

Of all public service duties I took up in over 20 years, becoming the Chairman of the UGC almost four years ago turned out to be the most challenging and satisfying.

Understanding the complexity of our higher education system - a key driver of Hong Kong's social and economic growth - was a daunting task. But the professional support of the UGC Secretariat was of great help.

The Hong Kong community looks to our academic institutions for talents and new knowledge that drive the continuous social and economic developments, not the least because a significant amount of precious public resources are committed to the sector. Last triennium, government expenditure for the sector stood at HK\$15 billion per year. That is expected to be further increased in the next triennium.

Community expectation on institutions points to an important aspect of institutional autonomy and academic freedom: public accountability for what institutions do and achieve. Stakeholders rightfully expect to see progress, and institutions that they may meaningfully engage with. These two core values must be appropriately balanced with public accountability.

I am pleased to have witnessed positive, significant developments in the sector. Foremost among them must be the launch of the four-year undergraduate programme in 2012, the culmination of the "3+3+4" new academic structure that forms part of the education reform dating back to 2000.

It took years of discussions to achieve the seamless transition from a three-year curriculum to the present four-year structure. We visited all campuses during last two years to see how it all worked, and we were pleased with what we saw.

An education system is a huge laboratory in itself and the latest transformation of our undergraduate education has been a breathtaking exercise; an opportunity which is the envy of the world.

The eight UGC-funded institutions had recruited additional faculty and support staff to cope with the expansion. Much institutional effort had also gone into development of the curriculum under the four-year structure. The new structure also presented a good opportunity for the adoption of an outcome-based approach in learning. New buildings equipped with the latest facilities have sprung up across campuses, serving not just to accommodate an expanded student population but also to provide an inspiring, effective learning environment.

In keeping with our core values of respecting institutional autonomy and academic freedom, institutions design their own pedagogies and curriculum, not only in the broad context of implementing the four-year curriculum, but with a view to nurturing truly global, skillful and responsible citizens. This is critical because in this world of technological advancement and globalisation, it is not information per se that students need to master, but how to use that information. Students require a genuine understanding of the world. A broader education means they will be in a much better position to understand opportunities and strengths, regardless of what they do later in life.

Looking at the key indicators, it is evident that our institutions have done well. First, in terms of international rankings, Hong Kong has made great strides. I know that rankings have their limitations. But the 2014-15 QS World University Rankings provides a source of pride for a small city like Hong Kong, in that three of our institutions made it to the top 100, same as the academic hub Boston, while

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London has five in the top 100. Also, the fact that four of our institutions ranked among the top ten in the QS Asian University Rankings 2015 speaks volumes about our regional influence. These rankings measure a broad range of factors: teaching and learning, research, internationalisation, staff-student ratio, student experience, etc. Our institutions' consistently high rankings testify to the all-round developments we have witnessed in the sector.

In research, in just over 20 years since the major funding boost that accompanied the establishment of the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong has attained much international recognition.

The results of the 2014 Research Assessment Exercise, released in early 2015, showed that 46 per cent of the research submissions made by the eight UGC-funded institutions were "world leading" or "internationally excellent". The assessments carried out by renowned academics from

around the world served another important purpose – they revealed the "centres of excellence", the areas of strengths in high quality research.

To maximise further potential, there is room for further support for researchers in respect of an area distinct from basic research - sometimes known as translational or midstream research that has the potential of generating societal benefits and impact in a relatively short period of time.

At the UGC we are well aware of the expectation that public money spent on research should return benefits to society. We encourage more efforts in identifying areas where we can do more in midstream or translational research in a wide range of fields from humanities through to engineering. The UGC's broad objective is to help create a vibrant research culture and an ecosystem which connect institutions' research talents with various sectors, be it businesses, non-governmental organisations or the Government itself.

Our sector is just as much striving for teaching and learning excellence as advocating the importance of research; all for making a real difference for our students. The provision of Teaching Development and Language Enhancement Grants since the 1990s emphasises this. With the rapid technological advancement, we believe that institutions should make creative and effective use of technologies in enriching students' learning experience and opening up new opportunities for learning. Additional resources had been allocated on a competitive basis in the 2012-15 triennium to support initiatives on pedagogical changes and innovations.

