



香港學術及職業資歷評審局
Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of
Academic & Vocational Qualifications



Quality Assurance
at the Crossroads
**A Critical Reflection
after Twenty Years**

About HKCAAVQ

The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ), formerly known as the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), was established in 1990 as an independent statutory body to provide authoritative advice on academic standards of degree programmes in higher education institutions in Hong Kong. In 2007, the Council was reconstituted as the HKCAAVQ to reflect the expansion of its scope and responsibilities to include the vocational sector and its new role as the Qualifications Register Authority under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework.

The HKCAAVQ is dedicated to providing quality assurance and assessment services to education and training institutions, course providers and the general public. The HKCAAVQ also provides advisory and consultancy services about education qualifications and standards to government bureaux and professional organisations in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.

Vision

HKCAAVQ is locally, nationally, regionally and globally recognised as an efficient, effective, innovative and accessible quality assurance agency providing academic and vocational accreditation and assessment services.

Mission

To safeguard the quality of the academic and vocational qualifications available to learners within the Qualifications Framework in Hong Kong and to strengthen providers' quality assurance capability; and

To provide professional advice through assessment and consulting services and to develop, promote and disseminate good practices on quality assurance.

Major Milestones

1990



Founding of the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) as an independent statutory body to provide authoritative advice on academic standards of degree programmes in higher education institutions in Hong Kong

First accreditation exercises conducted for City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist College, Lingnan College, Open Learning Institute and The Hong Kong Polytechnic

1991



Being a founding member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education – the first international network on quality assurance in higher education

1994

Commencement of qualifications assessment services to the Government for civil service appointment

1996



Signing of Memorandum of Mutual Co-operation with Shaanxi Education Commission to facilitate collaboration and information exchange

Signing of the Intent of Co-operation with the Institution of Shanghai Higher Education Evaluation (ISHEE) to facilitate collaboration and information exchange

1997



Named as the Advisor to the Registrar of Non-local Courses upon the enactment of the Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance to assess programmes to be registered under the Ordinance

2000



First accreditation exercises conducted for the sub-degree sector and for privately-funded institutions

2001

Appointed by the Insurance Authority as the sole assessment authority for the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes for insurance intermediaries

2002

Commencement of professional assessment services on courses under the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) Scheme



2003



Self-review of the HKCAA

Being a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Quality Network – the first network on quality assurance in higher education in the Asia Pacific region

2004

Becoming the designated body in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Mainland and Hong Kong on Mutual Recognition of Academic Degrees in Higher Education signed during the year to provide professional advice on academic degrees

2005



Signing of the Memorandum of Co-operation with the Australian Universities Quality Agency to facilitate collaboration and information exchange

Commencement of assessment services for the CPD schemes of the Estate Agents Authority

2006

Signing of the Memorandum of Co-operation with the Shanghai Educational Evaluation Institute, the successor of ISHEE, to facilitate collaboration and information exchange



2007



Reconstitution of HKCAA as Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) to reflect the expansion of its scope of responsibilities and powers

Passing of the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Bill into law which led to the establishment of the Qualifications Framework (QF) and the Qualifications Register (QR)

Launching of the QR prototype which established the online database of recognised qualifications

2008



Enactment of the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance

Launching of the QF and QR

Signing of the Memorandum of Co-operation with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education of the United Kingdom to facilitate collaboration and information exchange

2009

Publishing of HKCAAVQ's Vision and Mission and formulation of three year strategic plan

Launching of the Pilot Accreditation Exercise for Non-local Learning Programmes to test out the framework for non-local academic qualifications to enter the QR and recognised under the QF

2010

Commencement of the non-local learning programmes accreditation

Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Higher Education Evaluation Centre of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China to facilitate collaboration and information exchange

Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the National Institution for Academic Degrees and University Evaluation of Japan to facilitate collaboration and information exchange

Signing of the Memorandum of Arrangement with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency to facilitate collaboration and information exchange

Review of vocational accreditation

20th anniversary of HKCAAVQ

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Thank You



HKCAAVQ Council

Over the past 20 years, the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) has been dedicated to providing quality assurance and assessment services in Hong Kong with the continued support of our partner institutions, organisations and specialists under the guidance of our Council. The attendance at our 20th Anniversary Conference, *Quality Assurance at the Crossroads – A Critical Reflection after Twenty Years*, shows the significant interest and support for our work from our many stakeholders, and past and present Council members.

I would like to thank Mr Kenneth Chen, Under Secretary for Education, Education Bureau of the HKSAR Government, and our keynote speaker,

Mr Peter Williams, former Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom, who has been a close friend of the HKCAAVQ since our establishment in 1990, for their enlightening and inspiring speeches. I also wish to express my gratitude to all Council members who have devoted their valuable time and effort to this conference.

The HKCAAVQ is also grateful to all our guest facilitators and panelists, including Prof Richard M W Ho, Ir Edmund K H Leung, Prof Enoch Young, Dr Andrew Chuang, Prof John C Y Leong, Prof Frank H K Fu, Dr Carrie Willis, and Dr Charles Wong, who contributed to the vitality of the Roundtable and Panel Discussions. We also thank all participants for sharing their knowledge,

experience and insight; the conference would not have been so successful without their active engagement.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all HKCAA and HKCAAVQ staff for their dedication and efforts over the past 20 years in upholding the quality of education in Hong Kong. I wish to acknowledge the essential contribution of the current staff of the HKCAAVQ for their hard work in organising this conference.

Dr York LIAO, SBS, JP
Chairman, HKCAAVQ

Progress Made and the Road Ahead

Over the past two decades, the HKCAAVQ has been playing an active dual role as gate-keeper and gate-opener in quality assurance (QA) in Hong Kong. These responsibilities have been extended with the rapid expansion of the post-secondary education sector in the 1990s and 2000s. To celebrate our 20th anniversary, we organised this conference to reflect upon local and global practices in QA, to review the progress that has been made so far, and to identify the challenges that lie ahead.

Themed as *Quality Assurance at the Crossroads – A Critical Reflection after Twenty Years*, the conference was designed to bring together experts in QA to facilitate dialogue and promote the exchange of experiences between professionals from different sectors. The conference addressed three questions on QA: where are we now, where are we going, and how do we get there? What this monograph attempts to do in the way that the sessions are reported and presented is to capture the immediacy of the discussions and debates around these issues.

As Mr Peter Williams, former Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom, remarked in his keynote speech, *quality is not accidental*. Over the past 20 years, we have focused on safeguarding the quality of the academic



and vocational qualifications available to local learners. We also actively engage in international networks to develop, promote and disseminate good practices in QA. This work would not have been possible without the concerted effort of a group of devoted scholars, professionals and industrialists, who have a vision beyond the boundary of our original remit.

We see a rapid change in the local education landscape leading up to the implementation of the 334 Education Reform, increasing demand for vocational training and lifelong learning in support of the city's transformation into a knowledge-based economy, the opening of private universities as well as the rapid expansion of education services offered by the local and overseas

operators. In a time when education in Hong Kong is in a state of considerable transformation, it is especially important to have commitment and dedication to ensuring the Education QA system's continued suitability and effectiveness.

The opening session dealt with the evolution of QA in Hong Kong over the past 20 years. The Panel Discussion, moderated by Mrs Agnes Mak and joined by Prof Richard M W Ho, Ir Edmund Leung and Prof Enoch Young, provided an overview of the changes in the QA scene in Hong Kong, and the roles played by different QA bodies, namely the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of the University Grants Committee (UGC), the HKCAAVQ and the Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC).

