Overview Report of Quality Assurance Council Second Audit Cycle

September 2017

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Background

The Quality Assurance Council (QAC) was established in April 2007 as a semi-autonomous non-statutory body under the aegis of the University Grants Committee (UGC) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.

The UGC is committed to safeguarding and promoting the quality of UGC-funded universities and their activities. In view of the universities' expansion of their activities and a growing public interest in quality issues, the QAC was established to assist the UGC in providing third-party oversight of the quality of the universities' educational provision. The QAC aims to assist the UGC in assuring the quality of programmes (however funded) offered by UGC-funded universities.

Conduct of QAC Quality Audits

Audits are undertaken by Panels appointed by the QAC from its Register of Auditors. Audit Panels comprise local and overseas academics and, in some cases a lay member from the local community. All auditors hold, or have held, senior positions within their professions. Overseas auditors are experienced in quality audit in higher education. The audit process is therefore one of peer review.

The QAC's core operational tasks derived from its terms of reference are:

- the conduct of institutional quality audits
- the promotion of quality assurance and enhancement and the spread of good practice

The QAC's approach to quality audit is based on the principle of 'fitness for purpose'. Audit Panels assess the extent to which universities are fulfilling their stated mission and purpose and confirm the procedures in place for assuring the quality of the learning opportunities offered to students and the academic standards by which students' level of performance and capability are assessed and reported. The QAC Audit also examines the effectiveness of a university's quality systems and considers the evidence used to demonstrate that these systems meet the expectations of stakeholders.

Full details of the audit procedures, including the methodology and scope of the audit, are provided in the Audit Manual for the QAC second audit cycle which is available at http://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/qac/manual/auditmanual2.pdf.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(a) Introduction

This Overview Report provides an overview of the eight institution-specific Audit Reports produced during the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) second cycle quality audits of the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities of Hong Kong. These audits were conducted between 2015 and 2017 by Audit Panels appointed by, and acting on behalf of, the QAC. The individual Audit Reports presented a summary of the findings of the quality audits, supported by more detailed analysis and commentary on the following areas:

- the setting and maintaining of academic standards;
- the quality of student learning opportunities;
- student achievement;
- quality enhancement; and
- postgraduate provision.

Audit findings were identified by Audit Panels in the Audit Reports as features of good practice worthy of commendation, recommendations for further consideration by the university, and affirmations of progress with actions already in place as a result of the university's own self-review. The Audit Reports also provided a commentary on two Audit Themes: *Enhancing the student learning experience*; and *Global engagements: strategies and current developments* and drew some overall conclusions based on the findings. This Overview Report is organised similarly with the final section drawing overall conclusions about the strengths of the UGC sector and matters requiring further attention across the sector. Case studies illustrating some of the commendations made are included in each of the main sections of this Overview Report.

(b) The setting and maintaining of academic standards

Audit Panels found much to commend in relation to *The setting and maintaining of academic standards* across the majority of the eight UGC-funded universities. They singled out for attention seven features of good practice which can be clustered as follows:

- externality in setting and maintaining high academic standards;
- particularly effective systems of annual and periodic review; and
- well conceptualised and documented frameworks for setting and maintaining academic standards.

Audit Panels also made a total of two affirmations and fifteen recommendations across almost all universities in relation to *The setting and maintaining of academic standards*. No Audit Panel found direct evidence that gave cause for concern that academic standards had been compromised in practice. Nevertheless, several Audit Panels raised concerns about the efficacy of particular quality assurance systems through which individual universities claimed to know that their academic standards were secure. Six recommendations and one affirmation across some of the universities requiring attention related to the following issues:

- lack of clarity in the setting of standards and inconsistency in the implementation of procedures concerning academic integrity;
- insufficient direction at institutional level resulting in inconsistent practice on a range of assessment matters;
- weaknesses in maintaining academic standards in programmes delivered wholly or partly outside Hong Kong; and
- absence of a central repository holding current and archived definitive documentation of programmes and courses.

Nine other recommendations and the remaining affirmation, which were distributed across most of the universities, were primarily enhancement focused and fell into three broad categories:

- articulating organisational structures, policies, procedures and terminology concerning academic standards more clearly and communicating them more effectively, to ensure that they are applied systematically and fairly across the university;
- strengthening confidence in academic standards through external comment and benchmarking activities; and
- extending the enhancements made to undergraduate (Ug) systems to taught postgraduate (TPg) programmes.

(c)   The quality of learning opportunities

Audit Panels were particularly interested in exploring ways in which universities had responded to the challenges of managing the transition to the four-year Ug degree programme. *The quality of learning opportunities* produced ten commendations distributed across most of the universities and falling into three broad categories:

- creative, holistic and meticulous approaches to implementing and monitoring the new Ug curriculum;
- comprehensive and targeted student support structures; and
- diverse, mission-centred and extensive staff development provision.

Audit Panels made a total of four affirmations and ten recommendations across the majority of the universities in relation to *The quality of learning opportunities*. One affirmation concerned building English language competency and developing teaching skills for research postgraduate (RPg) students, while the others all affirmed the steps one university was taking to further its distinctive mission through curriculum development and by rebalancing the workloads of academic staff in relation to teaching and research.

The ten recommendations fell into the following categories, with those relating to e-learning anticipating a prompt response:

- exercising central oversight in relation to the quality of learning opportunities;
- expediting the process of embedding e-learning as an integral part of learning and teaching; and
- maximising the benefit to staff and students of enhancement activity.

(d)   Student achievement

The ten commendations made by Audit Panels across more than half of the universities reflected the expanded understanding of student achievement expressed in the Audit Manual and identified features of good practice that can be associated with four aspects of this topic:

- rigorous, comprehensive and supportive approaches to student achievement;
- effective assessment practices that promote student achievement;
- emphasis on the development of the whole person; and

- impressive levels of student achievement in a variety of manifestations.

Audit Panels made a total of three affirmations and eight recommendations in relation to *Student achievement*, distributed across a majority of the universities. One university received a recommendation that outcome-based education and criterion-referenced assessment be implemented fully, while another received an affirmation of the thorough action it was taking to ensure that these approaches remained firmly embedded, several years after full implementation.

