

Response to the Second TLQPR Report from the University of Hong Kong

HKU: A Learning Institution

1. The Panel's Report

(a) General comments

The University of Hong Kong is very pleased to see that the Report from the international panel of experts for the TLQPR is so positive. This confirms the high levels of commitment of HKU to teaching, as well as the University's adoption of global best practices in teaching and learning, and is consonant with our belief that HKU is a leader in offering a high quality education to its students. We are pleased that the Panel has been impressed by the high quality of the work we do in HKU, making it a quality teaching as well as a quality research university. In keeping with this, the Panel reported that the students were "in almost every case...positive towards the courses, and especially the teachers". We are encouraged by the Panel's Report that the educational quality work at HKU is "at a level that generates confidence in the quality of education programmes on offer", and we will endeavour to continue to offer the best quality educational to our students, through constant improvements and the commitment of staff. It has been made clear that the results of the TLQPR have funding implications, and we look forward to this being shown in the next round of funding for universities.

A major feature of HKU that came out clearly in the Report is the quality of the staff, who are committed to students and student learning, and are knowledgeable about the latest trends and advances in education worldwide. There is a culture of excellence in teaching, which drives high standards through discussion of best practices, peer reviews, seminars, workshops, teaching excellence awards etc. We are glad that the Panel found "evidence of significant staff development... aimed at meeting the changed demands", and "dialogue within the University...to optimize teaching and learning arrangements", with reference to best practices worldwide. We are particularly pleased that the Panel was so impressed by the staff who, it noted, were reflective and helping to drive change and innovation in teaching and learning. It was also favourably impressed by what we consider to be one of the key elements to good teaching and learning, that is, a good culture of communication and collaboration between staff and students.

We attach the highest value to providing the best quality education for students attending HKU. We believe we are producing graduates of the highest quality for Hong Kong and the region. The amount of time that staff put into not just their teaching, but the continual development of course material, and new methods for delivering this material, is exemplary. Because of the effort our staff put into the preparation of classes, student evaluations of teaching have risen substantially over the last five years (see, for example, Section 6.3.4 of the Self-Evaluation Document).

The Report is divided into three sections, one of which deals with the taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, one with the research postgraduate supervision and education, and one with the activities of HKU SPACE. While all three were reviewed relatively independently, by separate panels of experts, the conclusion is identical in being very positive about the work that the University does in each of these three areas.

(b) Research postgraduate education

In the research postgraduate area, we consider that the Report affirms our view that the reforms in 1998 to ensure higher quality of admissions and supervision were working well. The Report clearly reveals the excellent supervisor-postgraduate relationships in the University, referring as it does to the "atmosphere of partnership and collegiality between staff and students". The Panel was able to clearly see the attitude prevalent amongst research

postgraduate students at HKU, that they are “partners in research” with their academic supervisors. It has praised the attention that is paid by the University to the quality of the learning experience for such research postgraduates. We believe that all these points are very fitting for a research-led University.

(c) *HKU SPACE*

The University’s role in lifelong learning provision and in the area of community college development are well recognized in this report as being of high quality as befits an institution of HKU’s stature. It is clear that the University can be regarded as a clear leader in both areas and we are therefore appreciative that the work of HKU SPACE has been included in this pioneering level of external scrutiny. We note with some pride the comment that HKU SPACE is “exemplary”, this being a tribute to the efforts made by colleagues to embed a quality culture there. We are particularly pleased with the very positive remarks concerning the support and management of the part-time teaching staff, and also with the following areas that the Panel singled out for praise:

- the “Quality Assurance in HKU SPACE” Handbook and Brochure that we are happy to share with others;
- the SPACE Online Universal Learning (SOUL) web-based platform – efforts will continue to improve its features and to explore its wider potential;
- the strategic planning exercise initiated in 2001 that is now an established part of our ongoing work;
- the collaborative arrangements with academic units in the University and with overseas institutions;
- the role of the full-time staff in managing academic programmes;
- the inclusion of feedback from students that contributes to education quality work.

