

**For discussion on
5 March 2021**

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Retitling of The Open University of Hong Kong

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the legislative proposals to amend The Open University of Hong Kong Ordinance (Cap. 1145) in order to change the Chinese and English titles of The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) to “香港都會大學” and “Hong Kong Metropolitan University” respectively.

Background

2. The predecessor of the OUHK, The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLI), was established by the Government in 1989, with degree-awarding power and operated on a self-financing basis. The OLI aimed to provide opportunities for higher education to all those aspiring to it, regardless of their previous qualifications, age, gender, and race, by means of open learning and adopting a variety of instructional means. In support of its object, the OLI sought to advance learning, knowledge, and research, thus enhancing economic and social development.

3. At the early stage of the OLI’s establishment, there were limited opportunities for secondary school leavers to receive higher education and most of them chose to join the workforce. Therefore, the OLI primarily adopted a distance learning mode to provide quality and flexible further education opportunities for young people and working adults. As its development became more sophisticated, the OLI was granted a self-accrediting status in 1996 and then a university title in 1997, named as “香港公開大學” and “The Open University of Hong Kong”.

4. Since acquiring the university title, the OUHK has proactively expanded the range and scope of its programme offerings, introducing professional and practical programmes in response to societal developments, especially at the degree level. In support of the Government’s policy objective to increase the secondary school leavers’ post-secondary education participation rate to 60% within ten years as announced in the 2000 Policy Address, the OUHK first launched five full-time face-to-face sub-degree

programmes in 2001 and the first full-time face-to-face Bachelor's degree programme in 2003. The OUHK also participated in the Joint University Programmes Admissions System in 2007 and continued to develop its full-time face-to-face programmes. To date, the OUHK has evolved from primarily a distance learning institution into a full-fledged comprehensive university offering a range of around 220 programmes, covering distance, blended, and face-to-face learning, as well as full-time and part-time modes of study, and providing students with flexible learning pathways. In the 2020/21 academic year, the OUHK offers a total of 65 full-time Bachelor's degree and 21 full-time sub-degree programmes. In terms of student numbers, the OUHK has about 11 600 full-time sub-degree and undergraduate students, about 8 700 students on part-time distance learning programmes, and about 2 000 postgraduate students in the same academic year. In terms of full-time undergraduate enrolment, the OUHK is now the sixth largest local university.

5. The OUHK is also committed to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in various aspects to promote its academic development. To date, the OUHK has established six schools, covering academic fields including arts and social sciences, business and administration, education and languages, nursing and health studies, science and technology, as well as professional and continuing education. As regards hardware, the OUHK has three campuses in Ho Man Tin, including the Jockey Club Institute of Healthcare, which was newly opened in January 2021, and two learning centres in Kwai Hing and Lai King respectively to support the operations of different programmes. Meanwhile, the OUHK strives to strengthen the research capabilities in its niche academic areas, and has successfully obtained a total funding of over \$100 million under the Competitive Research Funding Schemes for the Local Self-financing Degree Sector¹ administered by the Research Grants Council, which is the highest funding granted to a self-financing institution.

6. Apart from focusing on local developments, the OUHK sets its sights on the Mainland and overseas by establishing ties with various institutions outside Hong Kong to facilitate academic exchanges. The University provides more than 1 000 internship, exchange and study trip opportunities outside Hong Kong for its students each year so as to enrich their learning experiences. In addition, the OUHK signed an agreement with the Zhaoqing Municipal Government and Zhaoqing University in April 2020 to collaborate on establishing The Open University of Hong Kong (Zhaoqing). The project will foster the higher education development in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-

¹ The Government launched three funding schemes under the Research Endowment Fund in 2014/15, namely the Institutional Development Scheme, the Inter-Institutional Development Scheme and the Faculty Development Scheme, with a view to supporting the academic and research development of the local self-financing degree-awarding sector on a competitive basis.

Macao Greater Bay Area (Greater Bay Area) as well as facilitate exchange and talent nurturing between Zhaoqing and Hong Kong.

Review of the University Title

7. Despite the rapid development of the OUHK since its establishment some thirty years ago, because of its title, many people in society still have the misperception of the OUHK as mainly a distance learning institution offering part-time programmes for working adults, instead of a full-fledged comprehensive university. Different stakeholders have reflected to the OUHK that this misunderstanding has posed challenges and hindrance to the further development of the OUHK and its graduates.

8. In this connection, the OUHK Council decided in March 2019 to set up a Working Group on University Title Review (Working Group), chaired by the President, to conduct a formal review of the university title. The Working Group considered that the existing title of the OUHK would give rise to the following challenges in relation to its future development –

- (a) **Hindrance to future academic development and exchange** – Some universities and academics still perceive the OUHK as primarily a distance learning institution with no solid academic vigour. This hinders the OUHK’s co-operation in research and scholarly activities with other universities;
- (b) **Difficulty in student recruitment** – Some parents and secondary school teachers do not encourage secondary school graduates to apply for admission into the OUHK, as they perceive the OUHK as primarily a distance learning institution mainly for adult learners. Some secondary school students also have this misconception. This affects the OUHK’s student recruitment to some extent;
- (c) **Hindrance to the career development of the OUHK’s graduates** – Many employers and human resources personnel do not appreciate that the academic qualifications of the OUHK’s full-time Bachelor’s degree graduates are equivalent to those of other universities. The graduates have received the same quality-assured university education, had the same campus life, and are equally well-equipped for joining the workforce. This adversely affects the long-term career developments of the OUHK’s graduates; and
- (d) **Impact on donors and sponsors** – Some potential donors’ and sponsors’ misunderstanding of the OUHK’s nature may affect the chances for the OUHK to secure donations and sponsorships, which affects its finance and future developments.

