

Special Meeting of the LegCo Panel on Education on 28 February 2007

Speech by Professor Paul Morris
President, The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Mr. Chairman and Members of the LegCo Panel of Education,

I would like to very sincerely thank you for the concern and interest you have taken in the very difficult situation at the HKIEd. Clearly the interest of this panel has contributed to the decision to establish a Commission of Inquiry by the Government. I welcome that inquiry as a public exposure of the truth has the potential to allow the HKIEd to move out of its current impasse and where it can fully develop to achieve the purposes for which it was established, namely to provide Hong Kong with a high quality professional teaching force. The inquiry also has the potential to re-establish the importance of academic and institutional autonomy in Hong Kong. This is especially critical for the HKIEd which was established from the former Government Colleges of Education for the purpose of creating an autonomous teacher education institution which was not constrained by the limits of its being operated by Government and its staff being civil servants. The hope when the HKIEd was established was that its staff would engage in greater scholarship and actively contribute to public debates on educational matters.

As you are aware, a threat of legal action hangs over Professor Bernard Luk, and by association myself, as to any comments which might be made at this meeting. Given that this meeting is not covered by legal immunity, I have no choice but to reserve my evidence in support of Professor Luk's statement for the Commission of Inquiry.

Over the last five years, the HKIEd has made great strides and transformed itself. But the task of upgrading has been extremely difficult given two factors. Firstly, the constant pressure to merge and secondly, the attempts to limit the expression of views by academic staff.

Forced Merger and Institutional Autonomy

Before proceeding, let me make it clear. There are very different and legitimate views on the pros and cons of a merger. Government officials have as much right to hold and express views on this matter as anyone else. It should

however be noted that there is and never has been a government policy to merge the HKIED. In fact the last public utterance on this matter was made by the previous Chief Executive who stated on 6 December 2003 that there were no plans to merge any institutions. It is also the “formal” position of the HKIED Council that they do not seek a merger. **The problem arises when those who control resources use their power to achieve their desired outcome.** The famous quotes of “I have the absolute power” and “Starting with diplomacy, and following up with troops” are apt descriptions of HKIED’s predicament in this saga.

Academic Autonomy

It is also appropriate for government officials to hold and publicly express different views from academics on many or all aspects of education and related policies. **It is however not appropriate to put pressure on their seniors to sack them or exclude them from external funding because of their views.** I have been under such pressure and I have seen it as my job to protect and shield colleagues from such pressures. To do otherwise would be tantamount to acting on behalf of the Government.

The Senior Management’s unwillingness to either engage in a full merger or to silence its staff has clearly had a serious and very negative impact on all aspects of our development which has effectively been controlled by EMB. At times this has amounted to attempts to undermine the HKIED’s development. The severe cuts experienced by HKIED in student numbers and funding allocation in recent years can be summarised by the unforgettable quote “I’ll remember this, you will pay”.

Unique or Shared Experience

I would also suggest that the experience of HKIED and how it has been treated by EMB is not unique and more acute. Others who have voiced dissenting views from EMB have been dealt with on the basis of the adage that “if you are not for us, you are our enemy”. Accordingly, there has been a general perception in much of the education sector that to express criticism or concern about government policies would result in consequences for the individual or the institution they represent. A common strategy employed to deal with dissenting voices has been to mount ad personam attacks on the individuals and question their personal integrity.

Since staff at the HKIED have brought up incidents of interference by EMB,

various groups and individuals have come forward to share with the media their own similar experiences with EMB. In today's meeting and a planned separate session in April at this Panel's meeting, I believe academics from other tertiary institutions will be able to express their views on academic autonomy. It is a clear reflection that the experience of the Institute is not unique.

Motive

I would like to express my regret at the attempt to undermine Professor Luk's integrity by suggesting that his motive was merely linked to creating a controversy in the run up to the election for Chief Executive because he has a link with the Civic Party. If people question the credibility of anyone merely on the basis that he / she belongs to a political party, they are undermining a key foundation of civil society in Hong Kong.

The timing of the emergence of this controversy has its roots in at least 3 events - my reappointment process upon the expiry of my five-year contract in September 2007; the reaction of the campus community to the award of university title to Shue Yan; and the planned closure by EMB of our BEd courses for secondary teachers of Art, Music and PE. The timing of my contract renewal was a coincidence and consequence of a series of procedures; which was started with the set up of a Review Committee by HKIEd Council in April 2006; followed by the first meeting with me in late November 2006, a decision on my reappointment or otherwise postponed from 1 December 2006 to 25 January 2007. The second was a result of the decision by Government and the third based on the UGC planning cycle. The timing may therefore be inconvenient, it was not however a conspiracy.

Scope of Inquiry

My hope is that the Commission of Inquiry has the capacity to establish exactly what has gone on with regard to the HKIEd over the years and to create a situation where we can move forward from the present wholly undesirable state of affairs. However, the Terms of Reference of the Commission of Inquiry are extremely narrow. They require the Commission to investigate firstly a single telephone call that took place between myself and Professor Arthur Li; secondly the pressure to sack staff; and thirdly a single statement in a phone conversation between Professor Li and the then Acting President. Whilst all of these are significant, the first and third cases are merely examples of a very long and continuing and consistent pattern of systematic activities over the last five years which needs to be investigated

if the full picture is to be understood. There were many incidents, activities and individuals involved, including persons outside the HKIED and EMB that related to the ongoing pressure from merger which went way beyond the two examples referred to in the Terms of Reference of the Commission. It is therefore likely that any attempt to raise cases and illustrations other than these two would not be possible. Accordingly, I would request that LegCo's decision whether or not to set up its own Panel of Inquiry should be based on whether or not they believe the Commission's Terms of Reference would allow it to reveal the truth concerning the overall relationship between HKIED and EMB. This would require that it is able to examine the many cases and incidents involved in both trying to pursue a merger and in the various attempts and strategies that were made by EMB to undermine the work of the Institute.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, my belief is that we need an open and thorough investigation of how the HKIED has been treated by the EMB over the last five/six years. This will require an investigation which looks at the systematic pattern of activities and is not limited to a couple of incidents. Without that, the issues will not go away and the HKIED will not be able to get on with achieving the role which Government created it for. Secondly, all is not well in the state of relationships between EMB and the education sector. What has gone on at the HKIED is illustrative as is the increasing use of both resource allocation and unreasonable contractual arrangements to commission teaching and research programmes. These require investigation if we are to establish an appropriate balance between EMB and the education sector and ensure that the control of public resources is not misused to ensure compliance.

Honourable members, absolute power corrupts absolutely. The plight of the HKIED illustrates the breakdown of the necessary checks and balances between EMB and the HKIED. The balance has tipped from a legitimate concern for accountability towards interference. It is my sincere wish that the LegCo, by supporting an in-depth investigation, will turn this crisis into an opportunity to improve the current governance mechanism of higher education in Hong Kong.