

UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMITTEE

HONG KONG HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW GROUP

Consultation Fora Held on 2 and 3 September 2009

Gist of Comments Received

On 2 and 3 September 2009, Sir Colin Lucas, Convenor of the Higher Education Review Group (HERG), held two consultation fora to gauge the views of the stakeholders in order to provide further input to the deliberations of the Group. The gist of comments received at the fora, and HERG's responses, is set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

Scope of the Higher Education Review (HER) 2010

- The HER 2010 should cover the whole post-secondary education sector, on top of the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded sector.
 - HERG's response: HER 2010 would cover the whole post-secondary education sector.

The Role of the UGC

- The UGC, as it currently operated, could no longer fulfill its role as the "buffer" between the Government and the institutions, given the increasing complexity of the higher education sector.
- The role and composition of the UGC should be reviewed. Related issues including whether the UGC should be an autonomous body supported by non-civil servants in performing its role, or one which was staffed by those with experience in managing universities, and the meeting cycle of the UGC, *etc.* should be looked into.
- The HER 2010 should also consider whether there should be a single body for the whole post-secondary education sector, and if so, the future role / position of the UGC.
 - HERG's response: HERG would, in the context of looking at the development of the whole higher education system, review the role of the UGC and the related issues.

Provision of Higher Education

- The university participation rate in Hong Kong was low compared with other jurisdictions *e.g.* Mainland and India. To maintain the competitiveness of Hong Kong, the overall post-secondary education participation rate should be increased.
- As the Government promoted the development of private universities, more resources should be devoted to this end.
- Student's mobility in the entire higher education sector should be enhanced. The Government should have a long-term policy to address the problem of articulation of sub-degree holders.
- Students from less well-off background should be given financial support, regardless of whether they participated in UGC-funded programmes.
 - HERG's response: HERG would establish the actual percentage of students who have access to higher education in Hong Kong, and compare that with other jurisdictions. This would inform whether and, if so, to what extent and by what means the participation rate might be increased. Student mobility within the higher education sector would also be considered. On financial support, the Government had already extended the financial assistance scheme to all locally-accredited self-financed courses.

Role Differentiation

- Role differentiation would restrict the growth of "teaching institutions" aspiring to be more research-led, as it would affect the way UGC funding was allocated.
- With the finite resources available, the UGC might consider releasing the funding given to the more well-established UGC-funded institutions, which had the potential to "go private", for the less well-developed institutions.
 - HERG's response: The concept of role differentiation appeared to be based solely on the allocation of research funding, which was not necessarily the case. The notion of allocating equal sums of funding to different institutions might not drive excellence.

Institutional Governance

- It was important to ensure that the governance of institutions was on a par with international standards.
- To protect institutional autonomy and academic freedom, there was a need to establish an inter-institutional redress mechanism, put institutions under the purview of the Ombudsman, or formulate legislation.
- Most of the teaching staff members in institutions were employed on contract term, instead of tenure, which had adversely affected the teaching quality.
 - HERG's response: HERG was fully aware of the issue of academic freedom. Externally applied measures might interfere with institutional autonomy. HERG noted that the issue of contract staff was a universal issue faced by institutions around the world.

Teaching and Learning

- Factors affecting quality of teaching in institutions included: (i) some teaching staff were teaching subjects which were outside their specialized areas; (ii) research was valued more than teaching and learning in institutions; (iii) over-reliance on student evaluation as a means to assess teachers' performance; and (iv) over-emphasis on adopting new and multi-media means for teaching.
- Possible ways to improve teaching and learning in institutions: (i) considering means to measure and reward good teaching; (ii) designating academic staff to focus completely on teaching; and (iii) developing a tutorial system with a low student-to-tutor ratio.
 - HERG's response: HERG was very concerned about the importance that was accorded to teaching and learning. While institutions were increasingly validated on their research performance, they should also strive for excellence in teaching and learning.

Curricula

- The existing curricula of institutions were too narrow and inter-disciplinary learning was insufficient.

- The curricula should have more focus on “outcomes”, and should encourage students to think critically.
 - HERG’s response: The implementation of “334” was an opportunity to expose students to more generic subjects, thereby helping students make decisions as to what they would specialize in future.

Research

- The amount spent on research and development by the Government was small in comparison to other jurisdictions such as the Mainland, Taiwan, Singapore and Japan. The Government should increase the funding for research.
- The Research Assessment Exercise compared research projects by the same set of criteria, and thus has a significant impact on the research focus of academics. The current research funding methodology should be reviewed.
 - HERG’s response: HERG agreed that the amount of research funding is small despite the \$18 billion Research Endowment Fund set up by the Government. The UGC and Research Grants Council would review the research funding methodology, which would be incorporated in the HER 2010.

Internationalisation

- Internationalisation of higher education meant more than the recruitment of non-local students. It should aim at nurturing a global view amongst students so that they would become good global citizens and be concerned about global issues.
- Some of the key success factors of internationalisation in higher education in Hong Kong were: (i) enhancement of students’ language proficiency in English; (ii) stepping up of efforts in promoting the Hong Kong higher education sector; (iii) recruitment of more non-local students from other jurisdictions, apart from the Mainland China; and (iv) provision of adequate supporting facilities and services (*e.g.* hostels and orientation) for non-local students.

- While attaching importance to internationalisation, institutions should also put more emphasis on Asian cultures and values. In particular, there were benefits in adopting a bilingual policy so that students could learn in the mother tongue and learn more about the traditional culture.
 - HERG's response: HERG agreed that, among other factors, the provision of adequate facilities would be necessary for the further recruitment of non-local students. On a separate issue, it was true that Hong Kong was in a strong position in promoting traditional Asian cultures and values by the very nature of the internationality of its historic functions and its present functions. As for the medium of instruction, it was the responsibility of institutions to decide on their own language policy.

The “334” Reform

- Memorising facts and information was still a major part of the learning process in universities. A four-year programme under the “334” reform should enable students to be exposed to a wider range of courses, and lay a more solid foundation for students.
 - HERG's response: The four-year programme under the “334” reform would offer a good opportunity for institutions to provide a broader undergraduate programme, which would be beneficial to the development of students.

JUPAS System

- The JUPAS system was too grade-oriented. Under the system, students maybe admitted to programmes in which they had no or little interest in. Apart from the inadequacy of the system, the root of the problem was the lack of sufficient places for “popular” programmes.
- The JUPAS system streamed students early on and as such students were unable to explore their potentials.
 - HERG's response: HERG noted the comments made.

Voucher System

- A voucher system for the higher education sector might help resolve some of the pertinent issues, including internationalisation and the assessment of teaching and learning.
- Consideration should be given to devising a voucher system which could finance students to pursue higher education local or abroad.
 - HERG's response: There was no evidence of the effectiveness of a voucher system working in reality in higher education systems. Among many issues, a voucher system might destabilize the finance of institutions. Nonetheless, HERG would keep an open mind to different systems.

Conduct of the HER 2010

- Relevant stakeholders should be fully consulted on issues covered in the HER 2010, and their views should be considered seriously.
 - HERG's response: HERG would consider the stakeholders' comments and views seriously.

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UGC Secretariat
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