

REPORT ON SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL AND CONTINUING EDUCATION (SPACE)

7. MAJOR OBSERVATIONS

As background, it may be noted that SPACE was established in 1956. It thus has a long history and enjoys the first mover's advantage in the realm of continuing education. Over the years, it has recorded impressive growth in terms of both programmes and student enrolments. As of early 2002, it had over 100,000 students enrolled, which is equivalent to more than 17,000 FTEs.

- 7.1 The senior management of SPACE was well prepared for the TLQPR visit. They had assembled more than adequate documentation, supporting materials and publications. The management team responded knowledgeably to questions raised by the Panel, and demonstrated positive attitudes, commitment and support for the overall mission and various activities of SPACE. The impression given is that of a hands-on management team who know their business well.
- 7.2 SPACE became self-financing in 1996, and is now fully responsible for all costs including rentals, salaries of staff, access costs to library facilities, etc. This self-financing mode allows it to commit funds to areas that are deemed to be worth developing, and it is not constrained by any external formula-driven method.
- 7.3 The School has direct linkage to the requirements of the market and will accordingly be rewarded or punished according to the quality of its teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, it is very conscious about quality assurance and improvement. This is evident from the fact that it proactively started to develop a School-wide Quality Assurance System in 1998, and published a handbook, "Quality Assurance in SPACE", in May 2001. This handbook contains a very detailed account of how SPACE undertakes the design and modification of curricula, teaching and learning processes, the use of students' assessment, and various measures in the implementation and monitoring of quality education. SPACE is well advanced in meeting the requirements for EQW embedded in the first four domains of the TLQPR template. In addition, being self-financing, it is able to commit resources to EQW where it deems necessary, such as for new programme development and activities that improve EQW. Examples include the development of the language translation courses (which are not top revenue generators), the publication of a guide book for teachers, organization of teaching workshops and the provision of an induction programme for new full-time and part-time teachers.
- 7.4 Another indication of the School's quest for quality validation and improvement is reflected in the outcomes of a University Review of Governance, Management and Quality Assurance systems by a panel of local and overseas experts in January 2002. The comments of the panel were favourable and they rated highly the various systems exercised by SPACE. In another study, conducted by an autonomous third party research firm, SPACE was ranked top in all quality related factors surveyed, attesting to its position as a premium provider of continuing education in Hong Kong.
- 7.5 SPACE has a strong culture of sharing good practices and responding to feedback from students. For example, students' feedback is taken seriously and there are cases where teachers have been removed because of weak teaching. Students reported that their enquiries and questions were also attended to promptly, often within 24 hours.

8. AREAS FOR COMMENDATION

- 8.1 SPACE has an impressive array of processes and procedures for reviewing programmes, etc. In particular, its handbook, "Quality Assurance in SPACE", published in May 2001, deserves special mention and is highly recommended to other institutions as a reference for quality assurance processes.

- 8.2 In April 2001, it started its first formal strategic planning exercise. Again, this is a commendable effort and it reflects the proactive stance adopted by SPACE in dealing with the challenges of the future.
- 8.3 Its web-based system, SPACE Online Universal Learning (SOUL), deserves special mention. Since its inception about 2 years ago, it has provided a new communication and teaching tool for its teachers and students. It is innovative and student-centred, allows students to easily access information, and also enables them to be in close touch with their teachers. As a result of its success, SPACE is considering expanding the usage of SOUL to more courses so as to supplement and complement the face-to-face instruction. SOUL also has a future potential application to Community College courses.
- 8.4 Teaching staff are customer-oriented and quick in responding to the needs of the students. In particular, SPACE has been successful in managing its large pool of part-time teachers. This is achieved through a combination of selection, training, close supervision of teaching (for example, site visits to classes), counselling, personal networking and attention by the full-time academics, and an adequate reward system. As a consequence there are many long-service part-time teachers in SPACE. Indeed, its heavy reliance on part-time teachers has become a strength within SPACE. This is because not only are overall costs reduced, but the quality of teaching is partially maintained by the flexibility of being able to remove weaker teachers relatively easily.
- 8.5 For its degree programmes in collaboration with academic units in the University of Hong Kong, all quality-related processes and controls are adequately addressed; e.g. the same examination and external examiner systems, etc. For the programmes with overseas institutions, quality is ensured through choosing the partner and programme carefully.
- 8.6 The full-time academic staff ensure that the various programmes offered receive close attention. In addition, the appointment of divisional heads ensures that there are dedicated specialists with oversight of the various disciplines. These arrangements, together with the careful selection of foreign partners and the attempts to provide local course contents when required, ensure that the programmes offered are able to meet required quality standards as well as the demands of the market. The inclusion of students in the various quality-related committees also ensures that timely feedback can be fed into the improvement of EQW.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 There is a need to balance the very large part-time teaching staff, the rapid growth of enrolment and the quest for self-financing on the one hand with the need to maintain a high quality for all the programmes offered. As the number of programmes and enrolments increases even further, this challenge will become even greater.
- 9.2 SPACE may wish to consider moving beyond some of its existing award granting programmes by entering into partnerships with stronger international institutions. This would be in line with its quest for excellence in quality (of programmes), and allow it to take advantage of its existing strong brand presence and image in continuing education. This qualitative leap may be necessary in view of the increasing number of providers in the market, especially with the establishment of more community colleges.
- 9.3 A Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) system within existing SPACE programmes may have to be established soon in order to ensure portability of credits and to provide more flexibility for students.