With the exception of one other recommendation requiring reinstatement of rigorous testing of standards of English competency at entry and exit points, the two remaining affirmations and six remaining recommendations were enhancement-orientated. They can be organised into the following clusters:

- developing and refining the means to capture and analyse direct evidence of student achievement;
- focusing enhancement activity on institution-specific and distinctive aspects of student achievement; and
- further facilitating students' understanding of grade descriptors.

(e)   Quality enhancement

Three commendations were made across several universities. Two focused on ways in which the university's centrally driven, strategic emphasis on systematic enhancement had had a positive effect throughout the university. The third commendation highlighted the significant impact of the development of a common core curriculum.

Three affirmations and three recommendations were made in relation to *Quality enhancement*, distributed across some of the universities and falling into the following categories:

- developing / extending external benchmarking across the university;
- increasing the volume and enhancing the value of student data collections; and
- strengthening independent external scrutiny of each taught programme and specifying lines of responsibility for quality enhancement.

(f)   Postgraduate provision

Of the six commendations made in relation to *Postgraduate provision* across some of the universities, five were related to RPg provision whereas one was related to TPg provision. The commendations included:

- establishing and fostering a rich research environment;
- high quality support for RPg students;
- the collective efforts of research supervisors to offer international perspectives;
- the clear guidance provided in the RPg handbook;
- biannual tracking of RPg students; and
- guidelines for review of TPg programmes.

Of the five affirmations made across some of the universities, three were related to RPg and two to TPg provision, while of the eight recommendations distributed across the majority of universities, three were related to RPg and five to TPg matters. The RPg affirmations and recommendations can be clustered as follows:

- addressing academic integrity; and
- enhancing the RPg learning environment.

TPg affirmations and recommendations fell into the following categories:

- strengthening the institutional policy and quality assurance framework for TPg provision; and
- determining the means by which the achievements of TPg students can more effectively be enabled, supported and celebrated.

(g)   Audit Theme: Enhancing the student learning experience

Audit Panels made eight commendations, distributed across more than half of the universities in relation to the Audit Theme: *Enhancing the student learning experience,* clustered around the following aspects of the Audit Theme:

- the wide range of learning opportunities;
- the role played by student services in enhancing the student learning experience;
- institution-wide large-scale enhancement initiatives; and
- specific innovative features of good practice.

Three affirmations and recommendations were made in respect of the Audit Theme: *Enhancing the student learning experience,* distributed across several universities. The affirmation recognised the bolder initiatives and a more ambitious approach one university is taking to enhance students' e-learning. The recommendations both focused on the need to develop an overarching, coherent strategic approach to enhancement.

(h)   Audit Theme: Global engagements: strategies and current developments

All eight universities received at least one of the ten commendations made in relation to Audit Theme: *Global engagements: strategies and current developments.* These can be grouped as follows:

- strategic approaches to global engagements;
- substantial and proactive development of overseas opportunities for students; and
- globalising the curriculum.

This Audit Theme gave rise to three affirmations and five recommendations distributed across a majority of the universities. They fell into the following categories:

- strategic approaches to globalisation;
- internationalisation of the student learning environment;
- strengthening mechanisms for assuring the quality of the student learning experience in international exchange; and
- increasing levels of participation in outbound mobility programmes of all types.

(i)   Conclusions

Overall strengths of the UGC sector

- The well justified reputation of the UGC-funded universities in their respective fields;
- The distinctive visions, missions and role statements of the eight autonomous UGC-funded universities that have a common commitment to quality;
- The successful transition to the four-year Ug degree programme;

- The well founded establishment of extensive and complementary programmes of academic, co- and extra-curricular learning opportunities;
- Diverse, wide-ranging and mission-sensitive provision to support the professional development of staff;
- Creative, proactive and integrated networks of student support services;
- The development and effective communication of conceptual frameworks for student achievement;
- Sophisticated mechanisms for ascertaining the extent to which students are actually achieving graduate attributes and programme intended learning outcomes; and
- A strong strategic focus on internationalisation.

Matters requiring further attention across the UGC sector as a whole

- Celebrating the successful transition to the four-year Ug degree internationally;
- Achieving the right balance between ensuring central institutional oversight and respecting the autonomy of academic units;
- Identifying opportunities for sector-wide collaborative enhancement in key areas where the quality and maturity of practice varies between universities;
- Ensuring all universities have a clear pedagogical strategy for e-learning as an integral part of their approach to teaching, learning and assessment together with an associated plan for resourcing associated infrastructural requirements;
- Encouraging all universities to explore means by which students could track their achievement across academic, co- and extra-curricular activities;
- Identifying the ways in which some of the key benefits emerging from the four-year Ug programme could be extended to postgraduate (Pg) and particularly TPg students, while respecting the particular characteristics of the Pg student body; and
- Promoting integration between local, Mainland and international students at all levels.

1. INTRODUCTION

Explanation of the audit methodology

1.1   This is the Overview Report of the second cycle of quality audits conducted by Audit Panels appointed by, and acting on behalf of, the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) between 2015 and 2017.   The eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities were audited in turn, in the following order:

- The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST);
- The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK);
- Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU);
- The University of Hong Kong (HKU);
- Lingnan University (LU);
- City University of Hong Kong (CityU);
- The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU); and
- The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK).

1.2   Each audit was based on an Institutional Submission, prepared by the university itself, following a period of self-review, and submitted to QAC from 12 weeks before the relevant Audit Visit.   In each case, a one-day Institutional Briefing and Initial Meeting of the Audit Panel was held six to eight weeks before the Audit Visit, to set the agenda and discuss the detailed arrangements for the visit. In the case of HKBU, a further site visit to an off-shore campus was made by the Audit Panel Chair and the Audit Co-ordinator.

1.3   All Audit Panels met a wide range of staff, students and external stakeholders, typically including university presidents and senior teams; deans, heads of departments and programme directors or equivalent; members of quality assurance and enhancement committees at university and faculty levels; teaching staff; those responsible for supervision of research postgraduate (RPg) students; non-academic professional support staff; a wide range of students, including undergraduate (Ug), taught postgraduate (TPg) and RPg; and external stakeholders including employers and alumni.

