

**Quality Assurance Council
Sub-degree Audit Cycle**

**Overview Report of
Quality Assurance Council
Sub-degree Audit Cycle**

February 2020

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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.

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

Since its establishment, QAC has conducted two rounds of quality audits, the first between 2008 and 2011 and the second between 2015 and 2016. By virtue of its mission, however, these audits conducted prior to the end of 2016 include only first-degree level programmes and above offered by the UGC-funded universities.

In 2016, UGC assumed the role of the overseeing body of the external quality audits on the sub-degree operations of the UGC-funded universities, with the involvement of QAC as the audit operator. The sub-degree audit cycle commenced at the end of 2016 with the promulgation of the Audit Manual.

Conduct of QAC Quality Audits

Audits are undertaken by Audit Panels appointed by QAC from its Register of Auditors. The Audit Panel comprises three auditors who are either international or regional experts in higher education quality assurance, drawn from a higher education system based outside of Hong Kong. The Panel also includes at least two local members, at least one of whom should be drawn from another UGC-funded university.

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

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

QAC's approach to quality audit is based on the principle of 'fitness for purpose'. Audit Panels consider the nature and strength of sub-degree operations in terms of the vision, mission and goals of the university and the Sub-degree Providing Unit(s) (SDPU(s)) within it. The degree of alignment between the SDPU(s) and the university's vision, mission, goals and strategic priorities is also considered.

Full details of the audit procedures, including the methodology and scope of the audit, are provided in the QAC Audit Manual on Sub-degree Operations of UGC-funded Universities which is available at http://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/qac/manual/auditmanual_sub-degree.pdf.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(a) Introduction

The Quality Audits of Sub-Degree Operations in UGC-Funded Universities aimed to:

- assure the quality of learning in the Sub-degree Providing Units (SDPUs) of UGC-funded universities through providing independent third-party review;
- support the provision and certification of student learning at an internationally comparable level;
- support the SDPUs in undertaking critical and comprehensive self-study and follow-through actions in the interests of ongoing quality enhancement to student learning outcomes;
- increase transparency and enhance public and stakeholder confidence in the internal quality assurance mechanisms of SDPUs and their host universities; and
- assure that SDPUs are delivering on claims and promises made in public media.

This report provides an overview of the seven institution-specific Audit Reports produced during the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) quality audits of the sub-degree operations of UGC-funded universities of Hong Kong. These audits were conducted between 2017 and 2019 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 dimensions:

- Governance, management, university planning and accountability;
- Approach to programme quality assurance;
- Curriculum design, programme development and approval processes;
- Programme delivery, including pedagogical approaches, learning environments and resources, scheduling;
- Support for teaching quality, including pedagogical development;
- Student learning assessment;
- Student participation and student support services; and
- Systems for acting on quality assurance data to make ongoing enhancements to student learning.

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. This Overview Report is organised similarly with the

final section drawing overall conclusions about the strengths of the UGC sub-degree sector and challenges facing the sector. Case studies illustrating some of the Commendations made are included in each of the main sections of this report.

(b) Governance, management, university planning and accountability

Four features of good practice worthy of Commendation were identified, across three universities, in relation to Dimension 1. They fall into two categories:

- strategic alignment of sub-degree provision with the approach of the university proper (*three Commendations*); and
- comprehensive, well documented governance and management policies and procedures (*one Commendation*).

Audit Panels made a total of five Affirmations and seven Recommendations across almost all the universities in relation to Dimension 1. They relate to the following issues:

- clarifying and strengthening academic governance structures (*one Affirmation and five Recommendations*);
- making more effective use of a wider range of data sources (*three Affirmations and one Recommendation*); and
- pursuing the strategic quality enhancement of sub-degree operations (*one Affirmation and one Recommendation*).

(c) Approach to programme quality assurance

Scrutiny of Dimension 2 gave rise to two Commendations, distributed across two universities, each of which highlights the valuable contribution of external input to effective quality assurance processes.

Audit Panels made a total of two Affirmations and five Recommendations across four universities in relation to Dimension 2. The underlying requirements can be summarised as follows:

- consistency of approach to quality assurance to facilitate systematic quality enhancement (*two Affirmations and two Recommendations*);
- broader understanding and wider application of the principle of externality in quality assurance processes (*two Recommendations*); and

- comprehensive staff development to engender deep understanding of the conceptual base of outcome-based approach to teaching and learning (*one Recommendation*).

(d) Curriculum design, programme development and approval processes

The two Commendations made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 3 across two universities highlight very different features of good practice:

- the quality of relationships with external stakeholders (*one Commendation*); and
- language development activity (*one Commendation*).

Audit Panels made a total of three Affirmations and two Recommendations in relation to Dimension 3, distributed across three universities. These support the following developments:

- the explicit use of data and market information to inform curriculum design and course improvement (*one Affirmation and one Recommendation*);
- consideration of how programme monitoring could guard against incremental changes to intended learning outcomes (*one Recommendation*);
- quality assurance of clinical placements (*one Affirmation*); and
- the implementation of an outcome-based approach to teaching and learning (*one Affirmation*).

(e) Programme delivery, including pedagogical approaches, learning environments and resources, scheduling

Each of the three Commendations distributed by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 4, highlights a feature of good practice that characterises one of the three universities so recognised. These features comprise:

- a student-centred approach in teaching and learning and student development;
- a close working relationship between external advisors and SDPUs; and
- high quality physical learning and e-learning environments.

Two Affirmations and two Recommendations were made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 4, distributed across four universities and falling into the following categories:

- strategic development of e-learning (*two Affirmations and one Recommendation*); and
- comprehensive and systematic co-ordination of the collection of student data (*one Recommendation*).

