

## CHAPTER 8

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# EMBRACING CHANGE: QUALITY ASSURANCE AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

*Bob Butcher  
Andrea Hope*

### ABSTRACT

*The Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (now the Open University of Hong Kong) was established in 1989 as a dedicated distance education institution at a time in Hong Kong's history when there was a huge demand for more opportunities for working adults to access higher education. The original quality assurance protocols were imported to meet the needs of the institution as a provider of distance education and to demonstrate externally that quality systems were in place. From an internal standpoint, the early processes were regarded as bureaucratic and oppressive by the academic staff. There was thus a perceived need, endorsed by the external accrediting bodies, to develop simplified systems which shifted responsibility for quality assurance away from senior management and put it under school and programme team control. Changes in the local higher education market since 2001 have led to a decline in numbers of distance education students. As students are the lifeblood of a self-financing institution, the university has had to seek ways of attracting new applicants. The case study examines three recent initiatives: the introduction of full-time face-to-face programmes; the development of eLearning; and the provision of courses in mainland China. It examines the impetus created by these initiatives for further review and revision of the quality assurance systems operating in the university.*

### 1. BACKGROUND

#### *1.1 Genesis of the Open University of Hong Kong*

In 2004/5 the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) is celebrating the 15th anniversary of its establishment. It was founded as the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong (OLI) in 1989 by the Hong Kong Government to “provide opportunities for higher education by means of open learning and thereby advance learning and knowledge, and

enhance economic and social development, in Hong Kong” (OLI Ordinance 1989) and gained university title in 1997. At the time of the OLI’s launch, the population of Hong Kong was 5.7 million, of which 2.6 million were in the workforce with an unemployment rate of just 2 percent (CIA World Factbook 1989). At the same time, fully funded full-time places in local conventional tertiary institutions in Hong Kong were available only for 6 percent of the eligible age cohort. Concern about lack of adequate provision for tertiary education was exacerbated in a Chinese society that traditionally sets a high value upon education and was eager to enhance its career opportunities through investment in training and intellectual development (Dhanarajan 1993).

All the socio-economic indicators predicted that, after many decades of under-provision, a vast backlog of potential adult learners existed for whom the opening of the OLI would be the answer to their prayer for accessible, flexible and cost-effective higher and continuing education. Yet many people thought that open-access distance education would never catch on in small, status-conscious Hong Kong. However, when the doors to the sixth floor office suite in a busy downtown shopping district that played temporary host to the fledgling institute opened to distribute prospectuses in late July 1989, there was a queue that wound all the way up the stairs, around the back of the building and into the main road. At one point the police estimated that there were 10,000 people in the queue, and two streets had to be closed to traffic (Kiloh 1999: 50). By the end of the application period more than 63,000 applications had been received. Eventually, 4237 students enrolled, and the only dedicated distance education provider authorised to award degrees in Hong Kong was launched. Modelled on the successful Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK), the OLI was able to launch quickly after government approval was given, thanks to its policy of buying in the first courses as well as expertise and administrative systems from the OUUK and other reputable distance learning universities around the Commonwealth.

The institution grew rapidly, and the number of students studying for a qualification by distance education at the OUHK reached a peak in October 2001. At this time there were about 27,000 registered active students, of whom over 17,000 declared that they were intending to graduate with a bachelor’s degree. The remaining 10,000 were equally split between postgraduate and sub-degree programmes and those students who, because of the modular nature of study, chose not to declare their intended qualification. Since then, significant alterations have taken place in the operating context of the OUHK that have intensified competition for students and have necessitated change to ensure the university’s survival. Key among them are the global reach of Internet-based technologies which have enabled penetration of the Hong Kong distance education market by a significantly larger number of international distance education providers; a liberal regulatory framework which encourages the operation of overseas universities in Hong Kong; a severe reduction in public funding to the local higher education institutions in the public sector, combined with a rapid diversification by those institutions into the provision of self-financing part-time degree and sub-degree programmes; and the rapid expansion of the China market. From April 2002, the number of students studying by distance education started to show a steady decline until by April 2005, there were just over 18,500 active students.