1.4   The Audit Manual for the QAC second cycle (pp 22-23) introduced audit trails to enable Audit Panels to look at aspects of a university's quality assurance

processes in greater depth. All Audit Panels availed themselves of this opportunity to investigate the effectiveness of institutional policies and procedures, typically identifying two discrete audit trails or one multi-faceted audit trail.

1.5   The Audit Manual (pp 28-30) also introduced Audit Themes to the process to support the strategic development of the UGC sector; to promote continuing improvement; to provide the opportunity for sharing between institutions in the development of key areas for quality enhancement and to allow the dissemination of good practice. In the second audit cycle, Institutional Submissions and Audit Reports addressed two cross-cutting themes: *Enhancing the student learning experience* and *Global engagements: strategies and current developments*.

1.6   All Audit Panels comprised four members, with the exception of HKUST, for which the Panel of four was augmented by one local lay member with relevant industrial expertise. Two of the four regular members of each Panel were senior members of staff from UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong, with experience of managing academic programmes and responsibility for overseeing academic standards and quality. The other two were non-local members who had acquired international experience of academic standards and quality either within an academic institution or in the context of working for a quality assurance agency or similar organisation. In each case, one of the non-local auditors was appointed Audit Panel Chair and presided over proceedings with a degree of detachment from the UGC-funded universities.

1.7   The Audit Co-ordinator acted as secretary to all eight Audit Panels and took responsibility for organising, managing and recording the audit process. The Audit Co-ordinator was not a member of the Audit Panels and did not contribute to the judgement of the Audit Panels.

1.8   Audit Panels evaluated:

- the setting and maintaining of academic standards;
- the quality of student learning opportunities;
- student achievement;
- quality enhancement; and
- postgraduate provision

and identified their audit findings as features of good practice worthy of commendation, recommendations for further consideration by the university, and affirmation of progress with actions already in place as a result of the university's own self-review. They also provided evaluative commentary on the two Audit Themes and drew overall conclusions based on their findings.

1.9   Within three months of publication of the Audit Report, universities were required to submit to QAC an Action Plan giving details of how recommendations would be addressed and how features of good practice would be disseminated. The Action Plan subsequently formed the basis for the university's Progress Report to be submitted to QAC within 18 months of the publication of the Audit Report. In the Progress Report, universities are expected to provide evidence that proposed actions have been implemented, together with details of other developments that may have occurred as a result of the university's reflections on the outcomes of the Audit.

1.10   For ease of reference, this Overview Report will consider the findings of the second cycle of quality audits by considering each of these headings in turn, concluding with reflections on the generic strengths of the UGC sector and areas for improvement.

2.   THE SETTING AND MAINTAINING OF ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Introduction

2.1   Academic standards are defined in terms of the expected levels of achievement of students that reflect the acquisition of knowledge, the development of capability and the exercise of intellectual skills by students. They apply across all disciplines and reflect the expectations established by institutions as well as the academic requirements and competences associated with individual programmes and courses (Audit Manual p 6).

Commendations

2.2   Audit Panels found much to commend in relation to *The setting and maintaining of academic standards* across most of the eight UGC-funded universities. They singled out for attention seven features of good practice which can be clustered as follows:

- externality in setting and maintaining high academic standards, as evidenced by: a broad approach to the international referencing of standards via the establishment of a visiting committee system utilising appropriate international expertise; external examiners' reports, professional accreditation, curriculum and Faculty reviews, graduate destinations and employer surveys; and the strategic and systematic use of external reference points;

- particularly effective systems of annual and periodic review, variously noted for: a comprehensive and integrated annual reporting framework on teaching and learning; careful review of reports by the relevant university committee and the high quality of feedback subsequently provided by the university-level committee to programme directors; and

- well conceptualised and documented frameworks for setting and maintaining academic standards which are: subtly nuanced to differentiate between the achievements represented by Ug, TPg, professional doctoral and research doctoral awards; and evident in a range of university processes.

Case study: CityU

2.3   CityU effectively deploys its approach to setting academic standards via thorough processes of programme design and approval, which ensure, in response to an affirmation made in the 2010 QAC Audit, that course and programme intended learning outcomes are aligned with the appropriate set of graduate attributes. Graduate attributes are themselves aligned with the University's mission, vision and five core values of excellence, honesty, freedom of enquiry, accountability and civility and collegiality. The Audit Report commended the four sets of five interlocking, complementary graduate

attributes, which are subtly nuanced to differentiate between the achievements represented by Ug, TPg, professional doctoral and research doctoral awards.

Affirmations and Recommendations

2.4   Audit Panels made a total of two affirmations and fifteen recommendations across almost all of the universities in relation to *The setting and maintaining of academic standards*. No Audit Panel found direct evidence that gave cause for concern that academic standards had been compromised in practice. Nevertheless, several Audit Panels raised concerns about the efficacy of particular quality assurance systems through which individual universities claimed to know that their academic standards were secure. Six recommendations and one affirmation made across some of the universities requiring attention were clustered around the following issues:

- lack of clarity in the setting of standards and inconsistency in the implementation of procedures concerning academic integrity, including: preventing, detecting, processing and reporting on breaches of academic integrity;

- insufficient direction at institutional level resulting in inconsistent practice on a range of assessment matters, including variously: outcome-based assessment; criterion-referencing of marks; grade moderation; group-work assessment;

- weaknesses in maintaining academic standards in programmes delivered wholly or partly outside Hong Kong, specifically in relation to: assuring broad equivalence of cognate degrees delivered in different locations; providing consistent information on degree certificates regardless of location of study; and ensuring joint degree certificates provide unambiguous information about study undertaken and student achievement; and

- absence of a central repository holding current and archived definitive documentation of programmes and courses.

2.5 Nine other recommendations and the remaining affirmation distributed across most of the universities were primarily enhancement-focused and fell into three broad categories:

- articulating organisational structures, policies, procedures and terminology concerning academic standards more clearly and communicating them more effectively, to ensure that they are applied systematically and fairly across the university;

- strengthening confidence in academic standards through external comment and benchmarking activities; and

- extending the enhancements made to Ug systems to TPg programmes.

