



# The Strategy and the Quality Management of Higher Education in Hong Kong

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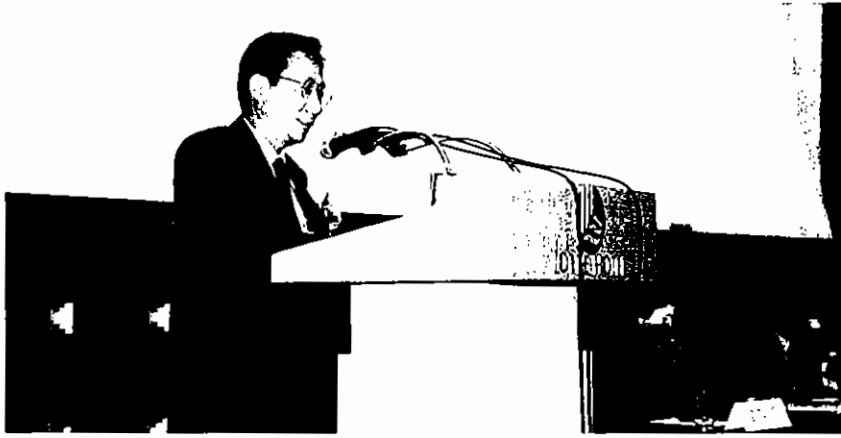
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- 제 117호(2002. 5 · 6월호 게재)
  - 21세기 인적자원 개발과 대학의 역할  
이상주(부총리 겸 교육인적자원부 장관)
  - The Evolving American University  
Samuel H. Smith, President Emeritus, Washington State University
- 제 118호(2002. 7 · 8월호 게재)
  - Developmental Strategy and Quality  
Gavin Brown, Vice-Chancellor, University of Sydney
  - Accreditation and Quality in the United States  
Judith S. Eaton, President, Council for Higher Education Accreditation
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  - The Strategy and Quality Management of Higher Education in Hong Kong  
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## Introduction

It is my pleasure to share with you the history and the features of the development of the quality assurance system for higher education in Hong Kong, for two reasons. Firstly, because of the strong emphasis placed on higher education in Hong Kong, and secondly, because of the multi-faceted quality assurance system we have, which has incorporated many international good practices while at the same time taking account of local practicalities.

For the small size of Hong Kong, with a population of over 6 million, we invest fairly heavily in higher education. Government expenditure on education in 2001/02 is about 21.9% of total government expenditure, and 4.4% of GDP, of which higher education accounts for about 30%. There are a total of eleven degree-awarding institutions in Hong Kong. Participation rate in degree level



education is 18% of the relevant age group, and over 30% if including sub-degree education.

In the last two decades, the higher education system in Hong Kong was marked by an unprecedented rate of expansion, starting with expansion of degree level education in the public sector. While the Government was keen to increase the participation rate in higher education (from about 2% to 18% for degree level education), it also saw the importance of safeguarding the quality of education, in particular in the wake of a fast pace of expansion. Thus the growth of the higher education system in the 1980s and 1990s was paralleled by the development of a quality assurance system for Hong Kong, and an increasing awareness of the importance of quality assurance.

Of this development one of the most significant features was the creation of an independent quality assurance organisation, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation, initially with responsibility for the non-university sector. The establishment of the HKCAA had brought about fundamental changes to the concept of quality assurance in the higher education sector. It resulted in the creation of a binary system in higher education, initially between the universities and the non-universities, and later, between the self-accrediting institutions, and the non-self-accrediting institutions. This binary system came to mark much of the later development.

More significantly, the existence of the HKCAA has come to enshrine the principles and the model of independent, external quality assurance, which have subsequently affected how the entire higher education system views the concept of quality monitoring. Irrespective of whether or not the HKCAA, or the principles of external quality assurance are accepted by the individual stake-holders in the system, their reactions and attitudes towards quality assurance/quality monitoring have inevitably been, to a certain extent, influenced by the very existence of an organisation which embodies concepts of quality assurance hitherto new to Hong Kong.

The binary system in higher education which came into shape with the creation of the HKCAA later

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underwent further transformation, and different configurations. Between the 1980s and the mid 1990, the public higher education sector had reached the expected ceiling of expansion and it had also become a more mature system. However, by the late 1990s further expansion took place, this time centered on the sub-degree provision in the post-secondary sector, offered mainly through private colleges. As a result, the strategy of quality assurance had to be re-examined, in the light of the more mature public sector, and a growing private sector majoring in sub-degree level education as well as a private sector consisting of imported higher education. Thus, added to the binary system of university/non-university, self-accrediting institutions/non-self-accrediting institutions, there were further divides and tensions between degree and sub-degree education, public and private education, local and imported education provision. Such dualities which had existed previously in the system, have become more pronounced with the Government's encouragement of private tertiary education, and the expansion of the sub-degree and continuing education provision, which was spurred by government incentive schemes.