Following the first Panel Discussion was the highlight of the conference – a keynote speech by Peter titled *World Trends in Quality Assurance: Where do the signposts point?* He made an impassioned plea for greater transparency for QA and pinpointed the imperative need to build a QA system that combined both accountability and improvement functions. He also shared his vision on the fitness for purpose principle as an option to carry on in the current direction for QA.

The second Panel Discussion invited participants to forecast the QA Era in Hong Kong in the next decade. With Peter as the facilitator and Dr York Liao, Prof Frank Fu, Prof Edmond Ko and Ms Michelle Li joining the panel, this session had an in-depth discussion on the changing QA models in Hong Kong as well as the roles played by the three QA bodies. Upon rich and open exchanges on topics like diversity, maturity and convergence, the Panel saw the importance of more coordination and collaboration between different bodies.

The third Panel Discussion gathered views on the way forward for QA practices in Hong Kong against the changing landscape of education. In this

session moderated by Prof Richard Y K Ho, I had the pleasure to join the other two panel members, Dr Carrie Willis and Dr Charles Wong, to discuss the challenges to be faced by the QA bodies in the next decade, and to explore the way forward on how the QA bodies might best prepare themselves for the future.

The conference took place in September 2010 and predated by three months the release of the UGC's report – *Aspirations for the Higher Education System in Hong Kong*. The conference presentations and discussions not surprisingly touched on many of the same areas subsequently highlighted in the Report. Indeed, the HKCAAVQ's response to the UGC Report has drawn on many of the discussions at the conference. The HKCAAVQ agrees that there must be better coordination in the present quality assurance arrangements for higher education (HE) so that efforts made by the current three QA bodies can be synergised and leveraged to take HE in Hong Kong forward. However, we also think that it is important that any consideration of integration of QA bodies takes into account the issues of diversity, fitness for purpose, as well as the relative maturity of institutions.

To build up public confidence in QA, externality, transparency and balance between public interest and academic autonomy are essential. We also need to build consensus on the scope and levels under discussion to achieve harmonisation of standards. After all, QA should be the means to the ends rather than an end in itself and be embedded in the culture of the HE and vocational sectors.

Quality assurance is now at the crossroads. As Peter affirmed in the conference, we cannot stand at the crossroads for very long. We need to find a way to equip ourselves with the capacity to cope with the challenges of a more dynamic market in post-secondary education, whether private, public or mixed.

I hope you will find the generous sharing and insights of all speakers and panelists, and the wide-ranging discussions and exchanges on key issues in QA around the globe that we capture in this monograph of value. Finally, just as Mr Kenneth Chen did in his opening remarks, I would also like to quote from Horace Mann, the Father of American Public Education, to summarise our perspectives at this conference: "Let us not be content to wait and see what will happen, but give us the determination to make the right things happen."



Professor Yiu-Kwan FAN, BBS, JP
Executive Director, HKCAAVQ

HKCAAVQ 20th Anniversary Conference

Quality Assurance at the Crossroads

A Critical Reflection after Twenty Years

Date: 14 September 2010
Time: 9:00 am – 5:00 pm
Venue: World Trade Centre Club, 38/F World Trade Centre,
280 Gloucester Road, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong

PROGRAMME

Opening Remarks

Dr York Liao, SBS, JP, *Chairman, HKCAAVQ*

Mr Kenneth Chen, JP, *Under Secretary for Education, Education Bureau*

Panel Discussion 1

Evolution of Quality Assurance
in Hong Kong over the Past 20
Years

Facilitator:

Mrs Agnes Mak, MH, JP, *Council Member, HKCAAVQ*

Panel Members:

Prof Richard M W Ho, JP, *Member of Quality Assurance Council, University Grants Committee*

Ir Edmund K H Leung, SBS, OBE, JP, *former Vice Chairman, HKCAA*

Prof Enoch Young, BBS, *former Chairman, The Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions*

Keynote Speech

World Trends in Quality Assurance: Where do the Signposts Point?

Facilitator:

Dr David Wolf, *Council Member, HKCAAVQ*

Speaker:

Mr Peter Williams, CBE, *former Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom*

Roundtable

HKCAAVQ's Past Achievements and Future Endeavours

Facilitator:

Mr Martin Liao, JP, *Vice Chairman, HKCAAVQ*

Panel Members:

Dr Andrew Chuang, SBS, JP, *former Chairman, HKCAA*

Prof John C Y Leong, SBS, JP, *former Chairman, HKCAA*

Dr York Liao, SBS, JP, *Chairman, HKCAAVQ*

Panel Discussion 2

The Quality Assurance Era in the Next Decade in Hong Kong

Facilitator:

Mr Peter Williams, CBE, *former Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom*

Panel Members:

Prof Frank H K Fu, MH, JP, *Chairman, Joint Quality Review Committee*

Prof Edmond Ko, BBS, JP, *Member of Quality Assurance Council, University Grants Committee*

Ms Michelle Li, JP, *Deputy Secretary for Education, Education Bureau*

Dr York Liao, SBS, JP, *Chairman, HKCAAVQ*

Panel Discussion 3

The Way Forward

Facilitator:

Prof Richard Y K Ho, *Chairman of Personnel and Administration Committee, HKCAAVQ*

Panel Members:

Prof Yiu-Kwan Fan, BBS, JP, *Executive Director, HKCAAVQ*

Dr Carrie Willis, SBS, JP, *Executive Director, Vocational Training Council*

Dr Charles Wong, MH, *Chairman, The Federation of Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions*

Closing Remarks

Dr York Liao, SBS, JP, *Chairman, HKCAAVQ*

Setting the Scene



Dr York Liao, SBS, JP, Chairman of the HKCAAVQ, welcomed guests and observed that the conference title was appropriate and that he expected to learn a great deal while surrounded by the many experts and long serving members of the HKCAAVQ.

Dr Liao then introduced Mr Kenneth Chen, JP, Under Secretary for Education, Education Bureau.

Mr Chen remarked on the beautiful day and let visitors know that they were in Hong Kong at a wonderful time to celebrate the HKCAAVQ 20th Anniversary.

Mr Chen congratulated the Council and thanked both current and former members of the HKCAAVQ for their contributions over the past 20 years.

He noted that the past two decades had seen two major transformations:

- A rapid increase in higher education opportunities
- Ongoing education reform across all sectors of education and training

The common theme through these reforms has been the effort to ensure that students have multiple articulation

pathways and that students can pursue further education based on their interests.

This has been achieved by both encouraging a greater diversity of institutions and through the drive to establish Hong Kong as a regional education hub.

According to Mr Chen, the HKCAAVQ's role in this process has been to act as both a 'gate-keeper' and 'gate-opener'.

The 'gate-keeper' role is about ensuring quality. In 1990 there were only four tertiary institutions. Today, the Qualifications Register (QR) contains more than two hundred operators and six thousand qualifications.

The 'gate-opening' role of the HKCAAVQ is to encourage the need for overseas operators to augment the variety of courses already being offered in Hong Kong.

The 'gate-opening' role increases provision on the supply side and therefore opens the door for greater opportunity for students.



How to establish Hong Kong as an Education Hub?

The role of the HKCAAVQ is crucial in this process.

‘It is essential that we demonstrate that we strive for quality rather than quantity.’

Articulation into university courses is highly valued and we have expanded the participation rate from 4% to 30% over the past 20 years.

Further improvement is still necessary to allow students to pursue meaningful Vocational and Continuing Education opportunities. In the 21st Century academic education alone is not enough.

The HKCAAVQ provides guidance on quality and fulfils a ‘gate-keeping’ role on behalf of students.

As Horace Mann, the great American educator said, ‘Education is a great equaliser and provides for mobility.’

‘To all Council Members, the work that you do is on behalf of students. We congratulate you on your efforts and look forward to the exchange of views today,’ Mr Chen concluded.