(f) Support for teaching quality, including pedagogical development

The majority of the seven Commendations made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 5 mention how teaching quality and pedagogical development in the SDPUs are valued, appreciated and strongly supported by the university proper. The Commendations, distributed across five universities, fall into the following categories:

- the range of professional development opportunities (*three Commendations*);
- the quality of teaching staff (*two Commendations*);
- measures for dealing with poor performance (*one Commendation*); and
- self-evaluation and peer learning (*one Commendation*).

Of the three Affirmations made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 5, across three universities, two address the pedagogical development of part-time staff, while the third concerns dealing with poor performance. Of the three Recommendations distributed across two universities, two encourage the universities to take a more strategic approach to professional development, while the third focuses on ensuring staff are familiar with the university's expectations for professional standards.

(g) Student learning assessment

Audit Panels made three Commendations, distributed across three universities in relation to Dimension 6, each focused on a different aspect of this Dimension, as follows:

- timely return of work with constructive feedback (*one Commendation*);
- implementation of Outcomes-based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) and Criterion-based Assessment (*one Commendation*); and
- comprehensive assessment policy framework (*one Commendation*).

Four Affirmations and ten Recommendations were made in respect of Dimension 6, distributed across six universities. They can be grouped as follows:

- further development of assessment policy, processes and procedures (*one Affirmation and six Recommendations*);

- deriving greater benefit from externality (*two Recommendations*);
- uniform adoption of OBTL and criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) (*one Recommendation*);
- enhancing assessment data (*two Affirmations and one Recommendation*); and
- enhancing learning through assessment (*one Affirmation*).

(h) Student participation and student support services

Four universities each received one of the four Commendations made in relation to Dimension 7, which fall under the following headings:

- wide range of co- and extra-curricular activities (*two Commendations*);
- management of student placements and internships (*one Commendation*); and
- pastoral care of students (*one Commendation*).

This Dimension gave rise to one Affirmation and four Recommendations distributed across four universities. They fall into the following categories:

- measuring access to and uptake of student support services, including by part-time students (*two Recommendations*);
- analysing attrition rates and causes (*one Recommendation*);
- encouraging and recording participation in co- and extra-curricular activities (*one Recommendation*); and
- securing the engagement of students in governance (*one Affirmation*).

(i) Systems for acting on quality assurance data to make ongoing enhancements to student learning

One Commendation was made in relation to Dimension 8, focused on responsiveness to student course and teaching evaluations and student experience questionnaires.

This Dimension gave rise to three Affirmations and four Recommendations distributed across four universities, all of which are concerned with the effective use of data.

(j) Conclusions

Overall strengths of the UGC sub-degree sector

- SDPUs are generally well aligned strategically with the approach of their university proper;
- universities are maintaining sufficient consistency between their respective SDPUs to assure academic standards and quality;
- approaches to programme quality assurance are generally sound;
- well developed links exist with staff in other institutions, employers and external stakeholders, including external examiners, external advisors and alumni;
- common frameworks for programme approval are in place, which are nuanced appropriately by differentiated processes, tailored to different types of programme;
- professional development opportunities are available for full-time staff in the sub-degree sector; and
- students are playing a substantial role in key aspects of the governance of their SDPUs and university, as appropriate.

Challenges facing the UGC sub-degree sector as a whole

- responding flexibly and openly to the rapidly shifting external environment, with increased competition from private providers and more stringent government regulations, which is inevitably having an impact on university planning and accountability;
- making more systematic, precise and effective use of a wider range of data sources;
- systematically and consistently embedding an outcome-based approach to teaching and learning, and especially CRA, and embracing the cultural shift that this approach embodies, as a matter of policy;
- strengthening and extending the sub-degree sector's repertoire of innovative teaching and learning practices incorporating a special focus on the development of a strategic approach to e-learning;
- providing appropriate professional development opportunities for part-time staff in the sub-degree sector, comparable to those provided for full-time staff;
- further strengthening and developing assessment policies, processes and procedures;
- embracing the work on programme outcome achievement that increasingly characterises undergraduate provision, to provide evidence on programme effectiveness and student performance in relation to programme learning outcomes; and

- addressing disparities between full-time and part-time students and between one SDPU and another in the same university in respect of access to student support services and facilities, as well as to co- and extra-curricular activities.

Concluding Remark

Taken separately and together, the seven audit reports demonstrate that Sub-degree Operations within UGC-funded universities are generally in good health and fit for purpose. Notwithstanding the diversity of SDPUs within and between universities, the reports identify significant strengths that characterise the whole UGC sub-degree sector. While the audit reports also highlight opportunities for individual universities to improve their operations and the Overview Report identifies common challenges, both internal and external, faced by the UGC sector, it should be noted that none of the reports has given rise to major concerns requiring urgent action. These findings give QAC overall confidence that academic standards and quality in the Sub-degree Operations within UGC-funded universities are secure.

INTRODUCTION

Explanation of the audit methodology

This report provides an overview of the sub-degree cycle of quality audits conducted by Audit Panels appointed by, and acting on behalf of, the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) between 2016 and 2019. Seven of the eight UGC-funded universities were audited in turn, in the following order:

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

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) has no sub-degree operations and was therefore not included in this audit cycle.

Each audit was based on an Institutional Submission, prepared by the university itself, following a period of self-review, and submitted to QAC from 16 weeks before the relevant Audit Visit. In each case, a one-day Mutual 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.

All Audit Panels met a wide range of staff, students and external stakeholders, typically including university presidents and senior teams; directors and senior teams of Sub-degree Providing Units (SDPUs); full-time students; part-time students; programme leaders; teaching staff; members of academic governance committees; academic support services staff; and external stakeholders including employers, alumni and representatives of institutions to which sub-degree students progress.