## *1.2 External accreditation and the quest for university status*

When it was founded as a non-university provider of degree-level study, the OLI and its programmes were subject to external accreditation, first by the UK-based Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and subsequently by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), which was established in 1990. From its very

inception, the Open Learning Institute had ambitions to gain university title, and under the British model of higher education that still prevails in Hong Kong, the first and necessary step was for the institution to acquire self-accrediting status. Success in this enterprise is achieved by demonstrating to the relevant accrediting body that the institution has the necessary internal quality assurance mechanisms in place at the institutional and the programme levels to continue to ensure the quality of the programmes offered without further intervention by the accrediting bodies at the programme level.

The CNAA review of the newly established OLI in 1989 set the early quality agenda. It found that to ensure high academic standards, the OLI must:

- i) Take full responsibility for its own academic standards
- ii) Develop a system of internal quality assurance
- iii) Seek advice from appropriate discipline-based external peer groups on course selection, development and adaptation
- iv) Subject the revised courses and programmes to external peer group validation
- v) Seek a further external audit in one year (Dhanarajan & Hope 1992: 213)

In fact, the OLI was to subject itself to three further major review exercises by the HKCAA in 1990, 1992 and 1995 before it achieved university title in 1997. The most recent review of the Open University of Hong Kong, the first of the regular five-year institutional audits mandated by the government following the achievement of university title in 1997, was conducted by the HKCAA in 2002.

In Hong Kong, success is closely linked to perceptions of status. In higher education, this even extends to external accreditation. The fact that the HKCAA retains responsibility for the external review of the OUHK differentiates the university from the eight other self-accrediting degree-granting institutions in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> They are all funded by the Hong Kong SAR<sup>2</sup> government through the University Grants Committee (UGC), which conducts regular audits of the quality of both teaching and research. Since 1997, when the last of the UGC-funded institutions (Lingnan University) achieved self-accrediting status, the HKCAA has been concerned primarily with the validation of Associate Degrees and Diploma programmes at sub-degree level offered by institutions in the senior secondary, post-secondary and vocational training sectors, the establishment of a qualifications framework and the oversight of the Government's Continuing Education Fund which was set up to encourage lifelong learning. Ever conscious of the need to establish its status as a fully-fledged university and an equal of its sister institutions, the OUHK has, since 2003, mounted a concerted campaign to come under the quality umbrella of the UGC rather than the HKCAA, and the signs are now good that this accommodation may be approved in 2005.

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1. For a list of the eight government funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong, see [www.ugc.edu.hk/ugcpubs/figures2003/eng/overview\\_ugc.htm#fund](http://www.ugc.edu.hk/ugcpubs/figures2003/eng/overview_ugc.htm#fund)

2. Having been occupied by Britain in 1841, Hong Kong was ceded by China in 1842, and various lands were then leased to Britain for 99 years (from July 1, 1898 to June 30, 1997). In 1984, during negotiations with UK Prime Minister Thatcher over the future of Hong Kong, Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping proposed to apply the principle of "One country, two systems" to Hong Kong. This became enshrined in the Sino British Joint Declaration whereby the whole territory of Hong Kong under British rule became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997. The principle of the declaration was that, upon reunification, Hong Kong could continue to practice capitalism under a high degree of autonomy in all matters, except foreign affairs and defense, for 50 years.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

This case study examines the background to and development of quality assurance procedures in the OUHK in response to social, political and regulatory influences in the external environment and internal pressures for increased self-regulation by the academic staff.

### *2.1 Adapting imported quality assurance systems*

Robertshaw (1997: 67) has described how the OLI's basic quality assurance systems were, like the first courses, imported from the OUUK in an attempt to "quickly demonstrate externally that quality systems (were) in place." He also points to the weakness of such a model that results in an alienation of staff and a lack of ownership of procedures that are essentially top-down and bureaucratic and are seen to imply a lack of trust in the academics at course level. This did not go unnoticed by the external review panels, and Robertshaw reports (1997 *ibid*: 73) that, following the 1995 review, the OLI sought to simplify its systems, to increase participation and ownership and to raise awareness of quality issues. By 2005 that quest had culminated in a significantly simplified quality assurance system described by the OUHK staff surveyed by the authors of this case as effective, devolved (to school and programme-team level) and learner-centred.