Evolution of Quality Assurance in Hong Kong over the Past 20 Years



End of Hong Kong binary education system in the early '90s

With his first-hand experience, Prof Young shared with the audience the fall of the Hong Kong binary education system beginning in the early 90s. Prior to that time, universities were granted self-accrediting status whereas former polytechnics or post-secondary colleges were required to go through external accreditation. Following the re-titling/upgrading of colleges and polytechnics together with the establishment of a third university, Hong Kong witnessed a more than two-fold increase in degree places in 1988/89 when compared to the figures in the '60s and '70s. That essentially marked the beginning of the end of the Hong Kong binary education system.

Around the same period, the United Kingdom (UK) education system underwent tremendous reform whereby the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), which was responsible for accrediting the polytechnics or post-secondary colleges in Hong Kong, ceased to exist. In view of the need to continue accrediting the higher education institutions in the non-university sector, the Hong Kong Council for Academic

What were the major developments in the education landscape?

What changes were witnessed in the quality assurance scene?

Mrs Agnes Mak, MH, JP (Council Member, HKCAAVQ) as panel facilitator, moderated a discussion session with Prof Enoch Young, BBS (former Chairman, The Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions; former Member, Quality

Assurance Council, University Grants Committee; former Member, University Grants Committee), Prof Richard M W Ho, JP (Member, Quality Assurance Council, University Grants Committee; Chairman, Standing Review Committee for Qualifications Assessment, HKCAAVQ; former Council Member, HKCAA), and Ir Edmund K H Leung, SBS, OBE, JP (former Council Deputy Chairman, Hong Kong Institute of Directors; former President, Hong Kong Institute of Engineers; former Vice-Chairman, HKCAA), which centered on the progress, development, and history of quality assurance in Hong Kong in the past two decades.

Accreditation (HKCAA) was established to assume the responsibility.

In his policy address in 1999, the Chief Executive of the HKSAR announced the plan to provide 60% of secondary school graduates with post-secondary education places by 2010. In response to the call, self-financed associate degree programmes began to emerge in 2000. By 2005/06, self-financed tertiary education places already outnumbered government-funded ones, amounting to 55% of the total tertiary education provision. The participation rate was 66%, which exceeded the target of 60% – five years ahead of schedule.

In view of proliferation of self-financed tertiary education programmes, the Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC) was set up in 2005 to look after quality assurance of the self-financed sub-degree programmes offered by the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded institutions.

Prof Young pointed out that in the past few years there has been ‘the re-emergence of a new kind of binary education system’. The nature is different though, as it involves different players, namely government-funded and self-funded sectors. To this end, Prof Young warned that a challenge for the government, institutions, and quality assurance agencies in the next few years is ‘to coordinate how to balance government-funded and private sectors’ to develop a healthy education environment for Hong Kong.

Reviewing or auditing? It is about quality after all

The first Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR) was conducted in 1996/97 for the seven UGC-funded institutions. Prof Ho commented that the quality assurance exercise, which is conducted by an external party, is for good cause simply because it provides ‘fresh perspectives and experiences’

for the institution on existing issues. In addition to the fact that it is ‘politically correct’, such exercises promote ‘community accountability’. Prof Ho stressed that the first TLQPR emphasised its review nature. In particular, the sense of ownership of quality assurance policy by university staff was a core concern.

In 2002/03, the second TLQPR was conducted with the now eight UGC-funded institutions. Similar to the first round, this second exercise was ‘to focus on quality assurance processes’ rather than quality per se.

The Quality Assurance Council (QAC) proposed a quality audit of UGC-funded institutions in 2007. The audits focused on QAC audit concerns with student-centered and outcome-based learning. In these audits, institutions must articulate processes as well as outcomes in learning, teaching and assessment. The audit was ‘intended to help institutions rather than penalise them’.



Reports of performance of the institutions were released to the general public, which attracted overwhelming media attention. Performance of the institutions was compared with each other, leaving them 'at the mercy of the press'.

Prof Ho expressed concern that some university teachers would have over-emphasised 'research quality at the expense of teaching quality' as a result of various reviewing and auditing exercises.

Prof Ho concluded that 'when the existing quality assurance programme is fully understood by the institutions, the auditing process will become much less stressful and perhaps even quite enjoyable.'

From HKCAA to HKCAAVQ – a 20 year journey

Ir Leung had been with the HKCAA for six years between 1996 and 2001. During that time, the HKCAA occupied a relatively small office with limited facilities and resources. During 1996-99, the HKCAA faced financial difficulties because of less demand for service from tertiary education institutions as many had attained self-accrediting status.

The difficulties were overcome by demand for new services and new sources of income including a grant from the then Education and Manpower Bureau to help develop the Qualifications Framework (QF) in Hong Kong back in 2000.

Ir Leung shared that his work with the HKCAA was made possible by a group of renowned scholars, professionals, and industrialists. This group was creative in tackling the many issues then facing the Council. 'The Council found it useful to have a layman's view to balance the learned view of those in academia'.



The experiences and expertise that the HKCAAVQ has accumulated over the last 20 years with the help of devoted talents from all sectors and trades are seen as an invaluable and irreplaceable asset. To fully harness the intangible legacy, the HKCAAVQ has upgraded its facilities, hardware and capacities.

Quality assurance: life long learning and constant fine tuning

The facilitator spoke of the development of the QF in Hong Kong. It was proposed in 2004 to facilitate life-long learning and quality assurance and was officially launched in May 2008. In accordance, the HKCAA was renamed the HKCAAVQ to reflect that it has assumed the additional roles of Accreditation Authority for vocational qualifications and Qualifications Register (QR) Authority under the QF.

The QF places particular emphasis on 'industry relevance'. Thus, Industry Training Advisory Committees (ITACs) are set up to advise on the development of Specification of Competency

Standards (SCS) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) issues.

To perform its dual role as gate-keeper and gate-opener regarding the QF, the HKCAAVQ serves on ITACs and provides expert advice on SCS and RPL matters.

In response to the question from the facilitator on whether the local quality assurance system has reached international standard or if 'there is a big gap to catch up [with]'; Prof Ho responded with an affirmative yes and elaborated that institutions are now externally assured under the local system. He added that the local system has been maturing. In addition, he asked the audience to think about 'what is international standard?'

'Definitely' was the answer to the same question by Prof Young though he added that 'there is room for improvement.' In his reply, he urged us to consider an expansion of the self-financed higher education sector in Hong Kong as private universities in other countries make up the majority of institutions.

The question: 'Is the existing quality assurance system in Hong Kong moving

forward?’ was raised from the floor. Prof Young addressed the question, remarking that there is now a new kind of binary education system in Hong Kong, which is based on funding. There are essentially two groups of programmes: government-funded and self-funded.

To address the question raised from the floor on ‘what is the difference between the quality assurance approaches taken by the QAC and the HKCAAVQ?’, Prof Ho responded that the difference is ‘obvious.’ HKCAAVQ’s approach is ‘threshold standard’ whereas QAC seeks a higher standard. He also remarked on QAC’s audit standard that the ‘sky is the limit.’

A comment from the floor was received on international quality assurance standard, suggesting that ‘there is no scientific way to measure it’. However, it can be measured indirectly; for instance, the HKCAAVQ endeavours to establish close networks with quality assurance agencies in Mainland China and other parts of the world to

exchange information and expertise and to keep abreast of world trends and developments.

The floor commented that ‘the engineering profession is one of the most certified and structured’. ‘Is the QF relevant or purely a nuisance to the profession?’ Ir Leung highlighted that ‘technicians in Hong Kong have been neglected’. The QF is now able to take care of them.