The Audit Manual for the QAC sub-degree audit cycle (pp 8 - 9) 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.

All Audit Panels comprised five members. Two of the five 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 three 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.

One of the three members of the Audit Co-ordination Team acted as secretary to each of the seven 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.

Audit Panels evaluated:

- Governance, management, university planning and accountability;
- Approach to programme quality assurance;
- Curriculum design, programme development and approval processes;
- Programme delivery, including pedagogical approaches, learning environments and resources, scheduling;
- Support for teaching quality, including pedagogical development;
- Student learning assessment;
- Student participation and student support services; and
- Systems for acting on quality assurance data to make ongoing enhancements to student learning

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.

Within three months of publication of the Audit Report, universities were required to submit to QAC and Action Plan giving details of how Recommendations would be addressed. 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.

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

1. GOVERNANCE, MANAGEMENT, UNIVERSITY PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Introduction

1.1 Dimension 1 is concerned with the ways in which SDPUs' operations reflect the vision, mission and strategic planning of the university proper. It also considers academic governance and how the policies and procedures of the SDPU align with those of the university as a whole.

1.2 Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on the:

- clarity of the purpose(s) of the SDPU(s);
- alignment between SDPU and University vision, mission, strategic planning
- strategies for monitoring the performance of SDPU(s); and
- follow through to enhance the performance of the SDPU(s).

Commendations

1.3 Four features of good practice worthy of Commendation were identified, across three universities, in relation to Dimension 1. They fall into two categories:

- strategic alignment of sub-degree provision with the approach of the university proper, as evidenced by: the clear specification of a sub-degree strategy; the rationalisation of the sub-degree, professional and continuing education portfolio to provide a launch pad for a new sub-degree strategy; and the positive attitude and effective actions of senior management and members of governance groups to resolve historic enrolment management issues (*three Commendations*); and

- comprehensive, well documented governance and management policies and procedures that are well embedded, widely understood and followed consistently (*one Commendation*).

Case study: CUHK

1.4 The School of Continuing and Professional Studies (CUSCS), established in 1965, is the principal centre for CUHK's substantial sub-degree provision. The University has undertaken a strategic alignment of sub-degree, professional and continuing education programmes with the CUHK Strategic Plan (2016-20) in which the educational goal is to 'serve the needs and demands of the community for education and continuing development'. CUSCS has developed a School Development Plan, approved by Senate. A key strategy for the School is to 'serve the needs of the aging population and second career trends in Hong Kong'. The plans are clearly aligned and the strategy has been deployed through a strong process of rationalisation and consolidation of programmes. The result is a portfolio of sub-degree programmes which, while still large, is significantly streamlined and better attuned to the declining but still highly competitive Hong Kong market [CUHK Audit Report paragraphs 1.2 - 1.3].

Affirmations and Recommendations

1.5 Audit Panels made a total of five Affirmations and seven Recommendations across almost all the universities in relation to Dimension 1. Where the matters raised were of a more serious and pressing nature, senior leadership and management were aware of the challenges they face and committed to meeting them. The findings of the Audit Panels covered the following issues:

- clarifying and strengthening academic governance structures including variously: ensuring an effective handover of an SDPU to another university; equipping committees with terms of reference that are fit for purpose and distinctive, with clear lines of reporting for the quality assurance and academic oversight of sub-degree provision; reviewing the effectiveness of committees; clarifying the role of Senate in relation to sub-degree provision; review and revision of governance relationships; and clear delineation and differentiation of leadership and management roles (*one Affirmation and five Recommendations*);

- making more effective use of a wider range of data sources, including: identifying and gathering data beyond student evaluations; undertaking benchmarking at sub-degree level; and articulating key performance indicators to guide improvement priorities (*three Affirmations and one Recommendation*); and
- pursuing the strategic quality enhancement of sub-degree operations, through the following: strengthening engagement and ownership of sub-degree activity throughout the university proper; and the introductions of comprehensive periodic reviews of sub-degree provision by the university proper (*one Affirmation and one Recommendation*).

Points to note

- 1.6 The audits took place during a period when the context for sub-degree operations within the UGC-funded sector was undergoing rapid change, with increased competition from private providers and more stringent government regulations. This shifting external environment is inevitably having an impact on university planning and accountability, requiring a degree of flexibility and openness to change.
- 1.7 The form, types, volume and complexity of sub-degree operations in the UGC-funded sector vary widely. Arrangements for governance, management, planning and accountability vary considerably both between and within the seven universities that were subject to audit. While some arrangements could be aligned more effectively, the overall finding of the audit cycle is that universities are maintaining sufficient consistency between their respective SDPUs to assure academic standards and quality.
- 1.8 Several audit trails were requested of relevance to Dimension 1. These enabled Audit Panels to ascertain, for example, if policies and procedures outlined in management documents were working in practice and whether data are rigorously interrogated.

2. APPROACH TO PROGRAMME QUALITY ASSURANCE

Introduction

- 2.1 Dimension 2 considers the university's (and/or the SDPU's) overall approaches to programme quality assurance. This Dimension takes a broad overview of quality assurance policies and systems. Because quality assurance activities occur across all aspects of the support of student learning, specific applications of quality assurance are also mentioned in each of the remaining Dimensions.
- 2.2 Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on their:
- suite of academic policies to support quality assurance and quality enhancement of programmes;
 - collection, analysis and interpretation of data on the student experience of learning at subject and programme levels;
 - collection and analysis of data on the quality of the physical and virtual learning environments;
 - approach to tracking student learning progress throughout the duration of programmes and at the point of graduation;
 - approach to monitoring sub-degree programme quality drawing on multiple data sources;
 - approaches to ensuring academic standards meet international norms; and
 - approaches to ensuring that reports of programme quality are followed through in the interests of enhancement.