Questions then arise as to how the existing quality assurance system should cater to the increasing diversity. Should there be one system to accommodate all or should there be a dual system which can cater for all these dualities? Up to the present, the government's strategy has been one which, taking account of the practicalities of the situation, adopts a two-pronged approach which recognizes as well as addresses some of the tensions and divisions.

While the rest of this paper describes the application of the quality strategy to the diversified higher education system, it will also highlight some of the principles which have become fundamental to the quality assurance system in Hong Kong. These principles were born of Chinese Confucian traditions of respect for academe, but they also reflect the modern-day close relationship between educational development and societal development in Hong Kong. These are

- the respect for academic autonomy
- the adoption of international perspectives, and
- the embodiment of societal input in the quality assurance of education

## **Quality Monitoring in Degree Education: the Non-University Sector**

### **Academic Autonomy vs Accountability and the Creation of an External Quality Assurance Body**

The higher education system in Hong Kong up to the early 1980s was marked by the small size of the system (2% of relevant age group participating in degree level education), the elitist nature of

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higher education, the academic autonomy of the degree-level tertiary institutions (of which there were two up to the early 1980s), and their relative freedom from any external form of quality assurance.

This changed with the birth of a greater number of degree-awarding institutions which emerged from the upgrade of sub-degree institutions. The expansion of tertiary places brought in its wake concerns about the quality of the expanded intake, the quality of the less experienced staff and institutions which have not been blessed with traditions of university education or traditions of quality assurance. All these, coupled with the awakening to international trends of accountability and calls of value for money, led to the adoption of an external quality assurance model for the monitoring of quality. The Government of Hong Kong initially harnessed the expertise of the UK quality assurance body, the Council for National Academic Awards(CNAA), to perform the role of external quality assurance for the new institutions (the two Polytechnics and the Baptist College). This was followed eventually by the establishment of an independent statutory body, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation(HKCAA) in 1990 which came to wield the responsibility for the quality assurance of institutions and programmes at the non-university sector.

When the HKCAA was set up in 1990 and put in charge of the relatively new institutions which were starting to award degrees, the purpose was quality assurance and enhancement of these institutions and their programmes through a system of accreditation. The dual purpose of accreditation was therefore approval and quality improvement: approval of institutions to award degrees/sub-degrees, and approval of specific degree/sub-degree programmes, as well as the provision of advice for improvement during the accreditation process. Unfortunately, the accreditation function has sometimes come to be unduly associated with the approval function, and the quality improvement function under-emphasised by those parties which do not have a full understanding of these dual purposes.

### **Accreditation: Quality Improvement and Approval**

The accreditation function was performed by the HKCAA through two types of reviews: institutional review and programme validation. Both of which aim at quality improvement, and the granting of approval upon the meeting of threshold standards.

*Institutional review* is 'a review of the academic and general standards of an institution of higher education' for the purpose of ascertaining whether the academic environment of the institution is suitable for implementing degree/sub-degree programmes which have standards comparable with those recognized internationally or whether the institution continues to maintain a suitable academic environment for offering degrees/sub-degrees.

*Programme validation* is 'the evaluation of a particular degree course conducted or proposed to be

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conducted by an institution of higher education, to determine whether or not the academic standard of the course is comparable with internationally recognized standards'.

The format and procedure of accreditation adopted by the HKCAA are in line with international practices, comprising the following:

- self evaluation of the institution
- peer review
- site visit
- a written report followed by the monitoring of conditions/recommendations

### Principal Features

One of the hallmarks of the accreditation function as conducted by the HKCAA is the respect for academic autonomy of the institution. Although the accreditation process presumes an approval function according to stipulated standards, it does not, however, presume the stipulation of any academic agenda for the tertiary institutions. Institutions are free to formulate their own mission, their own unique model of development, so long as they possess appropriate structures and processes, and quality assurance procedures to enable the fulfilment of their own missions and the provision of education at particular levels. Similarly, the development of programmes of study is determined by an institution's own mission and philosophy rather than a set of nationally determined objectives. The accrediting agency, the HKCAA, sets no parameters for what should go into any programmes of study. The programme is judged solely in terms of its ability to meet comparable internationally recognized standards with reference to the objectives set by the institution, and the input, the learning process and the intended exit standard of the programme.

Thus, at the same time that the inception of a quality assurance system has made certain inroads into the tradition of academic autonomy, it has also preserved and incorporated this tradition at the same time.

