



13 May 2022

Hon Mr Tommy Cheung Yu-yan, GBS, JP
Chairman
Panel on Health Services
Legislative Council
HKSAR

Dear Hon Mr Cheung,

RE: Insufficient Funding to Sustain Healthcare Professionals Education in HKPU

I am glad to learn that the Panel on Health Services will be discussing on the Enhancement of Healthcare Teaching Facilities in the upcoming meeting on 10 June 2022, whereby Members from the Panel on Education will also be invited to participate.

I wish to bring up to you a matter of concern: a serious insufficiency of funding for the various healthcare professional departments of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The shortfall will only be aggravated as we have to produce more healthcare professionals to meet the challenge of an ageing population.

The following information is based on public information and an in-depth discussion between the Deputy President and Provost of the HKPU, Heads (or deputies) of all the Departments and Schools involved and myself on 5 May 2022. I have tried every diligence to ensure all the data and information are accurate and true.

Background

The Faculty of Health and Social Sciences of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) is subsidized by the University Grants Committee (UGC). The Relative Cost Weighting for the Block Grant allocated to the healthcare schools and departments is currently 1.4. These schools and departments include the Department of Health Technology and Informatics, the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, the School of Optometry and the School of Nursing.

Healthcare professionals trained by the above schools and departments include Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLT), Radiographers, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Optometrists and Registered Nurses.



Healthcare practice comes with an inherently narrow margin for error. An error can lead to dire consequences. The training of healthcare professionals requires individual grooming to ensure each student is competently trained for practice. That requires a high staff to student ratio.

Medicine has become more and more technologically sophisticated. Molecular testing (relevant to MLT), new modes of imaging (relevant to Radiographers), expansion of the scope of rehabilitation, extended use of advanced equipment (relevant to Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists) and an increasing utility of simulation laboratory (relevant particularly to nurses) are more and more utilized in medical practice and training.

HKPU ranks well within the top 5% Worldwide in various healthcare professional departments, and often ranks top in Asia. They have for years been producing the best possible healthcare professionals Worldwide for the people of Hong Kong.

Challenges

1. Unsustainable Relative Cost Weighting:

The departments and schools have for several years worked on an actual Relative Cost Weighting of 1.8 in spite of the UGC allocation of 1.4, the difference being topped up by the University. Even on that up-regulated weighting, the departments have found it difficult to maintain an adequate teacher-to-student ratio as required by, for example, the Occupational Therapist Board and the Physiotherapist Board (statutory regulatory bodies of the respective professions). The current UGC allocated Relative Cost Weighting of 1.4 is unsustainable for maintaining an acceptable standard of teaching for healthcare professionals.

The problem will only be magnified taking into account findings of the “Strategic Review on Healthcare Manpower Planning and Professional Development”, when an increase of healthcare-related UGC-funded FYFD intake is already ongoing.

In real life practice, demand for Radiographers is enormous. We saw an unprecedented rate of attrition and emigration of Radiographers for both the public and private healthcare sectors in the past 2 years. New blood is urgently needed. With our ageing population, the need for rehabilitation services and nursing care will only expand in tandem. Vacancies await graduating Physiotherapists and Occupational Therapists to take up and less competitive employers (often NGOs) cannot provide adequate services as a result of insufficient manpower. Insufficiency of nurses is well known and needs no elaboration.



Currently there are 3 levels of Relative Cost Weighting for the UGC Block Grant: 3.6 for teaching programs in Medicine and Dentistry, 1.4 for Biological & Physical sciences, Engineering, Arts, Designs and Performing Arts and Studies Allied to Medicine and Health, and 1.0 for others.

Studies allied to Medicine and Health are close working partners of Medicine and Dentistry, and arguably the users of the most expensive medical technology, of which trainees must be familiar with. A refined level of Relative Cost Weighting between 1.4 and 3.6 will be more reasonable and certainly closer to reality.

Without sufficient funding, the quality of teaching and hence the quality of future healthcare professionals of Hong Kong will inevitably be eclipsed. The current top-up by the University is not merely shifting a funding responsibility to the university but also undertaken at the expense of other teaching programs. This is not a sustainable arrangement.

2. Cost of Practicum and Clinical Placement:

Practicum or clinical placement is universally required to prepare a healthcare professional for his future practice. The undergraduate training for healthcare professionals traditionally includes extensive hospital placement. These come at a cost to be settled with the hospitals.

Currently the hospital placement cost for MLT and Radiographer students are covered by the Food and Health Bureau and not UGC. The UGC coverage for Optometrist students is inadequate to cover the cost of clinical placement. The School of Nursing find it increasingly difficult to find placement for their students even before covid-19.

A uniform UGC coverage for hospital or clinical placement for students of the above healthcare professionals is urgently needed to maintain quality of training.

3. Non-UGC Funded Master Programs in Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy

The HKPU has been providing Master programs in Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy for post-graduate students. After completing the programs, graduates will be awarded professional qualifications in the respective professions. The annual intake for each of the 2 Master programs is 48.

The Master programs are currently funded by the Social Welfare Department on a triennial basis. We are coming to the last year of the current triennium. In spite of prior



discussion among the stakeholders, UGC has not yet committed to fund the Master programs on a regular basis. The university is caught in limbo on long term staffing and development consequent to an uncertain future of the programs.

Questions for the Education Bureau:

I am writing therefore to bring the matters to the attention of the Panel on Health Services, the Food and Health Bureau, the Education Bureau and the UGC. With respect to Faculty of Health and Social Sciences of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University,

1. Would the Education Bureau consider up-regulating the Relative Cost Weighting for Studies allied to Medicine and Health? If so, what is the timeline? If not, please explain the reasons.
2. Would the Education Bureau request UGC to cover the cost of practicum and clinical placement for students of the above schools and departments, viz the Department of Health Technology and Informatics, the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, the School of Optometry and the School of Nursing of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University? If yes, what is the timeline? If not, please explain the reasons.
3. Would the Education Bureau request UGC to take over from SWD funding for the Master programs in Occupation Therapy and Physiotherapy? If yes, what is the timeline? If not, please explain the reasons.

I shall be most grateful if you kindly consider deliberating on the above at the forthcoming meeting of the Panel of Health Services. Please feel free to contact me directly if any discussion on matter is deemed appropriate.

Respectfully Yours,

David T.Y Lam

c.c.: Dr Hon Priscilla LEUNG Mei-fun, SBS, JP, Chairperson, Panel on Education, Legislative Council, HKSAR