Commendations

- 2.3 Scrutiny of Dimension 2 gave rise to two Commendations, distributed across two universities, each of which highlights the valuable contribution of external input to highly effective programme approval, reapproval and review processes.

Case study: HKU

- 2.4 The HKU School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU SPACE) was established in 1999, building a long history of extra-mural studies dating back to 1956. Its quality assurance system is underpinned by a suite of comprehensive, detailed and informative documents that describe policies and procedures, committee structure, terms of reference and individual office bearers that make the system work and are required for successful implementation. Monitoring and accountability processes are well embedded in its comprehensive and effective quality assurance processes that include a meticulous approach to programme approval and reviews which draws on external input. In 2016/17, 28

new programmes were approved, while 89 existing programmes were reviewed and approved to continue. The School produced 340 annual monitoring reports and 64 overview reports covering 421 groups of programmes. This demonstrates a quality assurance system that is sufficiently robust to cope with a large programme load. Programmes benefit from various forms of external benchmarking, including input from external examiners, academic advisors and, in some cases, accreditation/recognition by professional bodies [HKU Audit Report paragraphs 2.4 - 2.7].

Affirmations and Recommendations

2.5 Audit Panels made a total of two Affirmations and five Recommendations across four universities in relation to Dimension 2. The underlying requirements can be summarised as follows:

- consistency of approach to quality assurance to facilitate systematic quality enhancement, exemplified by: the introduction of a standard template for annual reporting to ensure more consistent and robust reporting; the implementation of unified quality assurance procedures across all continuing education provision; annual consideration of quality and standards of all SDPUs by the same university academic body; and production of comparable documents on academic regulations for all programmes (*two Affirmations and two Recommendations*);
- broader understanding and wider application of the principle of externality in quality assurance processes, notably by: embedding externality systematically in, for example, programme design and delivery, capstone assessments and programme evaluation; and the development of benchmarking relationships both with peer institutions and institutions that the university might wish to emulate in future (*two Recommendations*); and
- comprehensive staff development to engender deep understanding of the conceptual base of outcome-based approach to teaching and learning (*one Recommendation*).

Points to note

2.6 Some Audit Reports refer under Dimension 2 to closely associated Affirmations and Recommendations made under Dimension 1, notably in relation to data

collection and analysis and the effectiveness of academic governance structures. Notwithstanding this, the findings about approaches to programme quality assurance are generally positive.

- 2.7 Audit trails of relevance to Dimension 2 enabled Audit Panels variously to ascertain: that consistent application of quality assurance policies and procedures are enabling one university to meet international standards and the professional requirements of its sub-degree programmes; that annual programme monitoring is conducted thoroughly and, as a result, proactive steps are taken to improve programme curricula; and that reapproval processes are comprehensive and consistently applied, making effective use of external experts.

3. CURRICULUM DESIGN, PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT AND APPROVAL PROCESSES

Introduction

- 3.1 Dimensions 3 - 8 are focused on ensuring and enhancing the quality of student learning and are organised according to the 'lifecycle' of programmes. They are each located within one of three broad phases of operational decision-making - the Planning Phase, the Action Phase and the Reflection and Follow Through Phase.
- 3.2 Dimension 3 constitutes the Planning Phase. Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on their:
- policies for curriculum design, programme development and approval;
 - practical application of policies on curriculum design, programme development and approval;
 - references to external regulatory requirements and descriptors;
 - development of programme-level learning outcomes in curriculum design;
 - use of intended learning outcomes as key curriculum design features;
 - policies and practices related to admission standards;
 - approach to monitoring learning progress as a component of curriculum design;
 - selection of international partners for exchanges and collaborative programmes; and
 - student recruitment materials.

Commendations

3.3 The two Commendations made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 3, across two universities, highlight very different features of good practice:

- the quality of relationships with external stakeholders and specifically the way in which these inform curriculum design and development; and
- language development activity delivered by a Language Enhancement Programme, which not only enables students to achieve a minimum acceptable level but also encourages and supports the higher-level ambitions of more advanced students.

Case study: LU

3.4 Language development at Lingnan Institute of Further Education (LIFE) is understood to be primarily the responsibility of the Language Enhancement Programme (LEP). The role of LEP is to foster students' interest in language learning, boost their confidence and improve their language proficiency. A range of services are provided, including a self-access language centre and remedial and progressive learning opportunities, which are made available to any sub-degree student. When academic staff identify a student at risk because of poor language skills, they recommend that the student undertake a LEP. Prospective students, with scores below Level 2 are provided with an opportunity to undertake a 42-hour programme in order to secure conditional admission to LIFE programmes. LEP staff discharge their current responsibilities in an exemplary manner and quality assure their programmes conscientiously. LEP successfully delivers language development activities that not only enable students to achieve a minimum acceptable level of language competence but also encourage and support the higher-level ambitions of more advanced students [LU Audit Report paragraph 3.9].

Affirmations and Recommendations

3.5 Audit Panels made a total of three Affirmations and two Recommendations in relation to Dimension 3, distributed across three universities. These encourage the following varied developments:

- the explicit use of data and market information to inform curriculum design and course improvement, including the use of specific student learning outcomes data, professional standards, market analysis; market demands; formal and informal dialogue with external stakeholders; and feedback via student evaluation questionnaires (*one Affirmation and one Recommendation*);
- consideration of how programme monitoring could guard against incremental changes to intended learning outcomes (*one Recommendation*);
- the implementation of an outcome-based approach to teaching and learning, for all new and existing programmes in one SDPU, with staff development support from the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning (*one Affirmation*); and
- quality assurance of clinical placements (*one Affirmation*).