Following the comment above, a Council member raised that the engineering profession in Australia is benefiting from the implementation of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). TAFE qualifications are increasingly gaining respect in Australia. The floor wondered if it is the case in Hong Kong. ‘Unfortunately it is not,’ replied Ir Leung. A root cause is family expectation that children move up along the career ladder whenever possible. As a result, technicians are always in demand in Hong Kong as they move up to become engineers whenever they can.



World Trends in Quality Assurance: Where do the Signposts Point?

Mr Peter Williams, CBE, *former Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom*



July 1991 was the last time I was here in Hong Kong. The purpose of that trip was to give a paper at an international conference on Quality Assurance hosted by the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA). I spoke about the work of the Academic Audit Unit, which had been set up in the United Kingdom nine months earlier, and of which I was the Director. 20 countries were represented at the conference, which, so far as I know, was the first major international gathering of its kind. It was a landmark occasion and the descriptions given of national approaches to quality assurance set a baseline against which we may now gauge the journey traveled during the past 19 years.

So, with that memory of the 1991 conference still fresh in my mind, it is a great pleasure for me to be here today, and to be invited to offer you some thoughts on that journey. Where were we 20 years ago? Where have we been since then? Where are we now? What have we achieved in the past two decades? And, most important of all, where are we going next?

'Are we now at a crossroads and, if so, to where are the signposts at the crossroads pointing?'

In 1991 quality assurance was very much in its infancy. Few speakers at the conference were able to talk about what they were actually doing, let alone what they had achieved or learnt. For the most part the accounts were limited to intentions – plans for the next five years, for example - or, in some cases, to rather limited bits of disconnected process (such as 'how we approve a course'). A few had more solid experience to impart. But even in 1991, it was clear in which direction the world of quality assurance in higher education was moving.

The two dominant approaches that were already evident were accountability and enhancement. These provided clear, alternative, focuses for most of the agencies represented. Accountability, an umbrella term which I use here to include all top-down, externally-determined control or regulatory mechanisms such as accreditation, recognition and approval, was very much the leading model, with enhancement (here, rather broadly, including improvement-based, developmental, formative, 'critical friend' and sector self-regulatory processes) as a perhaps softer-edged alternative.

I speak, of course, in generalisations. Every country introducing a quality assurance system has done so for its own reasons and has adopted methods and processes that it thinks will meet its needs. It is, though, noticeable that those two approaches have remained more or less the only ones in use by the member agencies of INQAAHE, the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, whose creation was perhaps the most tangible outcome of that 1991 conference. Is this because accountability and enhancement have been universally successful in meeting their objectives? Perhaps we have cracked the problem of quality assurance in higher education, or perhaps we haven't.

During the 15 years or so after 1991 the accountability approach gained general ascendancy around the world. In particular, accreditation – of programme, department or institution – became the most frequently encountered accountability-led quality assurance method. This was either directly or indirectly controlled by the state – except in the United States, where accreditation is based on a system of nominally voluntary institutional or specialist subject reviews. By contrast, only a small number of countries chose to follow the enhancement route: some parts of the Commonwealth (Australia, New Zealand), and in Europe, Finland, stand out as notable examples. A third way was tried by some – using hybrid or multiple approaches. In this category might be included Switzerland and the United Kingdom (although ultimately Scotland moved definitively towards enhancement).

'Why did accreditation and, in particular, programme accreditation become such a dominant model of quality assurance in the 1990s (and largely continues to be so today)?'

Superficially, accreditation appears to offer guarantees of predictable outcomes from courses and examinations, because programme accreditation can only be acquired if specific, externally determined, criteria are met. It implies a high level of standardisation or uniformity, which can be attractive. But its attractiveness stems equally, I believe, from the relationship of the state towards higher education institutions in the countries that have adopted it. While constitutional independence and operational autonomy of universities are long-time characteristics of the so-called 'Anglo-Saxon tradition' (a shorthand phrase I'm using here for the US and many of the Commonwealth countries, including, of course, the UK), in the rest of the world

higher education has more often been seen as a state-owned public enterprise, to be controlled, regulated, financed and, frequently, micro-managed by relevant government ministries.

In an era of inward-looking, self-referential, national systems of higher education (which was generally the case in all countries up to 25 or 30 years ago), this allowed the state to exercise, if it wished, very tight oversight of what was being done in its higher education institutions. But the loosening of direct state management of higher education, widely introduced during the past 20 years, has brought with it, not surprisingly, a reluctance to grant full self-regulatory powers to newly enfranchised universities. Ostensibly intended to guarantee quality and provide 'consumer protection' for students and employers, it seems to me that, in practice, accreditation has been as much concerned to ensure the continued maintenance of government authority over the higher education community.

That observation is not a criticism of accreditation or accountability mechanisms. In many countries the higher education system was new, it might not have been very good, or lacked international recognition. It might have



changed suddenly from elite to mass provision, or it might have needed to provide reassurance to a public that had never before needed to understand what universities did (or didn't do). There was also the question of the status of academic staff, frequently employed as civil or state servants, enjoying high status and (sometimes) particularly favourable conditions of service. And there were the very variable levels of competency of higher education institutions to manage themselves without the detailed help and controlling hand of the ministry. In such dynamic transitions, it would have been very risky indeed to thrust full autonomy or self-regulation onto individual institutions that had no experience and little capacity to manage them properly.

Certainly, countries looking around the world for quality assurance models to adopt have mostly followed this trend and have generally set up their systems using the well-tried paradigm of programme accreditation. Sometimes this is linked, as, for example, in Saudi Arabia, with institutional accreditation. But many seem to have done so in the untested belief that such a widely adopted route must be delivering the goods for those countries that have been using it for some years, it is therefore safe to import, a solution, they hope, which will be respected by international experts and certain to meet its objectives. Some have even been content to take 'off the shelf' answers offered by exponents from other countries, with little attempt to customise the processes and procedures to meet their own particular circumstances.

So, has the quality assurance journey come to an end? Have we found, in the accreditation of probably hundreds of thousands of courses around the



world, the answer to guaranteeing the quality of higher education? Is our accountability approach turning out to provide the public reassurance about the quality and standards provided in our national higher education systems? Is it the solution to all known problems?

I'm not at all sure that it is. Why, for example, given the blanket of confidence and trust that appears to surround the near-ubiquitous accountability model, should a recent World Bank regional seminar on quality assurance make this statement in an agenda concept note:

'Although setting up QA systems is critical in the process of improving quality and relevance of tertiary education, it is not sufficient to guarantee the outcomes that society expects from tertiary education institutions, nor the learning and innovation results needed to promote economic growth. Unlike monitoring national learning outcomes from primary and secondary education, which

have received attention from both national and international organisations in recent years, mechanisms to monitor tertiary education outcomes are scarce.¹¹

I take this to mean two things: first, that the World Bank now believes that the principal practical benefit of quality assurance in higher education is the enhancement of quality and, secondly, that current approaches are not meeting the challenge of assuring specific outcomes from higher education programmes. Nor is this just the World Bank's concern: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in its magisterial overview of tertiary education published in 2008, was at pains to analyse in detail the strengths and weaknesses of the current quality assurance landscape and to propose radical changes in order to try to ensure that quality assurance was having a valuable and worthwhile effect. It described the challenges facing quality assurance like this:

1. Quotation from 'Enhancing Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance in MENA: Exploring Potential tools to Facilitate Labor Mobility, Alleviate Skills Mismatches and Creating Lifelong Learning Opportunities', Agenda concept note, World Bank CMI Seminar, Marseille, June 14-15, 2010.

'The five key challenges of quality assurance systems relate to the design of the overall quality assurance framework in a way that combines the accountability and improvement functions...'