(d) *HKU SPACE Community College*

The inclusion of the HKU SPACE Community College in the TLQPR in only its second year of operation was most beneficial in giving the opportunity for a thorough self-review. We are pleased with the recognition of what has been achieved so far and will remain focussed on providing high quality, alternative routes to higher education. The areas of commendation singled out by the Panel are a fitting comment on the dedicated efforts of the Principal and staff of the College who can now build on the strong foundations laid by those involved in the establishment of the College.

2. **HKU’s Quality Assurance Processes**

The Report refers to the Self-Evaluation Document of the University, and it is appropriate to mention its key features, although a copy of it is also made available. These are:

- HKU has international external examiners from the best universities in the US (currently, for example, from Berkeley, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, UCLA), the UK (e.g. Cambridge, Imperial College, London, LSE, Oxford, UCL) and elsewhere. These, plus our membership of Universitas 21, allow the University to internally benchmark itself against quality universities. Visiting Professors offer a more informal means of comparison (in 2001, the largest number of Visiting Professors to HKU from any one institution came from Stanford and Oxford). The high number of international competitions won by HKU students and the success that HKU students have on their year abroad (e.g. at Oxford) also help us benchmark ourselves globally against the best.
- We have effected a major curriculum change in the University, leading to an education that emphasizes the development of skills and competencies for community leadership, breadth of knowledge, and general education. The magnitude of the changes over the last five years has been unprecedented in HKU’s history.

- Curriculum review and development at the course level takes place on a continuous basis throughout the campus, as the Report notes.
- The University is recognized as a regional leader in Problem-Based Learning (PBL), one of the major forms of student-centred learning.
- There is an ongoing commitment to incorporating IT in teaching and developing web-based teaching materials, as part of HKU's digital campus.
- University Development Funds and Teaching Development Grants are set aside to promote and implement further innovation, and will continue to be set aside for these purposes as long as the overall levels of funding to the University permit.
- We listen carefully to students, who provide feedback through evaluations of every course, Staff-Student Consultative Committees, student membership on key teaching and learning committees, web-based discussion groups, open forums and other means.
- Extensive use is made of data from stakeholders (employer satisfaction surveys, graduate surveys, students' evaluation of teaching, external examiners' views, etc.).
- Workshops, seminars, conferences and retreats foster a collaborative culture of discussion and debate about further development of teaching and learning.
- HKU has a comprehensive committee system to provide checks and balances, and to allow for further dialogue and decision-making.
- There is a comprehensive set of review systems at the University (reviewing departments, faculties, staff, centres).
- Many courses use international or global professional bodies for formal accreditation.
- Funding based on performance is one of the key features of HKU's new internal funding model, and teaching quality is given a high priority in this funding.
- A major reform to the research postgraduate education was initiated and implemented by the University in 1998, aimed at improving the teaching and learning environment.
- HKU SPACE has a well-documented and developed quality assurance system.

3. The Way Forward

While the Report is extremely positive, HKU is always making improvements. We continuously look at indications of performance to see where changes need to be made, and we review all of our activities on a regular and frequent basis. We take our role seriously as a *learning institution*, using this term in at least three senses, which all interact with each other. First, of course, we emphasize, as a priority, the provision of the best learning environment for our students. Second, we also aim to help the community, and that includes our community of scholars, to learn more about the world and its activities through the path-breaking research that we undertake and publish. Research is therefore learning, bringing new knowledge to the local as well as international community, and interacting with the learning that our students experience. Third, and in some ways just as important as the earlier two points, the term can be used in the "learning organization" sense that we are continually looking to review aspects of all our activities, that we are continually trying to further enhance our commitment to teaching and learning, and that we are continually reflecting upon whether we are providing the best for the community. The TLQPR itself has been valuable in this regard not simply because it has provided us with such a positive review of our teaching and learning processes, but also because it provides another source of valuable input to this culture of continuous improvement.

