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Professor Paul C W Chu, JP
President
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
Clear Water Bay
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Dear Paul,

Outcome-based Approaches in Student Learning

We discussed this important subject at our Heads of Institutions meeting on 4 May 2006. The UGC considered this subject at length during the April 2006 meetings. The UGC decided it would be useful for me to write to all Heads clearly to promulgate our intentions in promoting outcome-based approaches and to dispel any misunderstandings.

Let me outline a few facets of what outcome-based approaches are. An outcome-based approach to student learning is a student-centred approach. These approaches call for the articulation of what we expect our students to learn, and the gathering of evidence to determine whether they have learned it. Clear understanding and articulation of intended learning outcomes facilitates the design of an effective curriculum and appropriate assessments to measure achievement, and to plan the learning process for individual students. This is particularly relevant when all institutions are planning to review their curricula under "3+3+4".

These approaches are certainly not new to any of our institutions. To different extents, all staff and institutions have been consciously or sub-consciously using outcome-based approaches, but these maybe implicit or *ad hoc*. Outcome-based approaches are therefore not about creating an alternative scheme. They build on and make the existing one better. I am happy to note that all institutions have indicated willingness to pursue this path.

There has been an international trend to adopt outcome-based approaches in teaching and learning, and UGC would like to encourage institutions in this direction. It is understandable that institutions have different perceptions of UGC's intentions, because different overseas jurisdictions promote outcome-based approaches for different reasons. The UGC set out in the "Roadmap document" published in January 2004 that all institutions should pursue international competitiveness in teaching. The UGC's goal in promoting outcome-based approaches is simple and straightforward – improvement and enhancement in student learning and teaching quality. A central aspect of this is the alignment of learning outcomes, teaching and learning processes, and assessment. Examining this alignment has been an evolving but important feature of previous UGC initiatives (e.g. Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews) and will continue to be a focus of quality assurance for UGC.

I should also say a few words on UGC's approach to promoting the adoption of outcome-based approaches. The UGC's role can best be described as a facilitator to the institutions, providing support when asked and where possible. We also recognize that different institutions have different roles and missions. You may therefore rest assured that we will avoid a process of comparison based on a single set of criteria or the perception of "common standards" for all. The Committee equally appreciates that outcome-based approaches cannot be unilaterally imposed nor micromanaged. Staff of institutions must take ownership and ultimate responsibility, and we would wish to see the concept internalized through cultural and behavioral shifts, rather than acts of mere compliance.

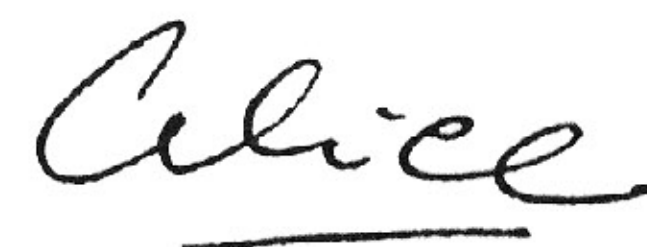
We are aware that some are concerned that UGC will link "outcomes" with resource allocation when they are still at an early stage of implementation. This concern is understandable, given that Hong Kong institutions are at a relatively early stage of implementing outcome-based approaches. The UGC advocates an incremental and measured approach in taking forward this subject. The shift from a focus on inputs and processes to outcomes is not an event that happens over-night. Let me reassure you that the UGC has no plans at present to link implementation of this initiative with funding, including the on-going discussion on student numbers for the next triennium or under "3+3+4". We understand that our institutions are at different stages in digesting this philosophy, and it takes time to make genuine changes. The Committee agrees that it will be premature at present to make a link to funding before institutions are ready.

At the same time, I do not wish to give the false impression that this subject is not worthy enough to be linked with resources. The UGC is determined in enhancing the quality of teaching - and promoting outcome-based student learning in one effective way. We will make this clear in future major UGC initiatives. The Committee is bound to take action if, after a reasonable period of time, institutions show immobility or disinterest, despite UGC's continued encouragement and emphasis. Therefore, it is important for institutions to start thinking and acting in this aspect, and the "3+3+4" curriculum review is a good opportunity for all. It is precisely because implementing outcome-based approaches is a gradual process that may take years, that it is important to begin this process early.

The UGC also plans to provide encouragement in the form of extra funding to promote early adoption. The UGC notes that most institutions will probably need some assistance in adopting outcome based approaches. We think that the curriculum revision under "3+3+4" will be a good opportunity to weave "outcomes" into the new curriculum. We have commissioned a baseline research study in order to assist institutions. As indicated in our meeting, we will consult the Teaching Development Sub-Group (which includes representatives from all institutions) to see how we can best help and pursue some ideas that have been identified in the study (e.g. developing a technical assistance network to provide expertise to institutions as needed, details to be discussed by the Sub-Group). We hope that this process will be driven by the institutions, and the UGC will encourage open dialogue in this process.

I would be happy for you to share this letter widely with staff.

Yours sincerely,



(Alice Lam)
Chairman

c.c. Chairman, QG