Points to note

2.6 Universities and Audit Panels all struggled at times with the overlap between *The setting and maintaining of academic standards* and *Student achievement,* especially when addressing such topics as graduate attributes, outcome-based education and criterion-based assessment. The following statement was formulated by the Audit Panel Chair of the first audit (HKUST):

> 'academic standards are viewed through these two broad frameworks for interpretation: first, the academic standards set for the programmes of study and their manifestation in graduate learning outcomes, which is addressed (under *The setting and maintaining of academic standards);* second, levels of individual student achievement against those academic standards, which is addressed…under *Student achievement.*'

It provided a helpful steer not only for the HKUST Audit Panel but for all subsequent Audit Panels.

3. THE QUALITY OF LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Introduction

3.1 Universities are obliged to ensure that students are provided with appropriate opportunities to demonstrate their level of achievement against academic standards. Learning opportunities include the quality of teaching, the availability of learning resources, the support and guidance available for students and the maintenance of a vibrant and enquiring academic community (Audit Manual p 7).

Commendations

3.2 Audit Panels were particularly interested in exploring ways in which universities had responded to the challenges of managing the transition to the four-year Ug degree programme. In all, scrutiny of *The quality of learning opportunities* gave rise to ten commendations, distributed across most of the universities and falling into three broad categories:

- approaches to implementing and monitoring the new Ug curriculum, highlighting: a creative, broad-based and detailed approach; implementation of a tracking system to monitor the whole student experience; the ways in which students have been provided with a rich and integrative learning experience; and a meticulous approach to curriculum and Faculty review, drawing upon external input;

- student support, variously citing: development of an extensive, co-ordinated support structure; establishment of a two-tier academic advising system, which provides complementary support for students, particularly during their transition to tertiary education; and

- staff development, in particular: a broad range of provision; the diversity and availability of a wide range of activities to support staff in the development of their pedagogical practices; a mission-centred approach to professional development of staff via a range of innovative initiatives; and an extensive range of courses and workshops which is a major factor in enhancing the quality of student learning opportunities.

Case study: LU

3.3   The Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) at LU makes a significant contribution to the quality of learning and teaching by providing opportunities for teaching staff to evaluate and enhance their pedagogical skills. For example, staff with fewer than three years' teaching experience are required to undertake the Learning and Teaching Development Programme which is also open to more experienced staff on a voluntary basis. Other initiatives include the faculty teaching mentoring scheme; the online course; teaching and learning enhancement system 'for instructors to voluntarily conduct and devise their own online surveys to collect immediate and formative feedback from students at any time throughout a semester for the continuous improvement of course and teaching quality'; peer observation; live webcasting of TLC workshops; student peer learning facilitation; the student consultant programme; and the early alert system.

3.4   Teaching staff regarded these initiatives as a rich suite of opportunities through which they could, on a mostly voluntary basis, opt to access support by sharing good practice and engaging with mentoring and peer review. The TLC's approach was considered supportive, open and professional. There was a general consensus that the voluntary basis of most of these developmental activities fits well with LU's collegial tradition and the strong commitment to teaching quality that already exists across the institution. Of particular note is the student consultation programme, which creates a partnership between a member of the teaching staff and a pedagogical student consultant. This is much in demand and appreciated by those who have experienced it. Teaching Development Grants are seen as valuable support for the development of innovative approaches to teaching, such as interdisciplinary course design or technology-enhanced learning. The 2010 QAC Audit recommendation, which required LU to articulate its distinctive strategic approach to teaching and learning in such areas as e-learning, has been implemented with detailed attention to the appropriate use of technology-enhanced learning in a learning environment that places a high value on face-to-face contact. The Audit Report commended the mission-sensitive approach of the TLC to supporting the professional development of staff through a range of innovative initiatives.

Affirmations and Recommendations

3.5   Audit Panels made a total of four affirmations and ten recommendations across most of the universities in relation to *The quality of learning opportunities*. One affirmation concerned building English language competency and developing teaching skills for RPg students, while the others all affirmed the steps one university was taking to further its distinctive mission through curriculum development and by rebalancing the workloads of academic staff in relation to teaching and research.

3.6   The ten recommendations fell into the following categories, with those relating to e-learning anticipating a prompt response:

- exercising central oversight in relation to the quality of learning opportunities, including such matters as: monitoring outcomes and identifying trends in complaints and appeals; monitoring outcomes of reviews of academic support services; considering outcomes of the university's quality assurance processes and enhancement initiatives; ensuring annual and periodic reviews are followed through; and establishing a framework of continuing professional development with institution-wide minimum standards;

- expediting the process of embedding e-learning as an integral part of learning and teaching, variously through: taking central responsibility for strategic decisions about e-learning infrastructure at institutional level; and articulating, implementing and / or effectively disseminating the pedagogical underpinning of an e-learning strategy; and ensuring access to learning resources of comparable adequacy and quality regardless of location of study; and

- maximising the benefit to staff and students of enhancement activity via provision of additional specific communication and training.

Points to note

3.7   The Audit Manual (p 19) provided a list of the main topics to be covered in the Institutional Submission (IS) and proposed (p 42) that universities consider modelling their submissions on the indicative structure of the Audit Report (p

33).   Permission was also given, however, to amend the structure of the IS to reflect the particular role and mission of the institution (p 42).   Most universities took advantage of this flexibility, to a greater or lesser extent. As a result, the eight documents submitted all covered the required topics in sufficient depth and breadth but organised the material in distinctive ways. Audit Panels took this into account when producing their reports, more often than not reflecting the university's particular way of seeing things.   For example, the Report on HKU considers co- and extra-curricular activities within *The quality of learning opportunities*, dividing the section into *Formal learning* and *Informal learning*, whereas the report on HKBU considers co-curricular learning and extra-curricular activities under the Audit Theme: *Enhancing the student learning experience.*

4.   STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Introduction

4.1   The outcomes of students' participation in higher education are measured in terms of the awards they achieve. However, the specification of awards may not adequately cover the range of student abilities or effectively measure the level of overall personal development.   The second cycle had a focus on student achievement and how it is demonstrated by institutions, including how it is rewarded and publicised (Audit Manual p 7).