Points to note

- 3.6 Curriculum design, programme development and approval processes within the sub-degree sector are strongly influenced by external factors such as industry requirements, demographic change, workforce planning, community and/or societal needs, government policies, and market forces. They are further subject to internal factors such as strategic policies and priorities and resource implications. Responses to external demand must be swift and carefully managed so that programmes maintain relevance to employers and/or prepare students for further study. In general, the UGC-funded sub-degree sector enjoys well developed links with staff in other institutions, employers and external stakeholders, including alumni. Common frameworks for programme approval are nuanced appropriately by differentiated processes, tailored to different types of programme.
- 3.7 In one case, detailed audit trails related to Dimension 3 provided confirmation that programme approval, redesign and revalidation had been conducted effectively. They illustrated how consultation with the professions contributes to programme design, where international practice is taken into account in the design phase, how programmes have changed over time, how changes have met the quality requirements required by the university and how the quality assurance of work placements is a feature of sub-degree programmes. In another case audit

trails confirmed that university procedures are appropriately followed and that attention is paid to students' educational experience.

4. PROGRAMME DELIVERY, INCLUDING PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES, LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND RESOURCES, SCHEDULING

Introduction

4.1 Dimension 4 lies within the Action Phase. Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on their:

- routine monitoring of programme practices;
- pedagogical approaches across the programme;
- learning resource collections, both hard copy and electronic;
- physical learning environments;
- e-learning; and
- scheduling arrangements.

Commendations

4.2 Each of the three Commendations made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 4, highlights a feature of good practice that characterises one of the three universities so recognised. These features are as follows:

- a student-centred approach in teaching and learning and student development which is highly appreciated by students and external stakeholders;
- a close working relationship between external advisors and SDPUs evidenced in annual programme and divisional quality assurance reports on a wide range of matters; and
- high quality physical learning and e-learning environments comprising good teaching and learning facilities, access to the library, computing facilities, laboratories and interactive learning facilities to meet the specific learning needs of students, together with recently enhanced e-learning environment.

Case Study: CityU

4.3 CityU attaches considerable significance to external benchmarking mechanisms, including the External Academic Advisor (EAA) scheme, professional accreditation, the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications' accreditation and the 5-Year Review of Academic Excellence. The Community College of City University (CCCU) appoints EAAs to help maintain the international standards of their awards. EAAs and External Professional Advisors all play an important role in programme approval, programme monitoring and periodic review at CCCU and other SDPUs of CityU. Evidence of inputs from these external experts can be found in annual programme and divisional quality assurance reports on a wide range of matters. Sub-degree students benefit from the close working relationships between the external advisors and the SDPUs [CityU Audit Report paragraphs 2.6 and 4.6].

Affirmations and Recommendations

4.4 Two Affirmations and two Recommendations were made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 4, distributed across four universities and falling into the following categories:

- strategic development of e-learning, exemplified by: the development of strategic and proactive approach to promoting, developing and embedding e-learning to enhance teaching and learning for both staff and students; and training in specific e-learning techniques (*two Affirmations and one Recommendation*); and
- comprehensive and systematic co-ordination of the collection of student data, including various surveys of student opinions on their learning experience and expectations, which could be analysed, aggregated and integrated more effectively to enhance teaching and learning practices (*one Recommendation*).

Points to note

4.5 While students across the UGC-funded sub-degree sector are generally satisfied with programme delivery, a reading of all seven reports reveals disparities in certain aspects of the quality of provision. Teaching and learning practices are sound across all SDPUs but while students in one university may enjoy the use of innovative pedagogical approaches, students and staff in another may still be

unfamiliar with relatively new pedagogical approaches that are now entering the mainstream in other institutions. Similar variations exist in respect of the adoption of a holistic approach to curriculum design that aims to integrate formal curricula, co-curricular learning activities and student support services and is a distinguishing feature of Hong Kong undergraduate programmes.

- 4.6 Most reports comment on disparities between sub-degree students, who are studying at the same university, in relation to access to learning, teaching and social facilities and student support services. Sometimes this is a question of which SDPU they are attending, more often it depends on whether they are studying full-time or part-time. While differential use of facilities and services by full- and part-time student is often seen by Audit Panels as something to be expected, at times they point to inequities in the quality of provision.
- 4.7 In one case, an audit trail of relevance to Dimension 4, enabled the Audit Panel to establish that follow through of issues raised by students is both systematic and effective.

5. SUPPORT FOR TEACHING QUALITY, INCLUDING PEDAGOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

5.1 Dimension 5 lies within the Action Phase. Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on their:

- human resources policies and practices for teaching staff;
- approaches to keeping teaching staff up to date with their fields;
- academic leadership and programme teaching teams;
- evaluating teaching quality;
- pedagogical development of teaching staff;
- retention of quality teaching staff;
- use of peer evaluation and peer networks; and
- reward and recognition schemes.

Commendations

5.2 The majority of the seven Commendations made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 5, mention how teaching quality and pedagogical development in the SDPUs are valued, appreciated and strongly supported by the university proper. The Commendations, distributed across five universities, fall into the following categories:

- centrally supported range of professional development opportunities, through for example: orientation programmes, on-going professional development activities, workshops, online resources and sharing sessions; tailored professional development of sub-degree programme teaching staff (*three Commendations*);
- the quality of teaching staff, notably: positive motivation to commit to teaching and pedagogical development; openness, accessibility and a pervasive determination to help students achieve (*two Commendations*);
- measures for dealing with poor performance, which entail following up low scores on teaching evaluation and monitoring the subsequent progress of staff (*one Commendation*); and
- self-evaluation and peer learning, specifically: high take-up of class visits and observations, with discussions around possible enhancements and improvements in teaching pedagogy and classroom management (*one Commendation*).