One example relating to the quality assurance of assessment may be cited here to demonstrate the trend towards simplification. Given the OUHK's course-based student registration system, External Examiners at the OUHK have always been appointed on a course-by-course basis. Their role in the maintenance of quality standards at benchmark levels with other local tertiary institutions has been extremely important. It has been their duty to monitor the marking of examination scripts and assignments submitted in satisfaction of continuous assessment requirements, as well as to review and comment on the examination question papers, attend Award Board meetings and approve examination results. By 2004/5, the OUHK was offering 380 distance learning and 45 face-to-face courses, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to identify and appoint External Examiners locally. Moreover, by comparison with other universities in Hong Kong, the expectations of the External Examiner were onerous. The university has therefore moved to a system whereby a single External Examiner may be appointed with responsibilities for a group of courses within a cognate discipline. External Examiners are no longer required to monitor continuous assessment or attend Award Board meetings. In this way, external scrutiny is maintained, but the "lighter touch" approach gives more responsibility for the award of course results to individual schools.

### *2.2 Cost-effectiveness of quality assurance*

A further advantage for the institution of the recent simplification of quality assurance procedures is that less elaborate measures also cost less. Although it was established as a government initiative and received funding for the first three years of its existence, the OLI was mandated to become self-financing by 1992/3. Decisions on quality parameters in terms of course and programme design, development and review, delivery methods, student support, or staff appointment and development strategies have thus always been subject to cost constraints. In order to achieve the aims of excellence and affordability enshrined in the mission statement, the university must

attract fee-paying students and retain those who register. As the university stated in its 2002 submission to the HKCAA:

For a self-financing institution dependent on student fees for the bulk of its operating income, this ‘bottom line’ consideration is critical. Without a solid base of income, we are unable to act to enhance our curriculum, our learner support mechanisms, or our quality assurance procedures in ways that would allow us to reach out with greater effectiveness to more learners, in Hong Kong or elsewhere. (Open University of Hong Kong 2002: 14)

In the light of the decline in student numbers since 2001, the university has been forced to consider how to cut costs, upgrade its products, diversify its market and explore other sources of students. All of these initiatives have consequences for the future development of quality assurance in the university. In this case study, we shall discuss three recent institutional developments and the impact they have made on the established quality assurance protocols: the introduction of full-time face-to-face programmes; the delivery of courses in mainland China; and the increasing use of eLearning.

### **3 INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE PROTOCOLS**

#### ***3.1 Introduction of face-to-face teaching***

Up until 2001 the university had been wholly dedicated to the provision of courses by distance education (with the exception of the university’s Professional and Continuing Education arm, the Li Ka Shing Institute of Professional and Continuing Education, which offers traditional part-time adult education opportunities in classroom mode). In October 2001, it took the bold step of offering the first of a series of Associate Degrees by full-time face-to-face study. With this move into face-to-face tuition, the OUHK also became a player in the traditional school-leaver market, having previously focused solely on adult students. Since its inception in 1989, the OUHK has been the only provider of continuing adult education locally mandated to award its own degrees. In October 2003 the university took advantage of this one remaining competitive advantage over the community colleges and schools of continuing education of the other universities in Hong Kong by offering full-time Bachelor’s degree programmes specifically designed to offer a route to a full degree for those students completing an Associate Degree. This not only offers a ladder of opportunity for OUHK full-time students but also allows those students completing an Associate Degree elsewhere in Hong Kong to extend their studies to Bachelor’s level (Hope & Butcher 2005). The additional, pragmatic reason for this development is that it was seen as a response to a local market preference (particularly among school leavers) for traditional face-to-face delivery. Even after 15 years of concerted public relations efforts by the university and the testimony of its more than 30,000 graduates, there is still a strong local belief in Hong Kong that education is only credible when it takes place in a traditional teacher-student classroom setting.