Commendations

4.2   The ten commendations made by Audit Panels across more than half of the universities reflected the expanded understanding of student achievement expressed in the Audit Manual and identified features of good practice that can be associated with four aspects of this topic:

- the approach to student achievement, which is variously perceived as: rigorous and scholarly in relation to quality improvement and maintenance of standards in grades; comprehensive in monitoring and fostering achievement of institutional graduate attributes; facilitative in realising the outcomes of whole person development philosophy; and supportive, for

example in providing a wide range of learning experiences and services; and to accommodating the specific needs of senior entrants;

- <u>effective assessment practices that promote student achievement</u>, notably clear and effectively communicated assessment rubrics and high quality feedback to students;

- <u>the emphasis on the development of the whole person</u>, including: initiatives to monitor statistically the impact of the learning environment on whole person development; and the development of mechanisms such as inventories and e-portfolios to enable students to assess and monitor their own progress in this respect; and

- <u>impressive levels of student achievement in a variety of manifestations</u>, including: graduate employment and engagement in further study; and the value added to atypical liberal arts, first generation university students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Case study: HKBU

4.3   HKBU conducts systematic reviews of students' holistic development during their studies through the Whole Person Development Inventory (WPDI). As well as increasing students' self-understanding, the inventory also provides guidance to help students plan for their university life and to actualise Whole Person Development (WPD). Students may log in to the WPDI eSystem to complete the questionnaire or to review their personal report. Two longitudinal studies of 2011 and 2012 entrants undertaken in 2014 showed growth in most of the WPD factors over the period, and consistent variations in student development among the factors themselves. Full-time Ug and postgraduate (Pg) students are invited to use the Student U-Life Record E-system to assist them in tracking their broad learning experiences, including their co- / extra-curricular activities, and to help them with the preparation of their *curricula vitae*. This also interfaces with the Student Development Portfolio System.

4.4   Students spoke positively about the Whole Person Education (WPE) elements of their programmes, many having selected HKBU for its WPE commitment. External stakeholders related their experiences of the characteristics of HKBU graduates as reflecting clearly the principles of the University's WPE

philosophy. Several stakeholders, as former alumni, felt they had themselves achieved these characteristics. The Audit Report commended the University in facilitating student achievement in realising the outcomes of the WPE philosophy as evidenced by the supportive testimony of students, employers and other external stakeholders.

Affirmations and Recommendations

4.5 Audit Panels made a total of three affirmations and eight recommendations in relation to *Student achievement*, distributed across a majority of the universities. Like the commendations, they reflect the expanded understanding of student achievement expressed in the Audit Manual, while also signalling that the sophistication of the work being in this field varies significantly from one university to another. For example, while one university received a recommendation that outcome-based education and criterion-referenced assessment be implemented fully in every quarter of the institution, another received an affirmation of the thorough action it was taking to ensure that these approaches remained fully understood and firmly embedded at all levels, several years after full implementation had been successfully accomplished.

4.6 With the exception of one other recommendation requiring reinstatement of rigorous testing of standards of English competency at entry and exit points, the two remaining affirmations and six remaining recommendations were enhancement-orientated. They can be organised into the following clusters:

- developing and refining the means to capture and analyse direct evidence of student achievement, including: developing conceptual frameworks; and refining instruments and devising methods to capture, document, monitor, evaluate and enhance direct evidence of student achievement across academic, co-and extra-curricular learning activities;

- focusing enhancement activity on institution-specific and distinctive aspects of student achievement, for example: promoting the distinctive characteristics of the education on offer and the specific strengths of graduates to all stakeholders; reviewing and revising the strategy for gathering and responding to feedback from a particular set of employers; and experimenting to further the goal of delivering bilingual education of excellence; and

- <u>further facilitating students' understanding of grade descriptors</u> through teaching staff and academic advisors.

Points to note

4.7   For clarification of the way in which Audit Panels were guided to deal with the overlap between *Student achievement and The setting and maintaining of academic standards*, see paragraph 2.6 above.

5.   QUALITY ENHANCEMENT

Introduction

5.1   Quality enhancement is defined in terms of institutional policies, procedures and activities that are designed to promote the learning experience and learning outcomes of students and also contribute to the enrichment of the curriculum…It may also reflect the particular mission and strategic priorities of institutions, where enhancement is seen in terms of a strategy for driving change and promoting student achievement and capabilities (Audit Manual p 8).

Commendations

5.2   The Audit Panels made three commendations across several universities. Two of these focused on the ways in which the university's centrally driven, strategic emphasis on systematic enhancement had had a positive effect throughout the university: the first via data analysis of surveys, meta-analyses of programme review reports and support for programmes with less than satisfactory reports; the second for the mechanisms put in place to create a quality culture distinguished by the value placed on evidence-led enhancement. The third commendation highlighted the development of a common core curriculum which had had a significant impact on the intellectual, social and ethical development of Ug students across the university.

Case Study: EdUHK

5.3　EdUHK uses a number of tools to evaluate programmes and support enhancement including stakeholder feedback and surveys, external examiner and reviewer reports, assessment data, accreditation reviews, progress and benchmarking reports. EdUHK makes use of comprehensive data to underpin improvement. There are multiple mechanisms for capturing, reporting and reacting to the views of students and external stakeholders including Staff-Student Consultative Committees and Advisory Committees. Advice from external stakeholders and experts is sought at periodic reviews, through consultative committees and advisory groups and international specialists, international conference participation and benchmarking partners. Programme committees and heads of departments are accountable to deans to ensure quality. The Learning and Teaching Quality Committee reviews quality assurance and enhancement measures and reports to the Academic Board. Students are informed of improvements through various channels demonstrated in a flowchart in the Quality Manual and knowledge of improvements was broadly confirmed in meetings with students.

5.4　The Audit Report commended EdUHK's commitment as an institution and the mechanisms it has put in place to create a quality culture distinguished by the value it places on evidence-led enhancement.

Affirmations and Recommendations

5.5　Three affirmations and three recommendations were made by Audit Panels in relation to *Quality enhancement*, distributed across some of the universities and falling into the following categories:

- developing / extending external benchmarking across the university to facilitate data-based as well as peer-derived comparisons locally, regionally and internationally;

- increasing the volume and enhancing the value of student data collections to ensure that enhancement opportunities are identified and exploited; and

- strengthening independent external scrutiny of each taught programme and specifying lines of responsibility for quality enhancement through all levels of the university.