Case Study: EdUHK

5.3 All new staff at EdUHK undertake a mandatory certificated course ‘Introduction to Teaching in Higher Education’. They are each assigned a mentor to provide advice and support on teaching and administration matters, as well as receiving a comprehensive and helpful induction which covers learning and teaching and assessment policy and procedures. The Centre for Learning, Teaching and Technology (LTTC) provides a range of professional development activities, working with the Vice President and Associate Deans to monitor training requirements. Analysis results in seminars and workshops orientated to specific professional requirements. A coherent University e-learning Policy is in place, with extra funding released for e-learning innovation projects. Sub-degree students benefit from EdUHK’s comprehensive approach, which is evident at Department, Faculty and University levels, with LTTC playing a focal role, that

leads to effective and tailored professional development of sub-degree programme teaching staff [EdUHK Audit Report paragraphs 5.3 - 5.6].

Affirmations and Recommendations

5.4 Three Affirmations and three Recommendations were made by Audit Panels in relation to Dimension 5, across four universities. They can be clustered as follows:

- taking a more strategic approach to pedagogical development, for example: by developing the role of the Quality Assurance Committee in the planning of professional development activities across SDPUs and consolidating the role of the Office of Education Development and Gateway Education in leveraging opportunities at programme and SDPU level to produce synergy; and identifying institutional pedagogical priorities and concrete action plans to steer the professional development of teaching staff (*two Recommendations*);
- ensuring staff understand the university's expectations for professional standards, specifically: to familiarise staff with assessment criteria and rubrics for staff performance appraisal and make them aware of the impact their performance may have on their remuneration (*one Recommendation*);
- pedagogical development of part-time staff, specifically: provision of online professional development resources; dissemination of good practices attuned to the characteristics of the sub-degree sector; and adoption of a dedicated staff development programme for part-time staff, geared to the roles, responsibilities and working patterns of part-time teachers (*two Affirmations*); and
- dealing with poor performance, by offering targeted support options (*one Affirmation*).

Points to note

5.5 Teaching staff across the UGC-funded sub-degree sector are generally appreciative of the professional development opportunities and support they receive. Most universities provide a strong institutional drive in this respect and have overarching arrangements in place for human resources management,

which cover both the university proper and SDPUs. These generally include: policies and procedures for recruitment; induction; ongoing professional development; evaluation, including student feedback, peer review of teaching and performance appraisal; support, including mentoring; remediation and reward.

- 5.6 The greatest difficulty the sub-degree sector faces in respect of Dimension 5 is to ensure that all teaching staff, including part-time staff, are supported comparably and consistently particularly in respect of the implementation of innovative teaching and learning practices and institutional priorities. While most universities make much of their pedagogical professional development provision available to part-time staff, participation is mostly encouraged but not mandatory and take-up is generally low. The challenge is to rectify this in ways that accommodate the characteristics and professional development needs of the part-time workforce and the specific teaching and learning needs of the sub-degree sector.

6. STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Introduction

- 6.1 Dimension 6 lies within the Action Phase. Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on their:

- policies and practices of student assessment;
- alignment of intended learning outcomes and assessment strategies;
- approaches to informing students about assessment tasks and grading policies;
- mechanisms for checking the validity of assessment tasks and the reliability of grading;
- approaches to fair and consistent grading;
- practices related to student achievement levels and international standards;
- approach to grade appeals;
- policies and procedures to address cheating or plagiarism; and
- policies and procedures for certification of student learning.

Commendations

6.2 Audit Panels made three Commendations, distributed across three universities in relation to Dimension 6, each focused on a different aspect of this Dimension, as follows:

- timely return of work with constructive feedback (*one Commendation*);
- implementation of Outcomes-based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) and criterion-based assessment (*one Commendation*); and
- comprehensive assessment policy framework, that frames all aspects of student learning assessment, engages with sub-degree students to ensure they understand assessment expectations, conducts external reviews of assessment outcomes and evaluates its assessment policies and practices (*one Commendation*).

Case study: HKBU

6.3 HKBU has placed great importance on the adoption of an outcome-based approach to teaching and learning and criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) of student learning and is effectively tracking the learning progress of students and the achievement of intended learning outcomes through these means. Staff report that the adoption and monitoring of OBTL and CRA have improved the SDPUs' consideration of assessment. The College of International Education (CIE) was early to plan the introduction of OBTL in 2010, conducting workshops to assist staff and utilising the expertise of the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning to support implementation and more recently to monitor the effectiveness of the approach. Overall the planning, implementation and monitoring of the adoption of OBTL and CRA in the CIE has been managed in ways that have had a significant impact on the assessment of student learning [HKBU Audit Report paragraph 6.5].

Affirmations and Recommendations

6.4 Four Affirmations and ten Recommendations were made in respect of Dimension 6, distributed across six universities. They can be grouped as follows:

- further development of assessment policies, processes and procedures, including variously: developing an institutional approach to the

identification, reporting and monitoring of academic integrity cases; applying academic integrity policies consistently across SDPUs; reviewing the policy on appeals of academic integrity and grades; ensuring students are aware of student complaints and appeals policy and confirm equity of treatment regardless of programme of study; reviewing the timeframe and processes for development and implementation of a new assessment policy to ensure timely completion; reviewing the grading framework with reference to requirements to complete all learning outcomes; reviewing and revising the assessment policy to ensure it is fit for purpose and capable of informing training and support for staff and students on the implementation of criterion-based assessment (*one Affirmation and six Recommendations*);

- deriving greater benefit from externality, specifically: integrating feedback from external examiners into programme review and enhancement; and providing guidance to assist departmental advisors give advice on assessment systems including moderation and external marking (*two Recommendations*);
- uniform adoption of OBTL and CRA (*one Recommendation*);
- enhancing assessment data, specifically taking explicit account of student course assessment outcomes in annual programme monitoring; piloting end-of-programme survey and programme outcomes assessment; and developing a database of course information (*two Affirmations and one Recommendation*); and
- enhancing learning through assessment, by providing students with access to examination scripts (*one Affirmation*).