Another feature of academic accreditation which incorporates the outward-looking vision of the Hong Kong society is its international dimension. By bringing into the accreditation process international experts in the relevant fields, the HKCAA brings international standards to bear on the local programmes of study and in so doing, ensures the international comparability of its higher education and that of the future workforce.

It is also part of our strategy in the quality assurance of higher education that close links are maintained between academe and the society. The accreditation process involves, in addition to academics, experienced practitioners from commerce, industry and the professions whose role is not so much to stipulate that institutions should try to serve the needs of the community, but that if they were

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aiming to do so, to advise how they may better secure this objective in the programmes of study offered.

### **The Binary System**

The setting up of an external quality assurance body, modeled on the UK system, for all the subsequent benefits it brought, had in fact at the outset created a rift in the system by distinguishing between the old and new higher education institutions (the universities and non-universities). While the external quality assurance/accreditation system was imposed upon the new degree-awarding institutions, the old universities were able to argue themselves out of the purview of the external accreditation authority. This binary system, which was based on the UK model, later transformed into the binary division of self-accrediting and non-self-accrediting institutions. Institutions which were initially being accredited by the HKCAA, and later judged to have reached a stage of maturity where they could be responsible for their own programme validation and be free from external accreditation, become self-accrediting institutions. Since 1990, a total of five institutions previously under the aegis of HKCAA, have become self-accrediting.

This binary system has persisted until this day, with the effect that the more mature institutions are able to free themselves from external accreditation and become self-accrediting universities. The concept of self-accreditation underlies much of the quality assurance strategy adopted at the present day.

## **Quality Management in Degree Education: the University Sector**

### **Self-accrediting vs Non-self-accrediting Institutions**

The university sector enjoys the status of self-accreditation. As mentioned, this includes universities which had never undergone external accreditation, and those new universities which had gained self-accreditation status through a maturing process.

Although the university sector is free from the scrutiny of the external quality assurance agency, the existence of the independent QA agency, the HKCAA, had irrevocably changed the attitude towards quality management in the university sector. Since 1993, a monitoring process for research, the Research Assessment Exercises(RAE), has been instituted in the university sector under the University Grants Committee, which funds most of the public universities.

In view of the international trend which views quality assurance as being necessary and beneficial to all institutions, irrespective of their status or experience, and in recognition of the real benefits which had been brought to institutions which had undergone accreditation by the HKCAA (which were recognized in a report commissioned by the University Grants Committee), a monitoring process

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for teaching was imposed by the University Grants Committee since 1996, upon all the self-accrediting universities funded by it. This process, termed the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review(TLQPR), brought winds of change into a sector part of which had never been subject to systematic external scrutiny of this kind.

### **Process vs Outcome and Standards**

As distinct from the academic accreditation process enforced by the HKCAA, the TLQPR was mainly process oriented. It aims to assess and improve teaching and learning processes in the institutions, by focusing on the processes of curriculum design, pedagogical design, implementation quality, outcome assessment and resource provision.

While the accreditation function involves a monitoring of standards, the Process Reviews largely presume the existence of high standards from the existence of appropriate quality assurance processes, notwithstanding the debate that quality assurance processes do not necessarily have any tangible links with standards. Another significant difference is that the accreditation function entails an approval element whereas this is not an objective of the Process Reviews.

A similar process was applied to self-accrediting institutions which were outside the remit of the UGC. The Open University of Hong Kong, for instance, which is a self-financed institution not funded by the UGC, continues to come under the purview of the HKCAA after it attained self-accrediting status, and is subject to reviews of its quality assurance processes at regular intervals.

Thus a dual system of quality assurance exists: an accreditation process for the non-self-accrediting institutions which involves a consideration of both processes and standards; and at the self-accrediting institutions, a focus on processes.

But this does not mean that standards and outcome are neglected in the quality monitoring of the university sector. The emphasis has simply shifted to its research arena. The university sector has undergone, since 1993, assessment of its research output conducted by the University Grants Committee, in the Research Assessment Exercise(RAE). Initially institutions were assessed on their number and proportion of research-active staff members for the purpose of allocation of recurrent research funding. Increasingly, emphasis is being put on the quality of research in the RAE. This emphasis on quality and outcome in the research arena contrasts interestingly with the emphasis on processes in the teaching and learning arena.

## **Quality Monitoring of Imported Education**

The quality control of non-local education imported into Hong Kong adopts a different approach

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from that in respect of local education. The model that was implemented since 1997 partly results from a consideration of the practicalities of having to monitor a large number of foreign courses operating in Hong Kong, as well as the Government's attempt to maintain an optimal balance between quality on the one hand and a free market on the other.