The Report makes a number of recommendations, as follows:

(a) *Evaluation*

We very much welcome the advice to further develop our evaluation of all the teaching innovations that we have recently adopted. We have been through a development stage since the last TLQPR where we have implemented a plethora of quality assurance and enhancement processes, which have, in turn, led to multiple changes in curriculum and pedagogy. These changes have not been implemented without evaluation. Indeed, the

Panel itself notes that there are institutional mechanisms in place to generate evaluative information from a wide variety of sources including students, employers, external examiners and peer reviewers, and that there is a willingness amongst staff to evaluate the various approaches they have developed in their teaching. Our evaluation systems currently in place at HKU include our faculty review system, our systems of performance indicators to assess aspects of our teaching, our budget system which requires self-evaluation, and committees to oversee all of these. More formally, we have evaluated some of our new initiatives, for example, the PBL systems in our faculties of Medicine and Dentistry, our notebook computer programme for undergraduates, and our new curriculum structure. So, we entirely agree with the Panel that evaluation of new initiatives is essential. In particular, we believe that tertiary institutions generally need more evaluation of IT in teaching and learning.

In terms of further development, we will be looking at setting up an advisory unit (for example, using our own experts from the Faculty of Education perhaps in collaboration with the Centre for the Advancement of University Teaching) to assist staff in evaluating innovations in teaching and learning. We will bring in a requirement for all newly proposed programmes to set specific targets against which to evaluate their success. We will invite, at regular intervals, more self-evaluation of degree programmes using the external examiners, for submission to the Teaching Quality Committee. We will ensure that all Teaching Development Grant proposals and University Development Fund proposals have targets and evaluation systems built in.

(b) *Central and faculty management*

HKU is noted for the quality of its staff, who keep abreast of the latest developments in teaching and learning, and who are keen to develop initiatives in teaching. We are pleased to note that the Panel was favourably impressed by “every unit” (the staff and students of departments and faculties) at HKU that they visited, and that “there is a reflective approach among the staff who are driving the (curriculum development) changes at unit level, and a willingness to experiment with and evaluate various approaches that may lead to the desired learning outcomes”. The senior management is able to ascertain the level of commitment of units to quality teaching through various means, and we believe we have struck a good balance between unit- or individual-led quality in teaching and learning and central management of initiatives. The Panel similarly reports that this balance is having a “positive effect” on the work of the University. Trust in the quality and hard work of academic staff is a fundamental attribute of HKU culture.

The Panel has suggested that HKU should develop structures that enable rather more robust, and evidence-based, central facilitation and management of unit initiatives, and stronger leadership and management at the faculty level. This was, indeed, already being implemented at the time of the Panel’s visit, and we are pleased to have the Panel’s support on this. *The learning network* system, just set up, is intended to provide a rather stronger system for helping to develop teaching initiatives further and faster, through sharing experiences and dissemination of best practices. The activities of this system, which extends throughout the University, are being monitored through a system of development plans, targets and reports. In the same way, the new funding system is being implemented so that the University’s priorities are disseminated through the faculty to the departmental level. HKU is currently undergoing a number of further management changes involving the faculty, and is considering the results of a further review in this area. These together will strengthen the structure of the faculty, providing easier routes for both the top-down, centrally-led initiatives to be implemented, as well as bottom-up engagement in the University’s strategic priorities. The proposed changes include the appointment of Deans and the establishment of a Vice-Chancellor’s Advisory Group of Deans.

(c) *Refinement of some new initiatives*

We agree that all new initiatives need ongoing development and improvement. That is part of a learning organization, and we value the recommendations made by the Panel with respect to particular innovations.

There are some detailed suggestions in the Report, such as the issues of capstone courses and filling the vacant positions in the Centre for the Advancement of University Teaching. We thank the Panel for their detailed examination of our activities and we will certainly look carefully into these. On the capstone courses issue, for example, such courses do exist in many parts of the University (the best example would be the final year thesis), but this is a useful prompt for us to bring this issue forward in our priorities for change. As a University, we are aware of many detailed areas in which we feel that further development in the teaching and learning aspects would be valuable, and we will continue to push ahead with such changes.

