

### **III. Second Round Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews**

**Response from**

**The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology**

**HKUST : To Advance Learning and Knowledge**

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### 1. The TLQPR Report

#### (a) *General conclusions and recommendations*

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology is grateful for the encouraging and constructive report of the TLQPR Panel on our progress in developing a comprehensive and coherent system for assuring and improving the quality of teaching and learning. Since the First Round of Teaching and Learning Quality Reviews, the University's administration and teaching staff have worked hard to address the concerns that were raised in the report of that exercise. It was heartening, therefore, to see that the Panel had found "significant progress since the first round of Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews," and that "deficiencies in quality assurance procedures relating to teaching and learning, identified in the first round Report, have been conscientiously addressed."

These encouraging words will play an important role in keeping us focused on continuous improvement as we move forward. Even more valuable, however, are the specific directions that the Panel has suggested where we can and should make significant further progress. The Review looked at taught programs, particularly at the undergraduate level, and also at research postgraduate education and continuing education programs. It made recommendations in all these areas, but the most critical recommendations deal with quality assurance of the taught programs. The other two areas are briefly discussed in (b) and (c) below.

A number of the recommendations are related to the conclusion that "there is not yet on campus a fully-developed overall system of quality assurance and improvement for teaching and learning." In particular, the system needs to be more coherent, and external review procedures could be more effective. To some extent, these shortcomings are the result of the fact that a number of the processes that make up the current system have been developed since the First Round of TLQPR. The cohesion of these newer processes with the earlier framework is still evolving, and even without further intervention the coherence of the overall system would improve. Nevertheless, the introduction of new elements to plug the gaps identified by the TLQPR Panel should serve to accelerate the development of the quality assurance and improvement system. Our proposals for doing this will be outlined in the section below on the way forward.

Another theme of the Report is the need to find the appropriate balance between the priorities attached to teaching and research in the institutional culture. While the Panel found that "the language of educational quality processes has been taken on board at all levels of the institution," it does not believe the institution has "embraced QA in relation to teaching and learning, to the point where it is part of institutional culture on a par with research activity." This is an important and difficult issue, since the University's research culture is one of its significant strengths. However, the strides in bringing teaching out of the shadow of research in recent years are acknowledged in many of the Panel's comments. Continuing to raise the profile of teaching in the years to come is consistent with the University's mission "to advance *learning* and knowledge, through *teaching* and research." In this mission statement, learning and teaching are not only put on a par with research, but come first.

**(b) *Research postgraduate education***

The Panel noted that “the University was developing a sound approach to teaching and learning quality for research postgraduate education,” and pointed out a number of developments that it felt were worthy of commendation. The close alignment of teaching and research in these programs has no doubt allowed the strengths of the University’s research culture to support and reinforce the culture of teaching and learning for research postgraduates. Further refinements have been made to quality assurance since the Review, and these will be described in the section below on the way forward.

**(c) *Continuing and professional education***

Credit-bearing programs leading to an academic award are primarily the responsibility of the Schools, particularly the School of Engineering and the School of Business and Management. In the early days of the University’s development, a decision was taken to focus external programs on “high end” continuing and professional development that supported the University’s mission to “assist in the economic and social development of Hong Kong.” Such programs were often derived from relationships developed between the academic Departments or Schools and segments of business and industry with which they had built ties. This has translated into a present day strategy where, as the Panel has noted, most of the School-based programs focus on “high quality at premium prices.” The TLQPR Panel seemed favorably inclined to this approach, while making several suggestions for making the programs more accessible.

The relatively new unit for delivery of continuing and professional education, the College of Lifelong Learning (CL3) was also reviewed, although strictly speaking its programs did not fall within the original scope of the Review. Understanding the nature of CL3 was, however, necessary for the Panel to gain an overall picture of how HKUST serves the continuing education sector. In its comments on the operations of CL3, the Report makes a number of useful suggestions for clarifying the role and organizational placement of the unit. Our response to these suggestions is included in the section on the way forward.

**2. *Teaching and Learning Quality Processes at HKUST***

At the institutional level, the responsibility for implementation of teaching and learning quality assurance is shared by the administration and the Senate. Within the administration, the office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs plays the key role, and three committees of the Senate oversee various aspects of the system. These are the Committee on Undergraduate Studies (CUS), the Committee on Postgraduate Studies (CPS), and the Committee on Teaching and Learning Quality (CTLQ). The CUS and CPS have primary responsibility for programs, curricula, and courses in their respective areas of concern. The CTLQ was added after the first round TLQPR, to advise the Senate on policy related to teaching and learning quality, and to monitor the implementation of quality assurance and related education quality work in the deliver of the programs.

Under the central administration are the Schools (equivalent to the faculties in most other institutions), and parallel processes operate at that level. The administrative

leadership is provided by the Dean's office, and a School Board reporting to the Senate is the collegial governance body that oversees academic matters.

Within each School, the Departments (or Divisions within the School of Humanities and Social Science) have the primary responsibility for the delivery of courses and programs, and play the most important role in the assurance and improvement of quality. Each Department has adopted its own committees and other structures for quality assurance, but all have a Student-Staff Liaison Committee to ensure that the views and needs of students are fully understood and addressed by these processes.