...the imperative need to build consensus and trust among all stakeholders with an interest in tertiary education quality, the need to enhance the cost effectiveness of the quality assurance system, the necessity to address the implications of the growing internationalisation of quality assurance, and the overarching challenge of maximising the impact of quality assurance processes on tertiary education outcomes.²

In my own experience, talking to representatives of governments, higher education institutions, the media, and members of the public at large, I detect a worrying lack of confidence at present in quality assurance and its outcomes. In part, this is because I believe that what these stakeholders want from quality assurance is unachievable – their expectations are unrealistic or only achievable at unacceptable cost in both time and money – and in part because there is conceptual confusion about the changing nature of higher education and its purposes. Is higher education meant to do what its name suggests – to educate people to the highest levels, or is it more about advanced training? Can it be about both? Is there a difference? I think that it can, and there is, but the two purposes lead to different outcomes, which need to be measured and evaluated differently.

And this leads me to my first main point: quality assurance is indeed at a crossroads, because many nations are confused about what they want or need from higher education itself. That being so, a quality assurance approach which is based on confused national higher education policies is also likely to be confused. In other words, we are not always clear about where we should be going, or what is the best way to get there. Much scratching of heads and peering at route maps is the inevitable consequence!

'We cannot stand at the crossroads for very long. If we do, then we risk watching the grass and the weeds grow around our feet.'

So what are the options now available to us? Where do the signposts point? What trends can we discern?

'One way lies a path which carries on in the current direction.'

This route suggests that the accountability mechanisms that have been used for the past two decades do the job adequately and should continue. The regular inspection of higher education institutions and programmes provides a means for ensuring that universities are complying with externally imposed requirements or criteria. Provided those criteria or requirements have been carefully decided and are regularly evaluated and updated, it is argued, then the inspection or

accreditation model will give a reasonable level of reassurance to key stakeholders that universities are delivering good quality education. The threat of withdrawal of accreditation or recognition is a sufficiently high-stakes sanction to ensure that only a seriously failing institution will not make certain of success. It also allows high levels of consistency and comparability. This continues to be the dominant world model.

The counter argument against this 'status quo' solution is that it gives encouragement to universities to do no more than is required to 'pass the exam' – to be led by the slow-changing, sclerotic, and often less-than-dynamic external control system. There is little incentive to improve or innovate. It can also mean that universities become adept at 'gaming' the process, thereby reducing its validity and reliability. Equally problematic, the repetition of an accreditation process is very expensive and likely to lead to rapidly diminishing returns.

'A second path turns a corner away from the accountability/accreditation track and moves towards an enhancement destination.'

This approach has no doubt that the most cost-effective purpose of external quality assurance is to improve both quality and standards and proposes that this can best be done by engaging closely with institutions' own internal QA procedures, acting as a distortion – free mirror of truth. It is not seen by its proponents as a soft touch solution: it can have stringent threshold levels that need to be reached to allow official recognition, but it does not insist on full

2. OECD, 2008. Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society, Paris: OECD Publications, Vol. 1, p. 292.



compliance with detailed criteria, and assumes that intermittent inspection by outsiders is not likely to lead to systemic institutional development or long-lasting improvements.

The enhancement path has its critics too. For some it gives too many opportunities to the institution to make 'smoke and mirrors' claims about its achievements. For others it fails to provide any useful information for students or employers, and is little more than an opportunity for vague claims about improvements in quality that involve no sharp-edged judgements about actual performance. The outcomes of enhancement-based external quality assurance carry little weight in international comparisons or rankings and are essentially a form of consultancy, which may be valuable, but not as a public accountability vehicle. Whatever the reason, there are now very few systems that still follow this path, and those that do, as in Scotland, for example, argue very strongly that there is a powerful accountability element embedded in their 'enhancement-led' reviews.

Is there, then, a third option? Before suggesting that there might be, I want to make a point about the way in which quality assurance systems get

set up. When I was introduced to the whole mystery of this activity in 1990 by my great mentor, Lord Sutherland, then Professor Stewart Sutherland, he described quality assurance as having two possible philosophical positions – not accountability and enhancement, but the Platonic and the Aristotelian. For those of you not fully versed in the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, the Platonic version can be characterised as believing that all higher education should be aspiring as closely as possible to a single ideal form. In operational terms this leads towards a compliance model for quality assurance. In contrast, the Aristotelian approach can best be summed up in that old favourite phrase 'fitness for purpose,' where quality assurance is designed to ensure the desired result in a particular situation and there is no necessary universal vision of what that result should be.

For the most part, 'fitness for purpose' – the Aristotelian approach – has been accepted around the world, at least as a useful phrase, although I'm not sure its implication has necessarily been fully understood. Its use does have the inestimable advantage of ensuring

that programmes and institutions are evaluated on their own terms and not against any monolithic uniform externally determined standard. This allows systems of considerable diversity to operate, within acceptable tolerances, providing different types of higher education for different types of students, with different needs.

It's probably clear that I am a strong Aristotelian, at least when it comes to quality assurance. So it should not be too surprising to you if I say that...

'...my third way at the crossroads is strongly influenced by the fitness for purpose idea.'

But my key interest is in the purpose, not, at this stage, in the fitness. I said earlier that I think many countries are confused about the purpose of higher education in the modern world. I also believe that there is a similar confusion about the purpose of quality assurance in higher education. One of the surprising things I have encountered during my international quality assurance work, both in Europe or further afield, has been the fixation that agencies have about their processes. Agencies tend to define their work in terms of the processes they use – the means rather than the ends, and give little attention to the aims and objectives they're trying to achieve. They speak of accreditation, or programme reviews, or audits, without first asking themselves what they are trying, or need, to accomplish through these procedures. Put another way, they don't seem to ask themselves how the world will be a better place as a result of their work. To quote a different maxim, 'form follows function', but in the case of quality assurance

agencies I see all too often function stuttering to express itself through processes and procedures designed without reference to any evident end purpose. So it is hardly surprising if elaborate assessment and evaluation procedures of the type we have become familiar with, and which are criticised so loudly by the academic communities of many countries, are not thought to be delivering improved quality. There is no reason why they should since, too often they have not been designed with that purpose in mind.

So along my third path from the crossroads we shall very quickly come upon a group of people representing the government, the universities, students and employers, all looking into the distance and agreeing where it is they want to get to. They will then start to map the route to their destination from where they are, ensuring that they survey the course of their road carefully, identifying dangerous or difficult bits of terrain. Their destination is unlikely to be limited to their own shores: higher education is now an international endeavour, and quality assurance cannot ignore this. Whether

through new methods of assessing transnational programmes, or international accreditation systems, or shared standards and good practice guidelines...

'...it is likely that co-operation within and amongst countries will become a necessity.'

If this is so, then it will almost certainly mean that the main purpose of having external quality assurance systems will change from its current focus. Instead of concentrating on guaranteeing compliance with standard criteria, it will shift towards the provision of verified and reliable information about higher education programmes, their curricula, levels of academic demand, assessment methods and student support mechanisms. These will be provided for the specific benefit and use of students, employers, and governments. They will be examined through accreditation or other evaluation methods and judged against national, regional or broader international criteria. We already have

the seeds of this sort of co-operation in the incorporation of European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)'s Standards and Guidelines into the work of European agencies, while the increasing use of non-national accreditors and assessors (in places where language barriers are not a problem) suggests that there is already some enthusiasm for transnational quality assurance. Indeed, the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) itself, in which I know HKCAAVQ plays a pivotal role, has as its strapline 'dissolving boundaries for a quality region' - a clear indicator of the shape of things to come.

'This, then is my vision of a third way. It gives to quality assurance a very specific and utilitarian primary function – the provision of information...'