Points to note

5.6   The second cycle had a particular focus on promoting the enhancement of teaching and learning and the development of sector-wide improvements in the value and appreciation of higher education provision (Audit Manual p 8). It may seem surprising, therefore, that Audit Panels made so few commendations, affirmations and recommendations in relation to *Quality Enhancement*. This can be explained, in part, by the fact that both the universities and Audit Panels often found it difficult to make a clear distinction between this section and Audit Theme: *Enhancing the student learning experience.* If the numbers for both sections are crudely amalgamated, the disparity in the attention paid to these two sections and the rest looks much less significant.

5.7   In practice, Audit Panels once again took note of the way in which the university itself had organised its material. Where this was not decisive, Audit Panels tended to consider within *Quality enhancement* the effectiveness of the universities' frameworks for ensuring that enhancement opportunities are systematically identified and exploited. The Audit Theme: *Enhancing the student learning experience* would then focus on institution-wide enhancement initiatives, over and above the regular operation of the quality cycle. In some cases, universities saw fit to focus there on the opportunities for enhancement afforded by the phasing in of the four-year curriculum, which might otherwise have been addressed under *The quality of learning opportunities* (see paragraph 3.7 above).

6.   POSTGRADUATE PROVISION

Introduction

6.1   The second cycle of quality audits made provision for more specific coverage of TPg programmes and RPg training programmes. Both areas were covered in the first cycle of QAC audits but on this occasion an in-depth, specific

assessment of institutional arrangements for the delivery of TPg programmes and for the support for RPg students was to be included (Audit Manual p 13).

Commendations

6.2   Of the six commendations made by Audit Panels in relation to *Postgraduate provision* across some of the universities, five commendations were related to RPg provision whereas one was related to TPg provision: the university so commended for the latter also received commendations in respect of its RPg provision. Commendations included: establishing and fostering a rich research environment; high quality support for RPg students; the collective efforts of research supervisors to offer international perspectives; the clear guidance provided in the RPg handbook; biannual tracking of RPg students to support student achievement and identify generic enhancement opportunities; and the guidelines for review of TPg programmes that provide a robust quality enhancement process.

Case Study: CUHK

6.3   The Audit Report commended CUHK for the high quality of its support for RPg students which includes: preparation for teaching assistant positions; opportunities to build up research skills through research method courses; funding for conferences; opportunities for interdisciplinary research; and regular supervision reports. Supervisors and departments are aware of student needs and provide support including regular checks of student progress; a range of support measures are available for students who are at risk or experiencing workload issues; faculties or departments facilitate interdisciplinary research; and formal and informal channels enable the University to collect student feedback. Students respond to these support mechanisms positively and find their learning experience at CUHK stimulating.

Affirmations and Recommendations

6.4   In contrast to the tally of commendations, the distribution of affirmations and recommendations between RPg and TPg provision was all but even. Of the five affirmations made by Audit Panels across some of the universities, three were related to RPg and two to TPg provision, while of the eight recommendations distributed across the majority of the universities, three were

related to RPg and five to TPg matters. The RPg affirmations and recommendations can be clustered as follows:

- <u>addressing academic integrity</u>, for example: ensuring that policies on research conduct and academic integrity and on intellectual property rights are communicated systematically and effectively to all staff and students undertaking research; and

- <u>enhancing the RPg learning environment</u> through such means as: formalising training in research supervision for new and/or experienced academics; investing in a dedicated senior appointment; developing local, regional and international research networks; systematically collecting data from employers to promote achievement of RPg graduate attributes; defining precisely, articulating clearly and communicating effectively graduate attributes and institutional learning outcomes for RPg provision.

6.5 TPg affirmations and recommendations fell into the following categories:

- <u>strengthening the institutional policy and quality assurance framework for TPg provision</u>, for example by: extending quality assurance processes available to Ug programmes to TPg provision; developing and expediting the timeline for completion, implementation and evaluation of a dedicated quality manual for TPg provision; developing and disseminating an overarching strategic vision and plan for TPg provision; and ensuring offshore provision is demonstrably comparable in every respect with provision offered on the home campus; and

- <u>determining the means by which the achievements of TPg students can more effectively be enabled, supported and celebrated</u>.

Points to note

6.6 While it still remains significant that only one of the six commendations made under *Postgraduate provision* relates to TPg provision, it should also be noted that many of the commendations made in respect of taught programmes apply as much to TPg as to Ug programmes. This section of the Audit Reports singles out issues of particular concern in the context of postgraduate provision.

7. AUDIT THEME: ENHANCING THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Introduction

7.1 The first Audit Theme required universities and Audit Panels to focus on what approaches were being taken at institutional level to promote systematic improvement in the learning experience of students. Enhancement involves more than a simple collection of examples of good practice or innovative developments in teaching and learning from across the institution. There should be policies, structures and processes in place to identify the need for improvement and mechanisms for ensuring that appropriate actions are taken (Audit Manual pp 28-29).

Commendations

7.2 Audit Panels made eight commendations, distributed across a majority of the universities in relation to the Audit Theme: *Enhancing the student learning experience,* three of which feature in the case studies below. They clustered around the following aspects of the Audit Theme:

- <u>the wide range of learning opportunities</u>, for example: informal and formal provision routinely made available to a significant and increasing proportion of the student population, which is carefully designed to facilitate achievement of learning outcomes; the Integrated Learning Programme, which includes hostel education and an array of co-curricular courses and activities that empower students and optimise their learning;

- <u>the role played by student services in enhancing the student learning experience</u>, notably: the creative and proactive approach taken by the integrated network of student services to developing and managing extensive experiential and co-curricular activities, supporting students and promoting their holistic development; the network of student services, which are all working in the same direction to provide proactive and flexible support that are highly valued by students at all levels;

- **institution-wide large-scale enhancement initiatives**, for example: the Discovery-enriched Curriculum, which provides all Ug and RPg students with the opportunity to create new knowledge during their studies; the concerted effort of all staff, students and other stakeholders across a range of disciplines, and in particular the contribution made by the gateway Education Laboratory, the Innovation Commons, the Knowledge Transfer Unit and the Computing Service Centre; and the requirement for all Ug students to complete an academic subject that integrates a service-learning element and an enhanced work-integrated placement; and

- **specific innovative features of good practice** illustrated by the Visual Arts Online Grading System designed to enhance teaching leaning and assessment practices.