The influence that good teachers can bring to the students, their peers and the community is tremendous and long-lasting. Through the annual UGC Teaching Award which recognises outstanding faculty members who excel in teaching in the UGC sector, we become aware of the excellent teachers we have. Not only do they enrich the knowledge of our students, but equip students with different skills to meet future 'whole life' challenges. The awardees are also "ambassadors of good teaching" collectively making a real and sustained impact in promoting teaching excellence within and across institutions.

Hong Kong's institutions are known for the high level of internationalisation of their faculty. In keeping with similar developments globally, the UGC has been supporting the diversification of sources of students and campus integration, and this work will continue. Thanks to continued government funding support, more students will go outside Hong Kong for exchange or other learning opportunities. This two-way flow of talents should be further enhanced, which we believe will bring enormous benefits to students and the institutions as a whole.

Institutions have also been addressing community needs by providing an increasing number of self-financed programmes in recent years. Such programmes help meet the growing aspirations among young people for further education and at the same time produce more talents needed for the new economy in an increasingly competitive world. This has led to what we call a "mixed economy" within the institutions, i.e. the co-existence of a publicly-funded core, together with self-financed streams. Increased government funding for senior year places has enriched the opportunities for these two economies to be bridged. The UGC's role is to ensure that financial disciplines are followed, institutions' quality assurance is fit for purpose and a robust governance structure is in place to enable the "mixed economy" to thrive while serving the institutions' respective core missions.

It has been recognised during our discussions and retreats that ours is comparatively a very small system and that the eight institutions combined are no bigger than some individual institutions in the United States or even the United Kingdom. Accordingly we recognise the need to rise above competition and engage in greater collaborations. We envisage research collaborations all levels, pooling resources and sharing expertise

for maximum impact. It is vital that we achieve critical mass in the many disciplines where we excel.

In teaching and learning, we have encouraged greater collaboration amongst the institutions in accelerating the adoption of necessary pedagogical changes and innovations to enhance teaching and learning in the UGC sector.

I strongly believe we are in the best position to advise the Government on the development of higher education, not just because of our long years of service. Indeed, we owe our expertise to the some twenty local and international members, all prominent individuals in their own right, who have selflessly committed weeks and sometimes months a year sharing valuable ideas with us at meetings, and sitting on working groups or assessment panels.

We will continue to draw on local and overseas expertise in our work ahead for the interests of Hong Kong. It is this gathering of the best minds from top institutions worldwide, after all, that makes our committee the unique body that it has been for the past 50 years.

Having looked back perhaps it would do no harm to do some speculating about the future. In the coming years our strong UGC sector can expect to continue to build on the opportunities afforded by the additional year granted by the four-year curriculum. The rest of the world envies the opportunities that this development allows us yet I believe it will take several years before all of the potential gains from this endeavour are fully exploited.

In a similar view, the full range of pedagogical opportunities of the digital revolution remains to be fully developed. Whilst these may not bring *revolutionary* change to our institutions, surely they will bring *evolutionary* change.

Going forward both teachers and researchers will focus on impact – the key watch word of the future.

Robust governance is not just required for effective management of institutions' affairs. It goes much deeper to the root of the sector's very sustainability. A sound governance structure, having regard to good practice among comparable systems around the globe, underpins our core value of institutional autonomy. It is only with a robust governance structure that public trust in institutional autonomy, and hence its legitimacy, can be assured.

The UGC will continue to provide the steering, in accordance with government policies and with respect for institutional autonomy, enabling each institution to develop according to their mission and vision, and their own differentiated role.

I am confident that the sector would excel further and continue to contribute to the development of Hong Kong and allow future generations stay competitive in the globalised world. As ever, the UGC, acting as the buffer between the Government and institutions, is committed to working for a brighter future of Hong Kong's higher education.