External input and advice is sought from external academic advisory committees. Each of the four Schools has an International Academic Advisory Committee that includes prominent academics from prestigious institutions around the world. Professional programs also have industry or corporate advisory bodies to provide advice from both local and global practitioners. HKUST is unusual in also having a majority of its students enrolled in programs that have been professionally accredited. Engineering programs are reviewed by the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers, a signatory to the international Washington Accord on mutual recognition of engineering accreditation. Business programs have been accredited by the U.S.-based AACSB and also carry the European EQUIS quality label granted by the EFMD.

To supply coherence to this multi-tier system of administrative and collegial responsibility, the design includes interlocking membership on the key integrating bodies. The Associate Vice-Presidents for Academic Affairs are the Secretaries of CUS, CPS, and CTLQ, and the first two include representatives from the each Dean's office. All three include academic staff nominated by their School Boards, as well as student members nominated by the Students' Union.

A substantial body of policy, examples of good practice, and advice on quality assurance issues has been collected and made available to all staff on the HKUST Teaching and Learning Quality Portal at

<http://publish.ust.hk/vpaa/tlq/index.html>

The material on this web site includes references to all of the relevant policy and procedure manuals that are also available on-line.

One of the means by which CTLQ monitors quality assurance is to review annual reports from the units about their activities. In 2001-/02 these reports took the form of Education Quality Work (EQW) Profiles, using the framework for the second round TLQPR as a basis for reporting activities in the domains of the review. These EQW Profiles are also available on the Teaching and Learning Quality Portal, and are used as a means to communicate examples of good practice. Departments and Schools will be required to update these regularly to demonstrate continuous improvement of both programs and the processes used to assure their quality.

### **3. The Way Forward**

The thrust of a number of the recommendations of the TLQPR Report are summarized in paragraph 3.2.1, which states:

*HKUST should build upon recent actions in order to further develop QA&I initiatives into a comprehensive, systematic and coherent system that integrates activity at the institutional, school and unit level.*

A number of the specific recommendations that follow from this are discussed in more detail below. This recommendation suggests that the progress made to date represents a good foundation for this further development. It would seem, however, that the introduction of new elements to the system could accelerate this development and help to ensure that "...continuous improvement of teaching and learning is as much a part of the institutional culture as research activity [recommendation 3.2.2]."

In particular, we intend to set up a system of what for the purpose of this discussion will be termed *external assessors*, who will be appointed from the ranks of sister institutions in Hong Kong who are well-versed in the TLQPR language and culture. This will not only provide a means to share best practice across institutions, but will form the basis for better integration and coherence of existing processes. At this early stage of discussion, the decision has not been made whether the external assessors will be appointed by Departments, much as traditional external examiners are, or whether they will be responsible primarily to a higher level of administration or to the CTLQ. It may also be the case that a one-to-one match of external assessors to Departments is not the most effective mode of operation. These issues will be thoroughly explored in the coming months, but whatever the outcome, the resulting core of external experts will be able to function in a variety of roles as explained below.

**(a) *Integration of Department, School, and University Efforts***

There are various ways in which the external assessors will be brought into the system to improve the integration and coherence of the HKUST system of teaching and learning quality assurance. First of all, one of the roles of the assessors will be to review and advise Departments on their quality assurance processes. We will then have the set of external assessors for each School meet with and make a collective report to the School Advisory Committee when it meets. This will bring these international advisory groups into the discussion of teaching and learning issues. Finally, either all or a representative sub-group of external assessors will constitute an advisory committee to CTLQ, thus bringing to that committee not only their first-hand assessment of what is happening on the ground, but their knowledge and experience of practice in the other institutions.

While the details of the operation of this system will have to be worked out after consultation with the Schools, Departments, the Senate, and academic staff, the following is a possible scenario.

- External assessors would visit Departments annually to review their teaching and learning quality assurance and improvement. The Department would receive a formal report documenting accomplishments, calling attention to deficiencies, and recommending improvements. Copies of the report, along with the Department's response, would be sent to the Dean, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and the CTLQ.

- Once every two years, in conjunction with the meeting of the School's International Advisory Committee, the external assessors for the Departments in the School would prepare a report to the Committee, and meet with the Committee to discuss it.
- At least annually, an advisory committee with membership drawn from the external assessors (perhaps the sub-group that met with School Advisory Committees during that year) to discuss and advise on the institutional framework, as well as discuss issues that arise from the Departmental reviews and Advisory Committee discussions.

**(b) Management Culture**

The TLQPR Report suggests that HKUST needs

*...to develop a culture, and associated practices, where senior managers see it as a significant responsibility, and are more prepared to take it upon themselves, to energetically drive moves to improve the quality of teaching and learning.*

*[recommendation 3.2.4]*

In the discussion with the TLQPR Panel, one of the areas of concern was the active engagement of the Deans in education quality work. The design of the external assessor system, as discussed in (a) above, has enlarging this engagement as one of its goals. The external assessors will send their reports to the Deans' offices, and also make a report on their finding to the School's International Advisory Committee, which itself reports to the Dean. Bringing to bear the prestige of the Advisory Committee on teaching and learning issues will ensure that the views of the assessors are taken seriously, and encourage the School administration to take the initiative to drive improvement.