- 9.4 To ensure that the quality of teaching can be enhanced even further, more creative approaches to reward the best teachers may have to be explored. For example, instructional fees may have to be tiered to reflect the market value of some of the best teachers.
- 9.5 Stronger integration and alignment with the University are necessary in order to ensure that the current negative perceptions of some mainstream academic staff concerning the misfit of SPACE within the overall mission of the University are arrested and not extended. This matter deserves close attention in view of the establishment of the Community College, and the further increase of enrolments in continuing education in SPACE. If conscious attempts are not made for integration and alignment into the main vision and mission of the University, SPACE (together with its Community College) may take on a life of its own in due course. This is not a remote possibility considering that SPACE is already self-financing and has an FTE enrolment that is considerably larger than its parent.
- 9.6 The University may wish to note the inherent strengths, capabilities and good practices of SPACE. For example, SPACE has been able to manage the large number of part-time teaching staff to its advantage, and maintain a high quality of teaching. Other academic units within the University might usefully consider its quality assurance practices and systems.
- 9.7 SPACE has undoubtedly flourished. In particular, since it was established in self-financing mode in 1996, it has demonstrated convincingly that self-financing need not affect or compromise the quality of its programmes. On the contrary, it has developed and established comprehensive quality assurance processes for its portfolio of programmes and activities. These have not only enhanced its image and service standards, but have rewarded it handsomely through its increased enrolments in recent years. Its next big challenge will be deciding on its directions for future development, so that it remains a premier supplier of quality programmes in continuing education.

10. SPACE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

10.1 General Observations

- 10.1.1 Established in March 2000, SPACE Community College has developed very quickly with a clear vision and mission and, as of October 2001, it has 2,636 full-time students. The College has been self-financing since its inception, and is fully responsible for all costs including rentals, salaries of staff, access to library facilities, etc. It makes use of former faculty members of the University as administrators and teachers, and this allows it to tap into the experience and academic credibility of the University.
- 10.1.2 Within a short period of time, it has established a good portfolio of Associate Degree (AD) and Higher Diploma (HD) programmes that reflects the needs of the community. An internal survey conducted by the College showed that about 75% of the students wished to proceed further to obtain a full degree, and 90% of these students wished to complete the degree in Hong Kong. This has widespread implications for tertiary education in Hong Kong. It is likely that the enrolment in the Community College will escalate significantly in the next few years. When this happens, the focus on delivering a high quality AD education will become more critical, especially when it has to remain self-financing.

10.2 Areas for Commendation

- 10.2.1 The College is very conscious of quality improvement and has established numerous quality assurance mechanisms. Thus, in terms of the domains of EQW, the Community College has adhered very much to the requirements for proper processes and procedures in curriculum

design and delivery, the implementation and monitoring of quality in teaching and learning, and the use and application of student assessment. The only shortfall is the need to commit more resources for physical facilities in order to ensure that EQW can be further enhanced in a campus-type atmosphere that is clearly lacking at the moment within the College. Nevertheless, it has (properly) focused its aims on the whole-person education of the student, and has provided a wide array of services, activities and programmes to achieve this objective.

- 10.2.2 The College has achieved a very creditable record with its first batch of students in terms of their academic advancement: of 108 Associate Degree graduates, 22 are in employment while 72 have progressed on to university education either locally or overseas. The College has obtained recognition from over 35 local and overseas universities for its programmes. Some of these universities are very reputable and the College administration must be applauded for their efforts in putting together high quality AD and HD programmes. With such strong recognition, progression paths for students are eased and assured.
- 10.2.3 Teaching staff members are student-oriented and are highly accessible to students for consultation. Students complimented their teachers for their high quality of teaching and commitment. The College also has appointed a strong pool of full-time administrators.
- 10.2.4 The College has departed from conventional modes of assessment to focus more on project work and other continuous assessment methods, with final examinations contributing no more than 50% toward overall grades.

10.3 Recommendations

- 10.3.1 As the first provider with a pioneering batch of AD graduates, the College is well positioned to ensure that its programmes can provide distinctive niches and training that are different from those offered by the mainstream universities. For example, it can enforce the use of English for all its courses, focus more on entrepreneurial and creative training, job attachments and internships, and use different pedagogical approaches in teaching and assessment.
- 10.3.2 It should track the performances of its pioneering batches of students to evaluate the value-added components that ADs bring to their academic and/or career advancements and attainments.
- 10.3.3 As mentioned earlier, there is a need to provide more physical facilities for a better college environment so that students can socialize and interact within a campus atmosphere that is comparable with that of their mainstream tertiary counterparts. This includes attention being given to students' access to library facilities. There is a limit to the extent to which the existing library resources of the University can be stretched, especially when they are also shared by SPACE students.
- 10.3.4 Over time, the number and scope of courses and programmes may have to be increased. Currently, laboratory-based courses are not available and this may limit the educational opportunities of the students.
- 10.3.5 Despite its self-financing status, the College should take a more considered position with regard to increasing class sizes in a quest to optimize revenue: it is important that the quality of provision should not be adversely affected.
- 10.3.6 A CAT system may need to be established so as to ensure portability of credits and to provide a more definitive route for academic advancement and progression toward the attainment of a full degree. Concurrent with this, more attention and effort may have to be given to the exploration and provision of alternative professional progression paths for the wide range of students who have been unable to attain entry to university.

10.3.7 Within a short period of time, the Community College of SPACE has demonstrated that it is capable of delivering high quality programmes and providing an alternative route for students wishing to progress towards university education. Students indicate that such a route is welcome, and are willing to make efforts to succeed in this environment. The major challenge for the College will be to demonstrate the value-added components of AD programs, to address any negative perceptions associated with ADs, and to ensure that there are alternative attractive career and professional paths for those who may not choose to enter university.