

Educational Reform and Higher Education in Hong Kong

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Hong Kong higher education has gone through dramatic changes over the past 20 years, including an increase in the number of universities from two to seven, along with university-level enrollments growing from 2 to 18 percent of the age cohort. The Education Commission, a government-appointed policy group, has recently recommended wide-ranging reforms to the whole education system, including the tertiary sector, which will undoubtedly lead to further changes in the near future.

The recommendations from the Education Commission range across each university's operations. Universities have been admonished to broaden their curricula to provide students with multidisciplinary learning experiences and to enhance their problem-solving powers and adaptability. Critics have charged that universities have overemphasized public examination results in admissions processes, by not giving enough attention to other aspects of students' performance.

The universities have also been urged to reconsider the length of their programs, now at three years, in response to likely changes within secondary education. These changes may involve reducing the duration of secondary education from seven to six years and opening up a three-year upper-secondary program to all students who wish to complete secondary education and can meet the basic academic requirements. At the present time, fewer than 40 percent of students completing the fifth year of secondary education are given the opportunity to enter an academic upper-secondary program to prepare for university entrance examinations similar to A-level examinations in Britain. The results of these examinations are the main criteria for entrance to university. Other recommendations for higher education reform include encouraging the development of community colleges, providing associate degrees or diploma programs to students who have completed secondary education, and making provision for the possible development of one or two private universities.

Changing Economic and Social Needs

The main concern driving these reforms lies in the nature and structure of Hong Kong's economy. While there are a certain number of jobs at low skill levels in some service industries and construction, most low-skill jobs in manufacturing have moved to the Mainland during recent years. Higher levels of education, as well as the ability to adapt to

rapidly changing economic and social circumstances, are essential for most of the workforce.

Hong Kong leaders note with dismay the contrast between Hong Kong and such Asian cities as Shanghai and Singapore, where nearly 60 percent of young people enter some form of postsecondary education. Hong Kong, with 18 percent of the age cohort entering university and another 12 percent or so entering other forms of short-cycle higher education, is clearly lagging behind in the provision of postsecondary education. There remains, too, a need to improve the standards of primary and secondary education for all students and to ensure that all children are able to enjoy learning, learn effectively, and develop habits that will result in lifelong learning. This means enhancing the status and professional level of teachers and providing support for them as they face the new expectations generated by the reform. At present, a relatively small number of elite schools combine high academic standards with good opportunities for all-round development in the arts, physical education, and community service. This has been possible through a tracking system, which assured these schools a steady flow of the top 20 to 30 percent of all primary pupils. Students were assigned to secondary schools on the basis of Hong Kong-wide academic achievement tests. The abolition of these tests, which was the first reform measure to be implemented in summer 2000, and the commitment to a reduction in the number of tracks mean that secondary schools will have a wider ability range among their students and teachers will be expected to motivate all students to enjoy learning, in the context of a broader and more integrated curriculum.

Teachers and Higher Education

Ironically, teachers have not directly benefited from the expansion and reform of higher education in Hong Kong. As the number of tertiary institutions expanded from two to seven, which involved the creation of a new university of science and technology in 1991, the upgrading of two polytechnic institutions and the Baptist College to university status in the early 1990s and then Lingnan College in 1998. In the process, professional development and training for teachers at the base of the education system was left behind. Five subdegree teachers colleges, the first established in 1939, continued to produce the majority of primary school teachers and about one-third of all secondary teachers through traditional two-year training programs. Not until 1994 were these five institutions merged to form the Hong Kong Institute of Education, which was placed under the University Grants Committee as the eighth government-funded tertiary institution in 1996. In his first

policy address as chief executive of the new Special Administration Region government in October 1997, Tung Chee Hwa made the commitment to a future where all new teachers entering the profession should be university graduates with professional training and asked the University Grants Committee to advise on the timetable for this transition.

There is considerable debate over the most appropriate model for teacher education at different levels, with the universities largely focusing on postgraduate diploma programs for university graduates in various subject disciplines.

The Institute of Education

This commitment of the new chief executive to an all-graduate teaching profession has resulted in plans for a very rapid transition for the Institute of Education. All subdegree programs for primary and secondary teachers are now to be phased out by 2004. They will be replaced mainly by bachelor of education programs, with a special focus at the secondary level on areas such as the arts, languages, physical education, and design and technology, which were strong points of the former colleges. These new programs have been designed as four-year programs, intended to integrate pedagogical knowledge with academic subject knowledge from the first year of the program, while at the same time fostering an interest in civic and environmental education across the curriculum and high standards in the use of information technology for educational purposes. As the Institute faces questions of how it will adapt its program to the planned new structure of secondary education, it has the advantage of approved four-year programs already in place and curricular patterns that are more suited to multidisciplinary learning than the narrower, academic subject structures found in some older universities in Hong Kong.

Nevertheless, the Institute faces a formidable challenge as several universities with well-established faculties of education seek to expand their enrollments in teacher education and all tertiary institutions are asked to do more without any increase in government funding. There is considerable debate over the most appropriate model for teacher education at different levels, with the universities largely focusing on postgraduate diploma programs for university graduates in various subject disciplines. Traditionally, teachers with this kind of background have dominated secondary education, especially the teaching of academic subjects in the sciences and

social sciences at the upper levels. Now there is an argument that this model should be used for the preparation of primary teachers, as well. While the Institute has developed postgraduate diploma programs for university graduates interested in either primary or secondary teaching careers, it has taken the position that the integrated bachelor of education program provides a more solid professional preparation for a teaching career, especially in the light of trends toward more integrated curricular knowledge and the encouragement of habits of self-learning in all children. The Institute, along with the University of Science and Technology and the Polytechnic University, has also developed collaborative programs that allow for a balanced emphasis on excellence in certain subject disciplines and professional studies from the first year of postsecondary schooling. ■

Developing a Financing Strategy for Palestinian Higher Education

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Despite great obstacles over its relatively short three-decade history, Palestinian higher education has helped to meet the rising demand for further education, providing access in West Bank/Gaza to those who had been forcibly deprived of the chance to study abroad.

But longstanding demographic and fiscal pressures, coupled with inadequately defined priorities and chronic economic and political problems only heightened by the recent turbulence, have led to a higher education system in fundamental need of repair. In recognition of these facts, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has decided to develop a financing strategy for the purpose of creating a more effective, accessible, efficient, and accountable higher education system.

Characteristics of the Sector

Palestinian higher education occupies an interesting, perhaps unique position in the constellation of international higher education. Its 10 largely nonprofit universities and more than a dozen government and private community colleges enroll about 70,000