

***Report of the Review Group on Hong Kong Institute of Education's Development Blueprint***  
**Submission from The Confederation of Tertiary Institutes Staff Unions**

General Comments

The Confederation broadly agrees with the Report's observations on the current ills of the higher education system in Hong Kong, to name a few:

1. The *insufficiency* of full-time publicly funded first degree places and its impact on students from the lower socioeconomic class;
2. The *vacuum of a quality assurance mechanism* in the self-finance sector;
3. The *lack of integration* of the various sectors within the HE system and the confusion it creates for students;
4. The *lack of conceptual clarity* of the notion of “*internationalization*”.

Most importantly, we applaud the report's honest diagnosis of the ***imbalance between research and teaching***, with the former being for a long time the only real criterion for reward at all levels – the UGC, the institutions, down to individual departments' treatment of their staff. As pointed out repeatedly by the report, the public expects our higher education to be relevant and perceives teaching (and not research) as the essential function of HE institutions. To this end, we are falling way behind the public's expectation.

Our Calls from the Frontline

While most of the recommendations of the report are sensible, we find that following crucial factors are largely neglected (sometimes deliberately):

1. ***The 18% cap of publically funded fulltime places:*** the report pointed out that: “This 18% has remained unchanged since 1994 [...] very low by developed country standards... [P]erhaps only Germany amongst developed countries has a comparably low”. And yet the report makes no recommendation on the problem. This low percentage is clearly unacceptable as Hong Kong assumes a “knowledge-economy”. We urge the government to expand this percentage and also to broaden the coverage to sub-degree programs.
2. ***Budget cut:*** Institutions have never recovered from the 15% budget cut since 1998. The cut has resulted not only in the high contract-to-permanent staff ratio and a more casualized workforce.

It has also led to a greater emphasis on research (through which institutions can compete for funds) and a narrower space for academic freedom – professional education/academic judgments often have to give way to financial considerations which are in turn manipulated by the UGC's or the EDB's funding programs. The fact that the funding for the extra year of the new curriculum is only 62.5% will only worsen the situation. We urge the government to raise this 62.5% to the normal standard. The UGC should then encourage this money be spent on undergraduate EDUCATION and student support, if we don't want more alienated students becoming suicidal. Additional funding support should also be provided for rewarding teaching.

3. **Failed role differentiation:** The report admits that role differentiation has essentially failed and yet it only recommends the government to “reinforce” the policy without an analysis of *why* the policy has not worked and what kind of changes should be made.
4. **Danger of “paper exercise” when frontline teachers are excluded:** The report mentions the various funding programs the UGC has introduced in recent years to promote teaching. We need to point out that more papers and reports have been produced as a result of these “initiatives” than actual effects on teaching and learning quality, largely *due to a lack of involvement of frontline teachers in the process*. A point to note here is that staff who focus on teaching are often more junior in rank as a result of the slight to teaching, and thus, *are often excluded from important committees* which decide teaching and learning policies and directions. To avoid the same from happening, the UGC needs to make sure that frontline teachers' views are properly channeled. This can be done by proper recognition of teaching in the promotion mechanism as well as direct consultations with teachers (instead of only the institution managements).
5. **Lack of foundation for building communities of practice:** The idea of developing “communities of practice” is an interesting and probably important one. The problem is partly *how to identify and cultivate individuals* who can be contributing members. As mentioned, staff members focusing on teaching are mostly marginalized. They are not likely to be nominated by their institutions. The other problem will be the *relationship between these communities and the institutions, and the government*. How much autonomy will there be – particularly if their members are nominated by the institutions? We suggest that to build up a foundation for these communities, the UGC should first sponsor scholarly activities, e.g., conferences, research, workshops, that are organically generated from the frontline, in order to build up capacity and nurture frontline teachers to participate in the future communities of practice.
6. **A need for recovering and focused energy:** Many of the recommendations of the report are ambitious and with long-lasting effect. We need to point out that *institutions and their staff are now under great pressure to ensure that the four-year curriculum is smoothly and properly implemented*. This is our foremost responsibility at the moment. We have not recovered from the impact of the budget cut; we have not fully digested yet the many “initiatives” the UGC has imposed on us in the last several years. In order for us to have a smooth transition to the four-year curriculum, any recommendation, if to be implemented, no matter how meaningful, should be implemented by stages and with full consultation with frontline staff, to make sure that any plan derived is realistic and meaningful.