... that will be useful and reliable and enable stakeholders to make meaningful comparisons between institutions and programmes in different countries. Which, I suppose, leads me to make an observation on rankings. I know that rankings are very popular in this part of the world, as they also are in the UK and many other parts of the world. Research in recent years has made it clear that while rankings are widely consulted and certainly sell newspapers and influence national policies, their methods are suspect and open to deliberate or inadvertent manipulation. Some of you may know the efforts that the Times Higher Education journal is going to in order to give its rankings a more robust and defensible algorithm, and I don't think it is finding it easy, though I applaud its attempt. How much better it





would be if reliable and valid data were collected through officially authorised channels or, even more preferable, if potential users were able to employ software that allowed them to compile their own rankings from that official data, as is being done in some places. At present, though, I fear that rankings are being accorded an accuracy, precision and authority they cannot justify, and are likely to mislead anyone who believes in their infallibility.

To come back to the third route, is there then any place left for enhancement in this user-focused approach? Yes, indeed there is, but to explain that, I need to make it clear that I take the view that, at its most useful...

'...quality assurance is not a simple one-dimensional inspectorial process...'

...but a set of tools and activities, which can fashion or improve a number of aspects of higher education and which, together, make for better learning. So, on one level, quality assurance is a way of professionalising teaching

and learner support. It can do this by requiring teachers to be more effective, through training and staff development, not just in transferring their knowledge, but also by playing an active part in the collective management of students' learning. It does it also by emphasising the importance of good organisation and management of programmes and courses, of treating students respectfully as partners in the quest for learning – and in encouraging students to accept that role. Crucially, it demands recognition that a conscientious approach to providing good quality should be an inbuilt part of every true professional's attitude to their work.

This model of quality assurance that I'm describing is one that recognises the equal importance of both enhancement and accountability but does not try to yoke them ineffectually into a single integrated external review procedure. It distinguishes between the two, making enhancement a key feature of internal quality assurance work, and accountability the primary purpose of external processes. The focus of the first is the bettering of students' learning, and of the second the need for reliable stakeholder information and reassurance.

If these different but linked purposes are accepted, then the ways and means of achieving them become our next concern. I am sure we can all envisage beautifully crafted and delightfully elaborate processes and procedures which are very complicated to administer, cost a lot in time and money, involve the filling in of many forms and deliver very little of value. I have seen various such confections (and may even have been responsible for some myself in the early days). It's at this point that we must seek the support of our 'fitness for purpose' principle and ask ourselves those basic quality assurance questions: What are we trying to do? Why are we trying to do it? How are we going to do it? How shall we know it works? And how shall we improve it?

One of the reasons that quality assurance is under pressure in some larger countries is the realisation that while it might be deemed cost effective to run a single cycle of national accreditation reviews, covering all programmes - or at least it's a risk worth taking - it's another matter to do the same thing every four or five years, again and again. The costs of a permanent cycle of reviews quickly become unsustainable: not only does the opportunity cost rise exponentially, but the value tends to diminish just as rapidly, as the universities learn to play the game to win. There is no more hollow ritual in higher education than the quality assurance exercise that is predictable from beginning to end.

This has been acknowledged in a number of systems, which see the virtue in viewing quality assurance as an evolutionary process rather than an unending series of repetitive and identical procedures. They recognise that ...

‘...if quality assurance is having any beneficial effect in universities, it is through the way that institutions are developing and maturing in their approach to the management of quality and standards.’

This provides an opening to rethink both how oversight is maintained in the system and how the players can be encouraged to continue their own development and improvement. And it is with this in mind that I should like to see the agencies of the world setting out from the crossroads and walking forward with some confidence.

‘If this strategy were adopted, what might we expect of quality assurance in, say, 20 years’ time?’

I hope it would be viewed as a journey towards a destination, but with a recognition that the destination would probably never be reached. We do not achieve perfection in this life. The intended destination would be the creation of strong, autonomous higher education institutions, able to regulate themselves and, thereby, generate public confidence in their capacity and determination to do so properly. Although fully autonomous, they would take their vision and their inspiration from the needs of their students, and would locate their response to those needs firmly within their country or region. They would have fit-for-purpose

internal quality assurance arrangements, carefully designed to require no more effort on anyone’s part beyond what would be required to achieve their stated objectives. Internal quality reviews would be rigorous and seen as a valuable developmental opportunity for those fortunate enough to be involved in them. The role of the national external agency would have changed over the years, with a gradual relinquishing of intensive accreditation of individual programmes towards an institutionally focused process that would assess whether an institution was mature enough to become, and remain, self-regulating. Thereafter the task of the agency would be to check, through desk-based scrutiny and occasional visits, that the self-regulation was being managed properly and efficiently.

The eventual withdrawal from comprehensive external accreditation, which is a key feature of this perhaps

utopian vision, would save a huge amount of time, money and effort, all of which are in increasingly short supply, but it would have the distinct disadvantage that there would no longer be the sort of objective information about programmes, or any detailed assessment of them, which the public, and particularly students, reasonably expect. Managed well, however, the evolution of the system would bring with it reliable information, generated within the institution, and verified through the agency’s external processes. I think this might well prove to be adequate for programmes which are not intended to have a direct impact on the labour market (for example some of the traditional humanities subjects), but for those that do, and especially in areas which are linked directly with international employment, it would probably not be sufficient. For those subjects, such as business studies, engineering, accountancy, computing,





international law, and some of the health areas, there would still be a need for the endorsement given by an accreditation process. But that need would be very much geared towards providing consumer protection for both student and employer; a secondary use would be to give successful institutions a competitive advantage. And it is my contention that the specialised accreditation of vocational areas – other than in those life-and-death professions traditionally regulated by the state, should be organised and managed by voluntary international organisations, along the lines of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and similar bodies. The professions whose interests are represented by those bodies operate in a truly global environment, and the quality assurance of the programmes in their subject areas needs to reflect this.

To conclude, we have all come a long way since that 1991 conference and the road we have travelled, if we care to turn round and look at it, has been both uphill and winding. We have achieved much, but it can sometimes seem as if those achievements have had a very high cost. I have no doubt, myself, that the millions of students who have passed through the higher education institutions of the world in the last decade have benefited from the heightened realisation, within and beyond the academy, that quality is not accidental. The transformation of higher education from elite to mass provision has been the hallmark of much of the development of the past two decades in so many countries. This trend has not been without both its critics and its problems, but could never have been achieved as effectively as it has without the hard work and impressive action that higher education institutions, and agencies like the HKCAAVQ, have put in.

Standing at the crossroads today, we must decide whether to carry on doing

what we have been doing for 20 years and have grown comfortable and familiar with, or look forward to meeting the new needs, the new expectations and the new opportunities which confront us all in our different countries.

‘Congratulations to you, HKCAAVQ. You led us forward in 1991 and you are leading us forward again today. Good fortune in the next 20 years.’

Thank you.

HKCAAVQ's Past Achievements and Future Endeavours



Mr Martin Liao, JP, Vice Chairman of the HKCAAVQ, facilitated the Roundtable discussion. Mr Liao pointed out that over the last 20 years the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) had evolved from a modest setup to the present Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) – entrusted with new statutory functions and additional responsibilities.

He added that the Roundtable presented a good opportunity for two of the past Chairmen and the current Chairman to share with the audience the highs and lows of life in the HKCAAVQ and its predecessor and the secrets of the Council's continuity and sustainability to the present day.

Dr Andrew Chuang, SBS, JP, a member of the first Council and later Chairman, observed that the establishment of HKCAA provided a platform for Hong Kong to have its own local quality assurance agency.

The original mission of the HKCAA was to be 'working itself out of business' when its target operators acquired self-accrediting status after successful accreditation by the HKCAA.