9. Given the above considerations, the Working Group agreed that there were sufficient grounds for considering retitling the OUHK, and extensively consulted various stakeholders, including staff, graduates, students, the Court (the statutory supreme advisory body of the OUHK), and other external stakeholders (such as donors and sponsors, partners, Presidents of other universities) on the issue from April 2019 to May 2020 by means of focus groups, townhall meetings, and online consultation, etc. On the whole, the stakeholders agreed that the misconceptions arising from the present university title would hinder the future developments of the OUHK and its students, and a new title which could reflect the OUHK's current status as a comprehensive university should be adopted to address the relevant issues and facilitate its strategic developments. In particular, more than 65% of the student respondents were supportive of the retitling proposal.

Justifications for the Retitling

10. Considering the positive responses of the stakeholders to the proposed retitling in the consultation exercise, the OUHK Council set up a Selection Committee on University Title (Selection Committee) in July 2020 to co-ordinate matters relating to university retitling. The Selection Committee, chaired by the President, comprised persons with a deep understanding of the OUHK, experienced educators or senior members of society, including representatives of the OUHK Council, the Court, staff, students, and alumni. Following the criteria set by the Selection Committee, all members of the OUHK community and the public were invited to submit nominations for new university titles from August to September 2020. During the period, around 1 000 nominations were received, including 49% from the public, 26% from students, 22% from alumni, and the rest from staff members.

11. The Selection Committee carefully considered all the nominations received through three rounds of shortlisting. Having thoroughly examined the merits and drawbacks of the various titles and sought the comments of language consultants, the Selection Committee recommended that the Council adopt “香港都會大學” (“都大”) and “Hong Kong Metropolitan University” (“HKMU”) as the new university title. Having taken into account the following considerations, the Council approved the recommendation on 10 December 2020 –

- (a) Hong Kong is a vibrant international metropolitan city. The new title carries the concept of the OUHK being an integral part of Hong Kong, supporting and contributing to Hong Kong's development and innovation;
- (b) The students of the OUHK come from diverse backgrounds with different aspirations. Moreover, the programmes offered by the OUHK cover a wide variety of disciplines, including full-time and distance learning programmes. The new title embraces diversity, which fits the present status and strategic goals of the OUHK as a comprehensive university, as well as reflecting the innovative, progressive, and diverse spirit of the OUHK, its students and alumni;
- (c) The new title reflects that the education provided by the OUHK is professional and practical, which helps equip students so that they contribute to Hong Kong through different channels and in different capacities;
- (d) The new title conveys the idea that the OUHK's teaching and research are modern and forward-looking, addressing the actual needs of Hong Kong and its neighbouring regions;
- (e) The new title is neutral in academic inclination and can facilitate the OUHK's development in new academic fields to meet the ever-changing learning aspirations and talent needs of society, which aligns with the strategic development of the OUHK while fulfilling its object of promoting open learning;
- (f) As the "open universities" on the Mainland generally only offer distance learning programmes, the new title is beneficial to the development of the OUHK and the proposed OUHK (Zhaoqing) in the Greater Bay Area; and
- (g) The title "Metropolitan University" has been adopted by many universities in major international cities, and does not carry any negative connotations.

12. The Education Bureau (EDB) respects the autonomy enjoyed by the OUHK in managing its internal affairs as an independent and autonomous statutory body. The EDB understands that the OUHK's retitling decision was approved by the OUHK Council after extensive consultation and a rigorous selection conducted by the University. The EDB respects the decision of the University and is following up on the relevant legislative amendment exercise in accordance with the established procedures.

Impact of University Retitling

13. The mission of the OUHK is “to advance learning, knowledge, and research that meet students’ learning aspirations and society’s talent needs, focusing on practical and professional programmes”. The OUHK believes that the retitling can help stakeholders (including prospective students, parents, employers, and members of the public) better understand the mission and role of the OUHK and correct their misunderstandings of the OUHK, which will in turn facilitate the continuous development of the OUHK and its contribution to the advancement of the higher education sector in Hong Kong.

14. Meanwhile, the OUHK is aware that it has a unique positioning and role in the higher education sector in Hong Kong as prescribed in Cap. 1145, i.e. in support of its object to promote open learning for providing learners of different ages and academic qualifications with flexible and diversified articulation pathways with multiple entry and exit points as well as encouraging lifelong learning, and to advance learning, knowledge, and research, thus enhancing economic and social development. Despite its transformation into a full-fledged comprehensive university in recent years, the OUHK still treasures open learning as its core business, and it is still one of the University’s strategic focuses to provide sub-degree and degree programmes through a distance learning mode. After the retitling, the OUHK will continue to uphold its object of providing opportunities for higher education by means of open learning, and maintain its vision “to be a leader in providing open and flexible education to all, and to excel as a provider of quality higher education”.

Legislative Proposals

15. Since the OUHK is a body corporate established under Cap. 1145, we propose to amend Cap. 1145 to change the Chinese and English titles of the OUHK to “香港都會大學” and “Hong Kong Metropolitan University” respectively. Apart from the retitling, other provisions of Cap. 1145, including the object, powers, governance structure, and operational mode of the University will remain unchanged. Consequential amendments will also be made to other ordinances which refer to the OUHK.

Advice Sought

16. Members are invited to comment on the retitling of the OUHK and the consequential legislative amendment proposals. Subject to Members' views, we plan to introduce the Bill into the Legislative Council in the first half of 2021.

Education Bureau
February 2021