Points to note

- 6.5 The implementation of CRA is generally progressing well across most of the sub-degree sector but there remains a considerable gap between those universities/SDPUs who have completed the task and others who remain divided about its merits and/or are only just beginning to grasp the full implications of the reorientation. On occasions the documentation of assessment policies and associated processes and procedures is outdated and/or not fit for purpose, notably in relation to matters such as complaints, appeals and academic dishonesty. With the exception of one university, there is little evidence that the

sub-degree sector is yet embracing the work on programme outcome achievement that increasingly features in undergraduate provision. Such an approach would be capable of providing evidence on programme effectiveness and student performance in relation to programme learning outcomes.

- 6.6 In one case, an audit trail confirmed that international benchmarking is undertaken in respect of sub-degree programmes and enabled the Audit Panel to ascertain the perceived value of external examiners' and external reviewers' role for programme co-ordinators and other academic managers. In another case an audit trail in relation to the implementation of CRA enabled the Audit Panel to test the effectiveness of the university's approach. In a third case, an audit trail provided insight into the close attention given at programme level to the appropriateness of assessment methods to be used in each course. A further audit trail demonstrated that the SDPU ensures comparability and equivalence of assessment practices by, for example, requiring both full-time and part-time versions of programmes to report to a single academic committee and by appointing the same external examiner to both versions.

7. STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Introduction

- 7.1 Dimension 7 lies within the Action Phase. Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on their:

- approaches to student engagement;
- approaches to students' personal development and/or the development of soft skills;
- student participation in governance;
- student support services, for example, academic skill development programmes, language development programmes, career planning advice and preparation for employment activities, and personal support services; and
- non-local student support services.

Commendations

7.2 Four universities each received one of the four Commendations made in relation to Dimension 7, which fall under the following headings:

- wide range of co- and extra-curricular activities, including student counselling, orientation activities, peer mentor support, career life planning, overseas service learning, participation in sport and cultural teams, out-of-classroom language learning activities and provision for special education needs, which enrich the experience of full-time students (*two Commendations*);
- management of student placements and internships, for which students are well prepared and through which students gain work experience opportunities that are valued by employers (*one Commendation*); and
- pastoral care of students, by dedicated staff, both within the teaching environment and beyond, involving both face-to-face advice and consultation and digital communication media (*one Commendation*).

Case study: PolyU

7.3 PolyU's student support services help students adopt a positive attitude towards their study and careers, broaden their horizons and develop as whole persons. Full-time sub-degree students are provided with a wide range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and global initiatives such as overseas exchanges and work placements. Participation and satisfaction rates are high, with students reporting that their learning experience has been enriched through these activities, as well as through the support of helpful and approachable teachers. English language support services and enhancement programmes provided for sub-degree students at Hong Kong Community College are diverse, comprehensive and effectively monitored. These activities, together with services oriented to personal and career development, make a valued contribution to the quality of the experience of full-time sub-degree students at the SDPUs [PolyU Audit Report paragraphs 7.4 - 7.9].

Affirmations and Recommendations

7.4 This Dimension gave rise to one Affirmation and four Recommendations distributed across four universities. They fall into the following categories:

- measuring access to and uptake of student support services, including by part-time students, specifically: development of a framework for data collection that measures usage rates, satisfaction levels and impact of student support services; review of the student support policy for part-time students in relation to access to the e-learning platform and library services to ensure support that is comparable to that provided for full-time students (*two Recommendations*);
- analysing attrition rates and causes, with a view to identifying and providing targeted support to student ‘at risk’ and in danger of withdrawing from their programme (*one Recommendation*);
- encouraging and recording participation in co- and extra-curricular activities, with a view to building upon and systematising evidence found in different annual reports in each SDPU that supports the effective monitoring and enhancement of co-curricular activities and internships, including evaluation reports and self-improvement and reflection sheets (*one Recommendation*); and
- securing the engagement of students in the various aspects of governance (*one Affirmation*).

Points to note

- 7.5 With one anomalous and temporary exception, sub-degree students play a substantial role in key aspects of the governance of their SDPUs and university, as appropriate. Students across all seven universities routinely provide feedback on their learning experiences and are satisfied with the responsiveness of academic managers and service providers. Those universities and SDPUs who recruit non-local students provide orientation sessions and other support to promote integration.
- 7.6 Across the sub-degree sector there are disparities between full-time and part-time students, and between one SDPU and another in the same university, in respect of access to student support services and facilities, as well as to co- and extra-curricular activities. While some of these variations can be attributed to the characteristics and learning support needs of different types of students, Audit Panels also identify circumstances in which the differentiations in levels of provision amount to inequity of treatment.

7.7 Significant strides are being made by several universities to open up co- and extra-curricular activities to sub-degree students, similar to those that distinguish undergraduate provision in the UGC-funded sector. One university is already piloting integrated Associate Degree and Higher Diploma and co-/extra-curricular provision and student support services to cater for students' holistic development. Take-up is not as high as many universities hope it will be and recognition of such activities on the academic transcript may have a positive effect on engagement.