The quality issues raised by the introduction of face-to-face programmes provide somewhat ironic echoes of complaints voiced in the early days by the staff of the OLI. They argued that the model adopted by the external accrediting bodies when making judgements about the institution was based on a well-funded face-to-face teaching university rather than a fledgling self-financing distance learning university catering to part-time adult learners. The institute fought hard to negotiate parameters for accreditation that would validate the OLI’s unfamiliar open and flexible model in the

eyes of a skeptical public. Such features included an open entry policy which meant that prospective students needed only to possess a Hong Kong ID card and to be at least 18 years of age rather than hold recognised academic qualifications to be eligible to register; students would register for courses, not programmes of study, and would be able to accumulate credits towards defined awards over time; students could study as many credits as they wished and there would be no penalty for taking time out from study; students, through a system of advanced standing, would be able to transfer into the OLI credits they had obtained for successful completion of study at an appropriate level in a recognised course elsewhere, all students would be allocated to a tutor but would not be required to attend the tutorials that would be held in the evening and on weekends in rented accommodation in other tertiary and secondary education establishments around the territory; the tutor's role would be to offer advice and guidance on how to study the course materials and provide feedback on assignments rather than to "teach" the course; students would be required to pass both continuous assessment and examination components of each course in order to pass; core academic staff would not be responsible for teaching or course development but for managing the tutors and the assessment processes; bought-in or specially commissioned comprehensive printed course materials supplemented by regular TV broadcasts and by optional attendance at tutorials would be the major medium of instruction.

Thus instead of using conventional, input-focused quality criteria such as A-level scores, teacher credentials, size of library holdings and campus facilities, the OUHK's quality assurance system focused on output measures at the course and programme level.

The OUHK's mission statement (2004) reflects its consistent commitment to the belief that higher education should be available to all those aspiring to it, regardless of previous qualification, gender, or race. Its quality assurance measures have been designed to ensure that access to educational opportunities is not an empty promise and that those students who register for the courses and programmes are helped towards achieving their goals. The two major focal points of the quality assurance system are therefore course and programme development and delivery and learner outcomes. Dhanarajan & Hope (1992 *ibid*: 211) identify the four crucial criteria for judging whether the quality of the products (i.e., courses and programmes) offered by a distance learning institution is of a standard comparable to that of other systems:

1. Logic of products: This includes the structure and content of courses, the level, sequence, relevance, currency and sensitivity to social concerns. It is in this area that academic judgements about standards are made; it is also the area where knowledge and skills are conveyed.
2. Development of products: The course and programme development process can reasonably be expected to mirror the concern for quality. Instructional design and product development procedures show quality-control checkpoints in the system.
3. Face value of products: This is concerned with the technical quality of the learning materials that are created for the individual learner, whether they are print, audio, video or computer-aided learning packages. In some cases precise parameters can be applied to measure quality, and in others judgements are made on "feel" and "impressions." Badly packaged learning materials can have a negative impact on students.
4. Delivery of products: The ability of the system to deliver the products to the intended learners is a measure of its success or failure. The question of delivery is an important consideration for any distance-teaching institute whose clients are a heterogeneous mix. New technologies offer great opportunities to teach and learn only if staff and students accept their use.

Having first established and then streamlined quality assurance protocols in line with these criteria to suit its core mission, the OUHK is now faced with the challenge of applying them to its face-to-face programmes. So far, the rigour of the OUHK's quality assurance protocols relating to course and programme development has meant that the curricula and syllabi of the face-to-face programmes have been subject to significantly more scrutiny than might be expected in a conventional face-to-face institution. However, there are at present only 521 registered students on 45 courses contributing to nine face-to-face programmes (Open University of Hong Kong 2005). These are very small numbers for an institution whose basic economic model depends on mass delivery. The university has established a Committee on Full-Time Face-to-Face Degree Programmes to oversee the conduct and administration of all full-time programmes taught in the face-to-face mode. This committee also makes recommendations to Senate on academic policy and to the Management Board on the allocation of resources. Initially the existing procedures used for distance education programmes were adopted for use with the face-to-face programmes. However, these procedures were not always appropriate, and a degree of flexibility has been used in their interpretation.

