an early age within a specialist school environment and therefore go on to achieve greater success in their future careers.

Pre-training of technical arts students under a career-oriented curriculum will not only enable them to develop the technical skills they will need in future, but studying alongside dance, drama and music students will instill in them a deeper understanding and aesthetic appreciation of these art forms.

Through its close connection with the Academy, the school will enjoy regular visits by distinguished international artists to give consultation lessons and master-classes.

The school will also have access to the Academy's existing depth of experience in the training and education of young gifted performers. Its proximity to the flagship performing companies resident at WKCD will provide encouragement and stimulus to the students while ensuring strong links with the needs of the profession. Above all, it will offer the opportunity to work and perform with other students of similar calibre. Talented children need the stimulus and friendship of other gifted children as well as access to specialist teachers.

Why WKCD?

WKCD provides an ideal setting for a specialist arts high school, as the students' young creative minds will be challenged and stimulated by the vibrant cultural activity around them, and the opportunity for interaction with guest teachers drawn from the resident performing companies will encourage students to aim higher in terms of developing their own abilities. It also provides a convenient funding framework.

After school hours and on weekends, the Academy's extra-mural studies unit EXCEL will offer a broad spectrum of part time arts courses using the high school's specialist facilities, thereby fulfilling the role of a community-level educational resource at WKCD as well as maximizing the return on investment in the specialist training facilities. The Academy will also operate outreach community projects for children of all ages and abilities at the school.

Financial arrangements

The Academy Council has formally requested that Government include a purpose-built performing arts school in the revised specification for the West Kowloon Cultural District. It is anticipated that within the WKCD's financial arrangements the statutory body would fund the design and construction costs of the school, as well as undertake an in-kind contribution to its running costs, i.e. to take up responsibility for the maintenance of the building fabric, operation and maintenance of its E&M plant, as well as provision of security, cleaning and landscaping services.

The cost of providing tuition will be met primarily from student fees, with assistance from privately sponsored bursaries in the case of talented individuals from families under financial hardship. Income from EXCEL courses at the school will contribute to funding the recurrent costs and help to maintain fees at an affordable level.

Conclusion

By starting arts training at an earlier age and allowing the intensive development of performing skills to continue alongside academic studies throughout six years of secondary education, the dedicated arts high school will significantly improve the standard of students at entry level to the Academy's tertiary courses, and thereby improve further the quality of Academy graduates.

Along with the senior Academy, the school will be a centre of excellence for the performing arts. Located in the heart of West Kowloon Cultural District, the performing arts high school will be at the forefront of arts education in Hong Kong and the region.