8. SYSTEMS FOR ACTING ON QUALITY ASSURANCE DATA TO MAKE ONGOING ENHANCEMENTS TO STUDENT LEARNING

Introduction

8.1 Dimension 8 constitutes the Reflection and Follow Through Phase. Universities and their SDPU(s) were invited to reflect specifically on their:

- approach to using systematic data on subject and programme quality to make ongoing improvements to curriculum and teaching approaches, and to track the outcomes of changes over time;
- use of trend data at programme level; and
- approach to addressing under-performing programmes.

Commendations

8.2 One Commendation was made in relation to Dimension 8, focused on responsiveness to student course and teaching evaluations and student experience questionnaires.

Case study: CUHK

8.3 CUHK is committed to improving student learning outcomes and demonstrates an exemplary level of reflection and follow-through when dealing with student feedback via its Course and Teaching Evaluations and Sub-degree Student Experience Questionnaires. These data, together with Exit Survey data are discussed thoroughly and systematically inform action plans. Students consistently report high levels of satisfaction with the level of responsiveness to

their feedback shown by instructors and programme co-ordinators [CUHK Audit Report paragraph 8.1].

Affirmations and Recommendations

8.4 This Dimension gave rise to three Affirmations and four Recommendations distributed across four universities, all of which are concerned with improving the use of data, as listed below:

- review exit and graduate surveys to ensure greater consistency of approach;
- draw on and supplement all available data sources to facilitate a systematic and enhancement-orientated understanding of all aspects of student learning;
- specify the key performance indicators to be used by SDPUs, enable central collection of relevant data, ensure appropriate committee review and undertake detailed trend analysis;
- identify sources of direct evidence of student learning and development, specify expected levels of learning and determine how various data types inform the enhancement of programme design and delivery;
- improve data use through quarterly reporting and develop learning analytics with data owners;
- strengthen follow through of programme quality reports; and
- use external evaluators to improve programme design and development.

Points to note

8.5 The overall focus of Affirmations and Recommendations indicates that data collection needs to be systematised and streamlined rather than proliferated, to ensure that data answer the questions that universities and SDPUs wish to have answered and directly inform the enhancement of student learning and development.

8.6 In one case three audit trails provided evidence of consistent data collection tools, including information from external evaluators but also indicated that data are used to inform improvements in varying ways.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Overall strengths of the UGC sub-degree sector

- SDPUs are generally well aligned strategically with the approach of their university proper;
- universities are maintaining sufficient consistency between their respective SDPUs to assure academic standards and quality;
- approaches to programme quality assurance are generally sound;
- well developed links exist with staff in other institutions, employers and external stakeholders, including external examiners, external advisors and alumni;
- common frameworks for programme approval are in place, which are nuanced appropriately by differentiated processes, tailored to different types of programme;
- professional development opportunities are available for full-time staff in the sub-degree sector; and
- students are playing a substantial role in key aspects of the governance of their SDPUs and university, as appropriate.

Challenges facing the UGC sub-degree sector as a whole

- responding flexibly and openly to the rapidly shifting external environment, with increased competition from private providers and more stringent government regulations, which is inevitably having an impact on university planning and accountability;
- making more systematic, precise and effective use of a wider range of data sources;
- systematically and consistently embedding an outcome-based approach to teaching and learning, and especially CRA, and embracing the cultural shift that this approach embodies, as a matter of policy;
- strengthening and extending the sub-degree sector's repertoire of innovative teaching and learning practices incorporating a special focus on the development of a strategic approach to e-learning;
- providing appropriate professional development opportunities for part-time staff in the sub-degree sector, comparable to those provided for full-time staff;
- further strengthening and developing assessment policies, processes and procedures;
- embracing the work on programme outcome achievement that increasingly characterises undergraduate provision, to provide evidence on programme effectiveness and student performance in relation to programme learning outcomes; and

- addressing disparities between full-time and part-time students and between one SDPU and another in the same university in respect of access to student support services and facilities, as well as to co- and extra-curricular activities.

Concluding Remark

Taken separately and together, the seven audit reports demonstrate that Sub-degree Operations within UGC-funded universities are generally in good health and fit for purpose. Notwithstanding the diversity of SDPUs within and between universities, the reports identify significant strengths that characterise the whole UGC sub-degree sector. While the audit reports also highlight opportunities for individual universities to improve their operations and the Overview Report identifies common challenges, both internal and external, faced by the UGC sector, it should be noted that none of the reports has given rise to major concerns requiring urgent action. These findings give QAC overall confidence that academic standards and quality in the Sub-degree Operations within UGC-funded universities are secure.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CCCU	Community College of City University
CIE	College of International Education
CityU	City University of Hong Kong
CRA	Criterion-referenced assessment
CUHK	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
CUSCS	School of Continuing and Professional Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
EAA	External Academic Advisor
EdUHK	The Education University of Hong Kong
HKBU	Hong Kong Baptist University
HKU	The University of Hong Kong
HKU SPACE	The University of Hong Kong School of Professional and Continuing Education
HKUST	The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
LEP	Language Enhancement Programme
LIFE	Lingnan Institute of Further Education
LTTC	Centre for Learning, Teaching and Technology
LU	Lingnan University
OBTL	Outcomes-based Teaching and Learning
PolyU	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
QAC	Quality Assurance Council
SDPUs	Sub-degree Providing Units
UGC	University Grants Committee

HYPERLINKS TO INDIVIDUAL AUDIT REPORTS

- City University of Hong Kong
https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/qac/quality/sub_degree/cityu201903e.pdf
- Hong Kong Baptist University
https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/qac/quality/sub_degree/hkbu201810e.pdf
- Lingnan University
https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/qac/quality/sub_degree/lu201911e.pdf
- The Chinese University of Hong Kong
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