One example of changes required to policies and procedures to reflect the needs and expectations of different student populations relates to the language proficiency requirements for face-to-face programmes. In 2002, in response to widely expressed concerns about the decline in English proficiency among university graduates, the UGC introduced the Common English Proficiency Assessment Scheme (CEPAS). This is a voluntary assessment scheme intended to provide a common framework for assessing and documenting graduating students' English proficiency; and to benchmark it against a reliable, internationally validated instrument (UGC 2005: 2). It is heavily promoted to employers and, as a consequence, in 2005, the "Big 4" international accounting firms (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, Ernst and Young, KPMG and PricewaterhouseCoopers) wrote to all providers of accounting degree programmes to let them know that they expected any Hong Kong graduate applying for a job in their companies to inform them of their CEPA score in their employment application. All other providers of full-time degree programmes in Hong Kong make completion of a defined number of credits in language courses (English and Chinese) a requirement for graduation. The OUHK has always resisted this in its distance education programmes, arguing that adult learners who are for the most part already in full-time employment can decide for themselves whether they wish or need to take language-enhancement courses to attain their graduation goals. With the advent of full-time face-to-face programmes aimed mainly at the 17 to 20 age group, the issue of compulsory language courses is a hotly debated topic on the agenda of the Committee on Full-Time Face-to-Face Degree Programmes.

As face-to-face student numbers grow and increasing numbers of staff become involved in dual-mode operations, we may expect further changes to the QA protocols and performance indicators to better reflect the different needs and expectations of the new group of learners and also to ensure parity of treatment between the two modes of delivery and equivalence of standards in the learning outcomes of graduates in either mode.

### *3.2 Delivering courses in mainland China*

1997 marked the end of British colonial rule in Hong Kong. In the run-up to the handover of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China (PRC), every organisation in Hong Kong realised the importance of establishing linkages with their counterparts in China. In 1995, the Open University had to start from scratch because distance and open education, as it was practised in Hong Kong, was practically unknown in mainland China. At that time, the China Central Radio and TV University and its provincial counterparts were

focused on the mass delivery of education using dedicated radio and TV channels to broadcast lectures by eminent experts. While Hong Kong's universities are allowed to recruit students to their full-time face-to-face degree programmes from China, Hong Kong's status as a special administrative region of the PRC confers no special privileges on its institutions to operate independently in the mainland, so the OUHK began in 1997 to launch certain programmes (at the postgraduate level) in partnership with mainland universities and professional organisations.

The first OUHK programmes to be offered in the PRC were the MBA (Chinese) and the Postgraduate Certificate in Business Administration (Chinese). These programmes have now been followed by a Master of Education in Distance Learning programme, in fulfilment of the university's objective to transfer its expertise in open and distance adult education to the mainland and beyond (Tam 1999: 104). So far there have been over 1200 OUHK graduates in mainland China.

While the mainland market is vast and has apparently endless potential, maintaining the quality of educational programmes offered by partner institutions in mainland China is not without its challenges. The OUHK has worked hard over the years to establish the integrity of its assessment processes in Hong Kong as a fundamental indicator of the quality of the degrees it awards. The following example will serve as an illustration. The OUHK holds two examination periods each year. Examinations take place in the evening and on weekend afternoons to accommodate the learners' normal lives. Part-time tutors act as invigilators. Examination centres are distributed throughout Hong Kong and are usually secondary school halls hired for the occasion. In order to guarantee the safe delivery of examination scripts back to the main campus, a security company is employed to collect the sealed envelopes containing students' scripts from every examination centre throughout the territory within 30 minutes of the end of the examination, store them under guard over night and deliver them to the university by secure transport at the start of office hours the next day. In order to ensure the security of the examination process in its mainland ventures, the university has found it necessary to send its own staff to oversee the examination operation. These additional quality assurance mechanisms add significantly to the costs associated with running the operation, but are deemed necessary to its long-term sustainability. China, like many countries undergoing rapid development, provides an apparently unquenchable market for learning opportunities, but unfortunately there are all too many cowboy operators who are willing to cut corners and compromise on quality to maximise profit.