(d) *Funding model*

This radically new model uses multiple measures of quality as its basis, and rewards those parts of the University that are doing best. It had already developed along the lines recommended by the Report before the Report was released. Account is made of education quality work activities, while the structures via which information is fed back to central management are emerging. These include the reporting of development plans from units to faculties, and from faculties to central committees, as well as the commitment of the Management Information Unit to acquiring and making available data on a plethora of performance indicators to relevant parts of the management structure.

(e) *The Graduate School*

Although the Report notes that there are good ad hoc arrangements in some departments for systematic teacher training courses for research postgraduates, the University had been planning to complement these activities by putting on courses centrally. Before the release of the Report, “Learning to Teach” courses had been offered by the University’s Centre for the Advancement of University Teaching starting in September 2002, and have attracted very good responses and feedback from research postgraduate students who attended. More courses are planned for this semester and this provision will become a regular feature.

In addition to this, the Graduate School is also making good progress in the following aspects as part of the University’s *continuous* efforts in education quality work:

- offering training courses for inexperienced/young supervisors;
- encouraging the formation of faculty research postgraduate staff-student consultative committees;
- formalizing arrangements for students of local universities to take courses from other institutions;
- discussions to restructure coursework;
- further improving internal communication with individual staff, students as well as faculty and departmental research postgraduate committees; and
- providing a framework for good practice that helps to ensure both an appropriate degree of comparability of the experiences of students within different departments, and the exchange of good practice across those departments. This good practice relates *inter alia* to coursework, supervision, mentoring and career development of students.

(f) *HKU SPACE*

The Panel's recommendations for HKU SPACE accord with the School's thinking on future developments. In particular, we acknowledge the need to build creatively on the strengths of the part-time teacher force so as to reinforce their quality teaching contributions. Efforts are currently made to work with the strongest possible teaching institutions for the area of academic demand concerned. Our strategic plan to differentiate by quality and the increasing pace of globalization point the School in the direction of working with quality partners. Work is already in progress on a school-wide credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS).

The recommendation to pay attention to the maintenance of quality as programmes continue to expand is well taken. We believe that the existing quality assurance structure will facilitate this as we do constantly keep this under review via a Quality Assurance Process Review to ensure that our systems continue to deliver the framework for high quality programmes. As part of its ongoing strategic planning the School has recently reviewed its academic and management structure and is in the process of implementing changes that will enhance academic management and hence contribute to the maintenance of quality.

The comment on stronger integration and alignment with the University echoes the recommendations from an internal University Review in January 2002, and specific action plans from this Review are already being implemented.

(g) *HKU SPACE Community College*

We note the recommendations made and will certainly look to providing distinctive niches and programmes to enforce the use of English and transferable skills. Steps are already underway to track the success of its students and these will certainly be developed. The provision of campus facilities is an issue that HKU SPACE and the College attach high priority to and is currently being followed up vigorously within the constraints of the self-financing imperative, although we already have in place extensive support from some units such as the library and sports centre. The issue of progression for students is another area of active development and will also be focussed within HKU SPACE's CATS discussions.

4. **Summary**

It is important for HKU to be seen as comparable to the best universities internationally. We try to achieve this through many means, for example, our external examiner system and our review systems, both involving respected academics from overseas, and the international accreditation of some programmes. We benchmark ourselves in terms of many of our performance indicators against other leading research-led universities abroad. The fact that an international panel of experts can be so positively impressed by the overall quality of our teaching and learning processes, and the fact that such complimentary comments were directed at the undergraduate, taught postgraduate, research postgraduate and continuing education (HKU SPACE) programmes alike, both allow us to believe that we are well on our way to achieving our goal of being a leading international quality university. The opportunity for self-evaluation was itself a valuable developmental exercise and the judgments that HKU's quality work is on the right track gives us great encouragement for further improvement in the future.

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