This was during the era where the university-polytechnic binary system was to be unified, as recollected by Dr Chuang and echoed by Ms Andrea Hope, quoting the remark made by the first Executive Director Mr Allan C Sensicle.

Dr Chuang ascribed the success of the HKCAA to the dedicated and strong Council, which had a vision beyond the boundary of its original remit.

In 1997 the Council took on new roles that added value to the Hong Kong education community, by being the advisor to the Government on the registration of non-local courses under the Non-local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance.

Prof John C Y Leong, SBS, JP, former Chairman of the HKCAA, also recollected the sole mission of the early HKCAA was quality assuring the majority of the client organisations so as to demonstrate that they were worthy of the self-accrediting university status and hence be relocated under the regime of the University Grants Committee (UGC).

The more successful the HKCAA was, the fewer clients it had left. The issue of survival came up during his Vice-chairmanship from 1996 and continued into his chairmanship in 1999. The transition of the HKCAA into new quality assurance roles was made feasible by three contributing factors:

- Professionalism as demonstrated by the first rate Secretariat under the leadership of Ms Wong Wai Sum;
- Stringent accreditation criteria under a robust accreditation mechanism to uphold the quality of the institutions and programmes accredited by the HKCAA; and
- The growth of operators who remained to be HKCAA clients since its early operation, e.g. Hong Kong Shue Yan College (now renamed a university), The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Chu Hai College of Higher Education, The Open University of Hong Kong, Caritas Francis Hsu College and Hong Kong Art School, to name a few.

The HKCAA took up further developmental tasks to meet the challenges brought about by the changing education landscape in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. For instance, the consultancy project to underpin the quality of Project Yi Jin commissioned by the Hong Kong Government, the Comparative Study of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Use of English (UE) paper of the Common Recruitment examination Part 1, the role of assessment authority as commissioned by the Insurance Authority and the Estate Agents Authority for their respective Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Courses are some of the relevant examples.

As Chairman during the transitional period, Prof Leong shared his satisfaction in the HKCAA's upholding of required standards for the quality of non-local courses run in Hong Kong.

As a founding and active member of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) as well as the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), the HKCAA established an international network and attained significant recognition in the quality assurance arena.

The Self Review funded by the then Education and Manpower Bureau and conducted by an external consultant in 2003 laid down the direction for the new HKCAAVQ to underpin the quality assurance mechanism of the Qualifications Framework (QF). A blueprint for offering participation opportunities to the private sector as well as the industry sector in the QF was one of the key outcomes of the Self Review.

In this new education landscape brought about by Education Reform and the QF, Dr York Liao assumed chairmanship in 2003.

Dr Liao brought to the Council both academic and industry perspectives. As a result he was well equipped to steer the transition of the HKCAA into a new incarnation as the HKCAAVQ with combined roles in both academic and vocational accreditation.

Dr Liao shared four major ventures during his reign, which he felt had a major impact on the operational mode of the HKCAAVQ.

- The move of the HKCAA from Central to its current office in Quarry Bay, and hopefully in two years to a government building.

- Second, thanks to the endless effort of the Executive Directors in recruitment and retention, the Council succeeded in building a professional and committed team in the Secretariat. The commitment and continuous support of the Secretariat staff is a key factor of the success of the Council.

- Third, continuous support given by former Chairmen of the Council as well as all its Members (past and current) also help the Council to lay down robust systems, standards and processes for local, regional as well as international recognition. This also helps to shape the education scene in turn and effect changes in the higher education arena by leaps and bounds.

- Last but not least, the HKCAAVQ has been lucky to have an active and supportive partner, i.e. the Education Bureau (EDB) to accompany it on its road of development. With the sponsorship via the QF Development Fund, the HKCAAVQ is able to make a tremendous impact on the community at large in tandem with the Government's plan for the QF.

Dr Liao made a request to the EDB that this support be continued in order to make it possible for the Council to carry on playing its gate-opening role.





With respect to the future endeavours of the HKCAAVQ, Dr Liao advised that the future was in the hands of the stakeholders. Therefore, feedback from the audience was fundamentally important to help the HKCAAVQ paint the landscape of the quality assurance picture in the next decade.

Mr Kevin A Power, a member of the Council of the HKCAAVQ, reminded those present that the most significant development and challenge to the HKCAAVQ since the formal launch of the QF was the emergence of quality assurance of the vocational sector.

The benefit to the vocational education and training (VET) sector of the availability of the new vocational accreditation services is the formalisation of recognition of the contribution of VET to economic and social development. This has taken a concerted effort by both the Government and the industry to come to the current stage of development.

Prof Leong echoed that vocational accreditation was a difficult area to start with. In the planning stage of the QF, it was recognised that the VET sector needs time to develop its quality assurance mechanisms.

It is important for VET participants to get used to the idea of quality assurance and to gain buy-in. Therefore, the concept of gate-opening was identified for the first time in the HKCAA's Self-review Report in 2003. One must not ignore the anomaly in the quality assurance mechanism for Hong Kong, when looking around the world, e.g. quality assurance matters are under the care of organisations on a voluntary basis instead of through a legislative process.

Ms Andrea Hope questioned whether the goal post had been shifted now that new universities were no longer granted self-accrediting status and must be subject to periodic review. This implies that latecomers joining the university regime will have to undergo endless external quality assurance processes which are time consuming and costly.

The panel recognised that there had been continuous debate about the nature of self-accreditation and whether such a status is a guarantee of freedom from external quality assurance. This is a policy issue beyond the remit of the quality assurance bodies.

Mr Peter Williams shared his UK experience where significant barriers had been in place for institutions seeking self-accrediting status for degree awarding status.

Over the years, he observed that institutions that ventured to seek such self-accrediting status were able to prove themselves operating within robust quality assurance mechanisms through the accreditation process.

Mr Peter Cheung, former Executive Director of the HKCAAVQ, concurred with Dr Liao that the issue relating to self-accrediting status was by and large a policy issue to be determined by the Hong Kong Government. Nonetheless, he would like the audience to note that everywhere in the world the trend is for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to be held accountable via external quality assurance processes on a regular basis. Even for institutions that have been granted self-accrediting status after the unification of the binary system, the self-accrediting status is either limited, such as in the case of the Hong Kong Institute of Education or is under an external review mechanism such as in the case of The Open University of Hong Kong. In fact, the HKCAAVQ's Four-stage Quality Assurance Process developed to underpin the QF is designed to address the evolving needs for quality assurance.

Stage three of the process, Programme Area Accreditation grants a limited self-accrediting power to the operator with a proven track record in management and quality assurance. The power is subject to review on a periodic basis.

The sharing with the panel reflected on the challenges met by the HKCAA and the HKCAAVQ over the years, in tandem with the changing education landscape locally and internationally.

The Quality Assurance Era in the Next Decade in Hong Kong



Forum facilitator Mr Peter Williams, CBE (former Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, United Kingdom) moderated a panel discussion comprising Ms Michelle Li, JP (Deputy Secretary for Education, Education Bureau), Dr York Liao, SBS, JP (Chairman, HKCAAVQ), Prof Edmond Ko, BBS, JP (Member of Quality Assurance Council, University Grants Committee, Chairman of Qualifications and Accreditation Committee, HKCAAVQ) and Prof Frank H K Fu, MH, JP (Chairman, Joint Quality Review Committee) which focused on the factors which may drive the shape of quality assurance in Hong Kong in the future.

A tale of three bodies

The existence of three quality assurance bodies in Hong Kong was brought under the spotlight in this session by panel members and members of the audience. This stemmed from an observation from Mr Williams that there are three quality assurance bodies in a small place like Hong Kong.