### *3.3 Introduction of eLearning*

Technological development is acknowledged to be one of the major drivers for the expansion of distance education delivery globally in the past decade. The OUHK started to pilot its Online Learning Environment (OLE) using WebCT in April 1999<sup>3</sup>. The initial pilot consisted of nine courses (approximately 5 percent of the total) in the English language. The provision of an OLE for Chinese language courses presented some technical difficulties for the university, and four Chinese courses with online components were offered for the first time in April 2000. In April 2004, the university piloted a new bilingual OLE platform (Domino). By October 2004, all courses using OLE had migrated to Domino, and the number of courses using OLE had grown to 196 (or 88 percent of the total). Student feedback indicates that they particularly appreciate and use the e-mail and discussion board features offered by OLE, and, where online submission of assignments is allowed, they prefer it to the traditional method of sending them through the post (Open University of Hong Kong 2002 *ibid*: 51). In April 2005 some 86 percent of OUHK students logged into their university e-mail accounts. Learner support for OLE is provided through the university's Educational Technology and Publishing Unit (ETPU).

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3. For a demonstration of an OUHK online course, go to [www.ouhk.edu.hk/%7Eetpwww/ole/guest.html](http://www.ouhk.edu.hk/%7Eetpwww/ole/guest.html)

The introduction of online instruction has significantly improved the opportunities for tutors to provide individualized and general learner support. It has also enhanced student-to-student communication and facilitated monitoring of the teaching and learning process by the course coordinator and the external examiner. However, it has also raised staff development and workload issues for both part-time tutors and full-time academic staff. Early experience indicated that incorporating online elements into a course increased the time spent by course coordinators on monitoring the discussion boards, supporting tutors in the use of the new methods of communication and continually updating course materials that make use of the Web. The university now pays an additional honorarium to tutors for providing online support in addition to their normal duties. ETPU has developed an online training course for new tutors to enable them to carry out their e-tutoring role more effectively. In the current climate of staff retrenchment created by the falling student numbers, course coordinator workloads continue to increase. Course coordinator workload norms are based on student credits (number of students X credit value of the course). OUHK programmes consist of 5, 10 or 20 credit courses. A course coordinator is expected to be responsible for 5,500 credits. The OUHK's 18,500 distance education students are spread over 133 courses, and on average course coordinators are responsible for 4 to 6 courses at a time. Continuous quality improvement of courses is a potential casualty in these circumstances as course coordinators have less time to undertake the maintenance and innovation that are essential to the success and sustainability of distance education programmes.

#### 4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

The survey referred to earlier was administered to a selected group of staff at the OUHK who hold responsibility for different aspects of quality assurance at the university in relation to course development, course delivery, institutional policy formulation and implementation. In one of the items, respondents were asked to identify the primary role of quality assurance in the university as a whole. The ten statements are reproduced in Figure 1 below:

THE PRIMARY ROLE OF QA IN THE OUHK OVERALL IS TO:	TOTALLY AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTALLY DISAGREE
1. Safeguard the reputation of the institution	1	2	3	4	5
2. Ensure that the university is delivering on its mission objectives	1	2	3	4	5
3. Promote open and distance learning as a viable mode of delivery for higher education in Hong Kong	1	2	3	4	5
4. Ensure learner satisfaction	1	2	3	4	5
5. Ensure that identified benchmark academic standards are maintained	1	2	3	4	5
6. Control variability in a devolved and diversified environment	1	2	3	4	5
7. Achieve a zero defect administrative culture	1	2	3	4	5
8. Promote achievement of the institutional mission objectives	1	2	3	4	5
9. Satisfy the requirements of external quality reviews	1	2	3	4	5
10. Maintain continuous quality improvement	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 1: QA statements at OUHK

While all the statements were endorsed by at least one respondent, all the respondents strongly or totally agreed that the most important function of quality assurance in the OUHK is to safeguard the reputation of the institution. Second most important was to ensure that identified benchmark standards are maintained; and joint third were to ensure learner satisfaction and to satisfy the requirements of external quality reviews. Least important in the respondents' view was the achievement of a zero-defect administrative culture.

The responses to this question reflect the historical development of quality assurance within the university as described in this case study. In the increasingly competitive world of higher education provision in Hong Kong, establishing and maintaining a reputation for the quality of the product remains as important today as it did to the newly formed institute back in 1989. As the OUHK's Quality Coordinator pointed out: "Historically, the university has needed to demonstrate that open access does not imply inferior outcomes. External reviewers, particularly the HKCAA, have also needed to be satisfied in order for the university to maintain and advance its status within the local HE community. With these fundamental requirements satisfied, the OUHK can look to continuously improving the functionality of QA processes, devolving responsibilities to academic units and individual course coordinators to enhance the sense of ownership of QA systems and reduce the reliance on external examiners and other reviewers" (Taylor 2005).