Another area where improvement can be made is in the structure of the CTLQ. At present, unlike CUS and CPS, all its School representatives are academic staff nominated by the School Boards. The other two committees have one representative nominated by the School Board and one member representing the Dean, typically an Associate Dean. Changing the CTLQ to have the same structure will bring the Deans' offices more directly into the campus-wide discussion of teaching and learning quality concerns.

**(c) Committee on Teaching and Learning Quality**

Recommendation 3.2.5 calls for

*...the development of CTLQ, to become more of a force for continuous improvement of teaching and learning on campus.*

Two changes proposed in (b) above address aspects of this recommendation. First of all, we propose a specific mechanism for the formation of an advisory committee for CTLQ, as called for in this recommendation. Second, we will engage the Deans' offices in the work of CTLQ through a change in the structure of its membership.

The contact between the CTLQ and the proposed external assessors will also, we believe, help to integrate the work of this committee and its counterparts at the School and Departmental levels. Through their membership on the CTLQ advisory committee, the assessors will bring a fresh perspective on both good practice and problems found throughout the University.

**(d) *Improvements in Existing Practices***

Several of the recommendations aim at specific improvements in existing practices. In particular, recommendation 3.2.8 suggests that we

| *Broaden and extend the range of evidence used to evaluate teaching quality, beyond student feedback.*

It suggests the use of external examiner reports and peer review as possible ways to achieve this. The proposal above to introduce a system of external assessors is one response to this recommendation. In addition, the University has recently adopted a policy on peer review of teaching, which will be implemented during 2003/04. This policy, it needs to be said, does not make such review mandatory, but rather establishes a mechanism for ensuring that it is available for formative purposes, while providing incentives for academic staff to make use of it.

The recommendation also calls for strengthening systems for collecting data relevant to teaching and learning. Responding to this will require further work and study, but we believe the more integrated institutional processes proposed above would facilitate it. Similarly, better integration and greater coherence will provide the means to respond to recommendation 3.2.9, which calls for

| ...the institution as a whole [to] move to develop a greater emphasis on student-centered learning...

**(e) *Research Postgraduate Education***

The TLQPR Report was generally satisfied that

| ...the University was developing a sound approach to teaching and learning quality for research postgraduate education....

There were recommendations for improvement in the areas that would affect duration of program, and completion and attrition rates. These will all be addressed, but it is worth reporting that the policy requiring research students to file an annual progress report has been strengthened. These reports require the review and approval of the student's supervisor, and provide an important means for monitoring whether or not a student is making satisfactory progress. However, in the past a substantial fraction of reports were not completed in a timely fashion. A new policy adopted by the Senate will now block a student's registration if the progress report is not on record at the time he or she registers for a new semester of study.

**(f) *Strategic Development of the College of Lifelong Learning (CL3)***

The Report's review of the University's continuing and professional education programs raised important questions about the strategic role and organizational positioning of CL3. Both before and after the TLQPR visit, this has been a subject of considerable discussion within the administration of

HKUST. This resulted in a presentation to the University Administrative Committee (UAC) at its meeting on 16 June 2003 by the chairman of the Sub-Committee on Continuing and Professional Education (SCCPE). He presented the outcomes of the SCCPE's review of strategic directions for continuing and professional education programs, and its review of the work of CL3. In its statement of strategic directions, the SCCPE proposed that HKUST should focus on its core competencies in offering executive and professional programs at the postgraduate level. These should be primarily the domain of the continuing and professional units within the Schools. Programs at the undergraduate and sub-degree levels aimed at the lifelong learning needs of the general workforce would be the primary focus of CL3's activity. The report proposed that the chairman of SCCPE should serve *ex officio* as the University's representative on the Hong Kong Federation for Continuing Education.

In its review of CL3, the SCCPE recommended expanding the Board of Directors, to include the chairman of SCCPE and the chairman of Continuing Education Review Board (CERB) as *ex officio* members, along with three members of the University community appointed by the President. The report also proposed that CL3 retain its registration as a for-profit company for the time being, and suggested that the future status of company registration could be a matter for the Board of Directors to decide.

#### **4. Summary**

HKUST finds the report of the second round Teaching and Learning Process Review to be both encouraging and constructive. It is encouraged by the recognition of the progress that has been made since the first round TLQPR, and grateful for the useful recommendations made for improvement. In responding to these recommendations, we are proposing a significant addition to the mix of quality assurance tools. While the use of external assessors is hardly original, we believe that our integration of them into all institutional levels of the current system is a novel way to promote the integration and coherence of that system itself. Much remains to be done to flesh out this proposal, and even more must be done to ensure that it produces the desired results. But these tasks will be undertaken within the spirit of a commitment to continuous improvement, and with the interests of our students foremost in our minds.