By the 1990s, Hong Kong has become a free and lucrative market for courses originating from a number of English-speaking countries, and the market was largely unregulated with the result that courses of any nature, level, and quality could be freely offered to local students. These courses lead to academic awards or professional awards from outside of Hong Kong, often operated in conjunction with local tertiary institutions or local commercial partners.

### **Registration vs Accreditation**

In 1997, the Government introduced a law whereby all courses leading to non-local academic or professional awards are required to be registered (or to seek exemption from registration). The criteria for registration/exemption hinge on the comparability of the non-local course in Hong Kong with its counterpart offered in the home country. The HKCAA is appointed by the Government to assess courses for their ability to meet this and other relevant criteria under the Ordinance rather than for their ability to meet any local standards or other stipulated standards. Thus, the assessment/registration process is distinct from the accreditation process. Between 1997 and to -date, over 400 courses had been assessed by the HKCAA for registration purpose.

The preference for the use of the comparability model, rather than the model of stipulated threshold standards, can be regarded as a concession to the concept of free market and consumer choice. By this model, maximum consumer choice is preserved, with minimum inroads into the autonomy of the foreign institutions, while some degree of consumer protection is achieved.

### **Voluntary Accreditation**

The deficiency of the registration/comparability model is that the courses are not evaluated for their academic standards per se. Further, students, consumers and employers are not guided as to whether the registered courses meet local standards. And when there is no guarantee that local standards are met, the Government, as an employer, does not categorically accept the graduates from these programmes for appointment purposes.

In order to ensure better quality of the courses, and to afford better guidance to students and the public, the HKCAA has since 2001 offered a limited accreditation service in respect of non-local courses. This is a voluntary process which can be sought by the non-local course providers for the purpose of benchmarking their courses against local academic standards. Accredited courses have the



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benefit of financial support from the Government, and of gaining recognition status for the graduates of the courses. Thus voluntary accreditation offers additional guarantees of quality on top of the registration process which is required by law.

## Quality Monitoring of Sub-Degree Education

The quality assurance model in Hong Kong has focused primarily on the degree sector, the development of which has taken precedence over the sub-degree/post-secondary education, despite the fact that this sector is in fact a very large one.

In contrast to the degree sector which is predominantly public-funded, the sub-degree sector comprises both public and private institutions. And unlike the award of degrees, there is no legal requirement for institutions to seek accreditation or other forms of authorisation for the award of sub-degree qualifications. Because of this Hong Kong boasts a large number of sub-degree qualifications ranging from certificates, diplomas, to higher certificate and higher diplomas and many others.

There is very little consistency in standards or nomenclature among this forest of sub-degree qualifications except for the more senior level awards of Higher Diplomas and Higher Certificates offered through the public institutions, which are modeled largely on the UK awards and thus achieving a certain degree of consistency.

The quality strategy adopted for this sector contrasts sharply with the more rigorous system for the degree sector. When a system of accreditation was implemented through the HKCAA for the new degree-awarding institutions, it was not extended to the sub-degree qualifications. Quality of sub-degree qualifications was left to the market forces where these are offered by private institutions; and where they are offered by the public institutions, trust was placed upon the internal quality mechanisms of these institutions.

The bewildering array of sub-degree qualifications offered little assurance of quality or standard to the consumers and employers. Government saw the need to introduce some form of standardization and the setting up of a Qualifications Framework is the long-term plan. The Government made the first steps towards this goal when in 2001 it invited the HKCAA and the major tertiary institutions to propose a common definition for the Associate Degree in Hong Kong. It also implemented the accreditation system for these Associate Degrees. But unlike the accreditation of degree-level qualifications, the accreditation is to be a voluntary process, to be sought by the institutions and encouraged by financial incentive schemes.


The dual system of self-accrediting and non-self-accrediting institutions features again in this new scheme of accreditation of Associate Degree and other sub-degree qualifications, whereby the

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self-accrediting institutions are entrusted to monitor the quality of their own courses, and are able to gain financial support and recognition for the qualifications offered without any external accreditation; whereas non-self-accrediting institutions come under the scheme of voluntary accreditation.

## Conclusion

The brief and slightly over-simplified description given above of the quality assurance system in Hong Kong highlights a few important points.

I think our system has incorporated many worthwhile features of quality assurance as practised around the world: systems of peer review, international perspectives, respect for institutional autonomy which is enshrined in the accreditation principle and the concept of self-accreditation. We have tried to deal with the issue of transnational/imported education by a scheme which balances between free market, institutional autonomy, and consumer protection. We have also introduced schemes of voluntary accreditation for both local and imported education in order to encourage better quality and enhanced consumer protection, all of which embrace both the ideal of quality assurance and the pragmatism of a diversified education scene. 

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