The HKCAA institutional review in 2002 encouraged further devolution of QA processes to the schools, and in 2005 the principle gatekeepers of academic quality are the Dean and the School Committee. The OUHK has now decided to eliminate the position of QA coordinator, seven years after its establishment. This may be seen as an indication of senior management's commitment to the principle that "quality is everyone's job" and that responsibility for quality and ownership of quality processes must go together; and of their confidence that the schools and their academic staff have demonstrated their capacity to sustain the operation of quality protocols.

The OUHK is in the process of becoming a dual-mode university in a mirror image of the normal process whereby a conventional face-to-face institution would embrace aspects of off-campus, technology-based learning to meet learner demand for flexibility and to make more cost-effective use of its expensive staffing resources. It is embracing face-to-face teaching in response to the local preference for full-time study and in order to make additional cost-effective use of its expensively developed course materials and its campus facilities which are under-utilised during normal working hours. At the same time, eLearning is becoming more popular among its distance-mode students.

Open and distance learning is, by its very nature, more open to public scrutiny than its face-to-face counterpart. Successful open and distance learning institutions have built their reputations on the reliability and consistency of their course development and delivery systems, upon the integrity of their assessment systems and the recognition and portability of the credits they have awarded (Hope 2005). For now, the OUHK's quality assurance protocols, which have been painstakingly refined for the development and delivery of largely print-based distance learning courses and programmes, are being applied to both modes irrespective of the medium of delivery to ensure parity of esteem between programmes. If we are to draw lessons from experience, we may speculate that "one size does not fit all" and that the university will have to continue to develop, adapt and simplify its quality assurance protocols to ensure that they promote an appropriate quality learning environment for all of its learners and encourage the active commitment, participation and ownership of the staff in the ongoing and ever-changing quality enterprise.

## 5. TOWARDS A CULTURE OF QUALITY

This case study has demonstrated that while establishing a reputation for quality is an essential component of institutional success, there is more to achieving a quality culture than simply establishing quality assurance mechanisms. By importing and rigorously implementing ready-made QA protocols, a fledgling institution can get off the ground quickly and meet external validation and accreditation requirements. This requires a top-down, somewhat heavy-handed approach, and the initial reaction of staff is to comply rather than to embrace their responsibility for quality. The mature institution needs to change this attitude and to make quality “everyone’s business.”

To achieve a quality culture, responsibility for quality should be situated as near as possible to the “sharp end” of the process being evaluated. If, in its enthusiasm for quality, an institution establishes quality protocols with too many layers of oversight, the individual faculty member will feel devalued as a key participant in the learning process. Since it devolved responsibility for programme review and degree programme assessment activities to school level, the OUHK has had a much more vibrant quality culture based on ownership.

Nevertheless, quality must continue to be championed from the top. This includes the constant promotion of distance education itself as a viable alternative to face-to-face provision as well as defining the meaning of quality in terms of the institutional mission.

Finally, in a vibrant quality culture, quality assurance arrangements need to be under constant review and revision so that they meet current needs. Our case study demonstrates that in order to remain relevant and responsive to the needs of its actual and potential learners in a rapidly changing external environment, an institution must constantly review and renew the learning opportunities it offers. The need to remain sensitive to market demand is particularly acute in a self-financing institution such as the OUHK. Risks to quality emerge in this fiercely competitive environment. If quality assurance procedures are too cumbersome, there is a danger that they will be short-circuited or even ignored in the scramble to bring new products to market. If they are insufficiently rigorous, the reputation of the institution will suffer.

Thanks to technological advances, learners have more choices about how and where to achieve their academic goals. They will choose the university that puts meeting their needs at the top of its agenda. As the then President of the hugely successful Phoenix University affirmed, institutional success in this environment depends more on successful marketing, solid quality assurance and control systems, and effective use of appropriate technology than solely on the production and communication of knowledge (de Alva 1999: 13).

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