Case study (i): HKU

7.3   HKU regards enhancement activity as integral to its strategic development and there was much evidence of its continuing commitment to enrich the educational environment, particularly at Ug level.

7.4   The enabling structure of the four-year Ug curriculum defines the totality of experiences afforded to students to achieve the Educational Aims. Students, supported by advice from academic advisers, course teachers and senior students, can select their own combination of disciplinary majors, minors and electives alongside Common Core courses. Other non-discipline-specific Educational Aims can be achieved via co- / extra-curricular learning experiences, which are delivered by the Centre of Development and Resource for Students (CEDARS), the General Education Unit, Gallant Ho Experiential Learning Centre and residential Halls and Colleges. These include: the Common Core curriculum; experiential learning; global experiences; e-learning environments; academic induction and first year experience; capstone experience and Ug research opportunities; and an internationalised learning environment. The Audit Report commended the wide range of formal and informal learning opportunities routinely made available to a significant and increasing proportion of the student population, which is carefully designed to enable students to achieve the various learning outcomes.

7.5   In the transition to the four-year Ug degree programme, CEDARS has stepped up its transformation from an administrative support unit to being the driver of the co-curriculum in addition to providing a comprehensive range of student services. There was evidence of widespread engagement with the extensive experiential and co-curricular activities offered by various units. Examination of evaluative documentary evidence was supported by the meeting with Ug students who indicated that these activities are rated highly and viewed as adding considerable value to the formal learning experiences associated with their academic programme. The Audit Report commended the creative and proactive approach adopted by the University's integrated network of student services to developing and managing this range of activities and to supporting students and promoting their holistic development.

Case study (ii): PolyU

7.6   PolyU has incorporated and mandated within the formal curriculum some activities that hitherto formed an optional part of the co-curriculum. All Ug students are now required to complete an academic subject that integrates a service-learning element to cultivate a greater sense of social responsibility and ethical leadership. In similar vein, an enhanced version of Work-integrated Education (WIE) has been mandated and incorporated within the formal Ug curriculum, now with more overseas placements, reinforced discipline relevance, and strengthened work-based learning preparation and employer support.

7.7   There was convincing evidence that the WIE experience increases students' exposure, improves their capacity for learning and is well implemented, managed and supported by a range of student services units, notably through thorough pre- and post-placement training. First hand reports from employers and alumni, uniformly welcomed these developments, stating that PolyU graduates acquire sound practical knowledge that enables them to start in the workplace without much further training. They described typical PolyU graduates as having a very positive attitude and a willingness to explore new solutions and approaches to the challenges presented to them. They were also of the view that WIE also provides crucial experience in certain professional programmes and making it mandatory has given PolyU graduates a unique advantage in certain graduate employment fields. Students described the ways in which such experiences had challenged and ultimately transformed

their learning. The Audit Report commended the requirement for all Ug students to complete an academic subject that integrates a service-learning element and an enhanced work-integrated education placement.

Affirmations and Recommendations

7.8   Three affirmations and recommendations were made in respect of the Audit Theme: *Enhancing the student learning experience,* distributed across several universities. The affirmation recognised the bolder initiatives and a more ambitious approach one university is taking to enhance students' e-learning in an increasingly technology-enhanced environment. The recommendations both focused on the need to develop an overarching, coherent strategic approach to enhancement.

Points to note

7.9   For commentary on the comparatively low numbers of affirmations and recommendations in this section and *Quality enhancement*, see paragraphs 5.6-5.7 above.

8.   AUDIT THEME: GLOBAL ENGAGEMENTS: STRATEGIES AND CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Introduction

8.1   As a relatively small and externally focused economy, Hong Kong is particularly well positioned to respond to the challenges of globalisation. This has far-reaching implications, not just for the future development of the UGC-funded universities but also for the support and encouragement given to existing students. In considering the second Audit Theme, universities and Audit Panels were obliged to focus on the impact of international developments on the student learning experience and the steps taken by universities to ensure that students are prepared for participation in the international community (Audit Manual p 30).

Commendations

8.2   All eight universities received at least one of the ten commendations the Audit Panels made in relation to Audit Theme: *Global engagements: strategies and current developments*, two of which feature in the case study below. Unsurprisingly, given the title of the Audit Theme, these commendations focused either on strategies or on current developments, as follows:

- strategic approaches to global engagements, including: well articulated aims for international engagement, supported by a comprehensive range of strategies, support services and funding; the clarity of the internationalisation strategy, which specifies key performance indicators capable of providing meaningful data about progress made; the strategic focus on internationalisation in the Strategic Plan and the way in which teaching staff, non-academic professional support staff and students have embraced, adopted and implemented the theme within both the core and core curriculum; the University's on-going process of operationalising its internationalisation strategies, which involves widespread active engagement across a range of stakeholders;

- development of overseas opportunities for students, notably: substantial and successful efforts to provide international service and exchange opportunities for students; proactive efforts in securing a large number of international agreements; extensive work developing a wide range of exchange and other student mobility opportunities, together with a new survey for evaluating Ug exchange programmes; provision of international learning experiences to a large and increasing number of students; the work of the Global Services Office in preparing, supporting and debriefing students engaged in overseas activities; and

- globalising the curriculum, for example: opportunities for students to acquire greater globalisation knowledge and skills in their formal degree curriculum.

Case study: HKUST

8.3   As a consequence of HKUST's success in recruiting a diverse, international student body, cross-cultural integration has become a high priority. To foster

cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity, a number of programmes have been established. For example, local students are able to gain international learning experience through HKUST's international student-exchange programme while the international summer exchange programme enables international students to gain an insight into Asian culture. A range of international learning experiences are also available, including the international research opportunities programme; international service learning through community projects world-wide; internships particularly for Engineering students; entrepreneurial skills development particularly for Engineering and Business and Management students; international engineering and business case competitions, and Technology Meets Art. At the time of the Audit Visit, the percentage of undergraduates spending a term or more overseas had grown to 47% of the cohort; the number of internships had increased; and over 3 500 service learning placements were available each year.

8.4   The 2010 QAC Audit Report affirmed HKUST's continuing efforts to provide such opportunities. In the intervening period, much work has been done and this programme is now significant in both quantum and impact. Therefore, the Audit Report of the second cycle commended the substantial and successful efforts of HKUST to provide international service learning and exchange opportunities for its students.

8.5   There was evidence that policies and procedures for global engagement are being successfully implemented and that HKUST is actively working to expand opportunities for students. There are a large number of international agreements covering student exchanges and internships, joint programmes, and research collaborations. The University's strong global rankings give credence to its claim to a culture of academic excellence. The Audit Report commended the University on its proactive efforts in securing a large number of international agreements.

Affirmations and Recommendations

8.6   This Audit Theme gave rise to three affirmations and five recommendations distributed across a majority of the universities. They fell into the following categories:

- **strategic approaches to globalisation**, including: re-examining and strengthening criteria and processes for selecting partners for international and regional collaborations; expanding the capacities of the international agreements database to enable systematic tracking of all international agreements and establishing a requirement and guidelines for pre-agreement expiry reviews to be established at university level; and articulation and codification of the strategic approach to global engagement, based on a well defined conceptual model designed to frame and interconnect the various components of the strategy;

- internationalisation of the student learning environment including: modernisation of the curriculum to include a global focus; provision of training to faculty members and teaching assistants in cross-cultural competency; and greater breadth in the University's strategy for the internationalisation of the student learning environment to address both curriculum content and pedagogical practice;

- strengthening mechanisms for assuring the quality of the student learning experience in international exchange; and

- increasing levels of participation in outbound mobility programmes of all types.

Points to note

8.7 Both universities and Audit Panels seemed to find it much more straightforward to determine the boundaries of this cross-cutting Audit Theme and to discern when an issue concerning a university's international collaborative networks should be considered under one of the other main sections of the Audit Report.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Overall strengths of the UGC sector

9.1 The overall strengths of the UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong cannot be deduced merely by reading an aggregated list of the commendations made in a

particular cycle of quality audits, although many of the commendations made in the second cycle derive from and contribute to the overall strengths of the sector. What is required rather is a close reading of the eight Audit Reports in full. Many of the strengths are now so well embedded that they could be in danger of being overlooked or taken for granted: readers will find them woven into the text, the very fabric of the Reports, taken as a whole. For this reason, they were often more immediately apparent to non-local auditors than to local auditors. They include:

- the well merited reputation of the UGC-funded universities in their respective fields, which is supported by high regional and international rankings, out of all proportion to the size of the sector;

- the distinctive visions, missions and role statements of the eight autonomous UGC-funded universities, that hold in common a commitment to excellence in academic standards, quality and enhancement;

- the successful transition to the four-year Ug degree programme, an accomplishment that non-local auditors found quite remarkable and which local auditors have now almost come to take for granted;

- the well founded establishment of extensive and complementary programmes of academic, co- and extra-curricular learning opportunities, designed to promote and foster the holistic development of students;

- diverse, wide-ranging and mission-sensitive provision to support the professional development of staff;

- creative, proactive and integrated networks of student support services that have risen to the new task of facilitating extensive programmes of co- and extra-curricular learning opportunities stimulated by the new four-year degree programme;

- the development and effective communication of imaginative conceptual frameworks for student achievement, expressed in terms of learning outcomes and graduate attributes, that empower students to take control of their own learning;

- sophisticated frameworks, instruments and methods for ascertaining the extent to which students are actually achieving graduate attributes and programme intended learning outcomes through course assessment assignments; and

- a strong strategic focus on internationalisation resulting in extensive and substantial achievements in securing international learning opportunities for increasing numbers of students.

Matters requiring further attention across the UGC sector as a whole

9.2   With the exception of the first and last items on the list below, the proposals here have been formulated by the synthesis of affirmations and recommendations within this Overview Report and rely to a lesser extent on a full reading of all eight Audit Reports than does the list of strengths above. The sector as a whole is invited to consider:

- celebrating the achievement of the UGC-funded universities internationally, using the findings of the initial evaluation of the implementation of the four-year degree programme;

- achieving the right balance between ensuring central institutional oversight of academic standards, quality and enhancement and the need to respect the academic culture, expertise and autonomy of academic units;

- identifying opportunities for sector-wide collaborative enhancement in key areas where the quality and maturity of practice varies between universities, for example: the embedding of an outcome-based approach to learning and teaching; criterion-referenced assessment; and evaluation of the extent to which the achievement of graduate and programme learning outcomes is authentically facilitated by formal and informal assessment regimes;

- ensuring that all universities have a clear pedagogical strategy for e-learning as an integral part of their approach to teaching, learning and

assessment together with an associated plan for resourcing associated infrastructural requirements;

- encouraging all universities to explore means by which students could track their achievement across academic, co- and extra-curricular activities;

- identifying the ways in which some of the key benefits emerging from the four-year Ug programme could be extended to Pg and particularly TPg students, in a proportionate manner and acknowledging the particular sets of characteristics represented within the Pg student body; and

- working together to discover fresh approaches to promoting integration both within and outwith the classroom between local, Mainland and international students at all levels.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CEDARS	Centre of Development and Resource for Students
CityU	City University of Hong Kong
CUHK	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
EdUHK	The Education University of Hong Kong
HKBU	Hong Kong Baptist University
HKU	The University of Hong Kong
HKUST	The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
IR	Institutional Representative
IS	Institutional Submission
LU	Lingnan University
PolyU	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Pg	Postgraduate
QAC	Quality Assurance Council
RPg	Research postgraduate
TLC	Teaching and Learning Centre
TPg	Taught postgraduate
Ug	Undergraduate
UGC	University Grants Committee
WIE	Work-integrated Education
WPD	Whole Person Development
WPDI	Whole Person Development Inventory
WPE	Whole Person Education