Prof Fu briefly recapped the work of the Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC), which was established in 2005 to provide for the peer review of the quality assurance processes of the self-financed sub-degree programmes of the continuing education arms of UGC-funded institutions.

In 2009, JQRC completed its first round of assessments and an interim report was subsequently published.

Ms Li highlighted a few trends that she believes should be considered when reflecting on the 'fitness for purpose' of the current quality assurance (QA) system in Hong Kong:

Internationalisation

This refers to mobility across national borders. Here, mobility may refer to overseas institutions coming to Hong Kong, or Hong Kong students going abroad for long-term or short-term studies. According to Ms Li, the current registration process for Non-local Learning Programmes (NLP) provides a certain degree of quality assurance as the comparison with home courses is the benchmark used in registration. In addition, local accreditation of NLP will be the next step forward in terms of granting recognition to non-local programmes in Hong Kong. Ms Li also noted the setting up of a branch campus in Hong Kong by Savannah College of Art and Design from the U.S.A. Finally, Ms Li emphasised that mutual recognition has to hinge on effective QA.

Diversification

More and more self-financing programmes are being offered in Hong Kong. As a result, the self-financing sector has now surpassed the publicly funded sector. This is a welcoming trend but the variation in maturity of institutions has increased. Ms Li posed the question whether the same QA strategy should be applied equally to all institutions, or whether a more enhancement-oriented approach could be applied to more mature institutions with the focus on accountability to be applied to less mature institutions. Diversity also comes in the form of variation of programmes that range from Level 1 to Level 7 under the Qualifications Framework (QF), and from academic, vocational and continuing education. Different training is used in these programmes and Ms Li pointed out quality assurance should be conducted to support a 'common currency' for articulation between different pathways.

Gate-keeper and gate-opener

Ms Li considered it a difficult mission for the HKCAAVQ in maintaining a threshold standard and to promote the concept of QF to facilitate participation in the QA process.

Prof Ko added that the real question might not be how many quality assurance bodies there are, but whether they are using the same process of accreditation. Additionally, the move towards the outcome-based approach may help to shift the focus from process to outcomes, which may be used to differentiate between institutions at different levels of maturity.

Mr Williams asked whether there is any strength in the current arrangement of having different quality assurance bodies. Ms Li explained that the development of the QA system in the past was evolutionary, not by design. On the question of whether this makes the system difficult to understand from the outside, she responded that it doesn't matter as long as it is fit for purpose.

Apparently, some users who are using the services felt that more communication and coordination between the different bodies in Hong Kong are needed. With the introduction of NLP accreditation by the HKCAAVQ, this comment can be extended to the international level as well. On this, Ms Li agreed that more coordination and collaboration between different QA bodies is beneficial.

Dr Liao made the remark that the HKCAAVQ is trying its best with its new roles and has achieved some success. He emphasised that accreditation of NLP is part of the plan for Hong Kong to become an international hub for education. In this regard, clients requesting accreditation of an NLP should not be asked to wait in a long queue. Given the challenges in front of the HKCAAVQ, there is an opportunity for the HKCAAVQ to become a trailblazer.

Diversity, maturity and convergence

Prof Ko highlighted that the major challenge in the QA landscape of Hong Kong is diversity. He made an analogy between the diversity of students in teaching and the diversity of institutions under QA in the tertiary sector. In particular, he pointed out that the purpose of assessment is either to provide a ranking, or to ensure that certain performance criteria are met. In this regard, the trend in the past decade was to move from 'assessment of learning', to 'assessment for learning', and more currently to 'assessment as learning'.

Diversity of institutions in the tertiary sector can come in various forms:

- Funding modes, i.e. privately funded versus publicly funded institutions.
- Qualifications coming from academic and vocational education.
- Differences between school leavers and adult learners.

The key diversity, according to Prof Ko, is the variation in level of maturity in quality assurance readiness.





Ultimately, the question is: 'What is the purpose of quality assurance?' Given that the provision of multiple articulation pathways for students is the cornerstone of higher education reform, a quality assurance system that 'harmonises' the above diversities is desirable.

A participant from the floor suggested that in order to cope with the diversity of institutions, 'policing' could be used at the beginning to build up trust. He further added that another dimension of diversity, is the diversity of thinking. Hong Kong, with its unique background and culture, is the place to promote diversity of thinking.

On the issue of convergence, according to Ms Li, it is probably not desirable to look for uniformity given the diversity in the education landscape. A participant from the floor observed that QF may provide a platform for the different QA bodies to work together and achieve a certain level of uniform standards.

Further questions relating to transparency and independence of QA bodies were also raised during the session.

Ms Li remarked that QA is expensive. That's why the Government has set up the Qualifications Framework Support Schemes (QFSS) to support the development of QF and this will be kept under continuous review.

International standards

There was a brief discussion on whether Hong Kong has achieved the international standard for QA. On this, Ms Li highlighted that the composition of the HKCAAVQ and UGC Boards include international representatives. A participant remarked that Hong Kong has achieved the international standards by actually helping to shape the international standards.

The Way Forward



The changing landscape and implications for QA

Dr Charles Wong, MH (Chairman, The Federation of Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions) began the discussion by providing a history of the different sectors in the tertiary education fields including those under the University Grants Committee (UGC), Continuing Education Units (CEU), other Continuing Education Providers (CEP) and Vocational Training Council (VTC). Policy was changed to have more institutions, more capacity, provision of Government funding of two levels of programmes and 60% participation rate in higher education within ten years.

Dr Wong commented with the emergence of diverse operators and the rapidly developed sub-degree sectors, there was a genuine need to improve quality and financial support through loans since there was no central planning or sharing amongst different sectors. He pointed out that some of the major factors that will need to be taken into account over the next ten years:

- There will be even more rapid growth of the sub-degree sector as the providers have reached the 60% participation rate.
- Major providers are CEU of UGC-funded institutions, CEP, NGO's and not for profit private providers. They are mostly local and not from existing post-secondary institutions.

- Financially, there are land grants, loans for providers and students for self-financed sub-degree programmes but the competition is keen.
- With the new educational policy (334), the sub-degree sector will change from two-or three-year programmes to two years and the emphasis will switch to four-year degree programmes. In this context, some existing sub-degree providers will switch to become providers of four-year degree programmes.
- As the sector is driven by policy, structural change, regulatory measures and market forces, the future of quality assurance must be considered in these contexts and not in a vacuum.

Dr Wong admitted that it is difficult to project or predict what will happen to the sub-degree sector but he deduced that both sub-degree and self-financed degree sectors are likely to be less diverse in the near future. He also described the way forward under the changing educational landscape and concluded that there are more questions than answers as the operators will experience a high level of uncertainty. However, he suggested that if 'we can think about doing review and planning for the whole sector together with the Government, we will all benefit including the regulatory bodies.'

Roles of VTC in the future educational landscape

The VTC is, according to Dr Carrie Willis, SBS, JP (Executive Director of VTC), 'a significant player in the Qualifications Framework (QF) and a strategic partner of the HKCAAVQ that offers the possibility of developing Hong Kong as an educational hub and enhancing a quality culture in vocational and tertiary education.'

The VTC, as the largest vocational education and training (VET) provider in the sector was funded by the Government but is an independent statutory body. She noted in this context that the implication is for less control by the Government and more flexibility for diversification in provision of vocational education and training: 'VTC offers a wide range of disciplinary programmes, such as business and design and the new mission is to provide students with values, knowledge and skills for lifelong learning and therefore enhance their employability.'

The audience echoed that keen interest was shown towards whether the VTC would provide support services to young VET operators particularly in the development of course materials and contributions to the standardisation of quality assurance measures under the Skills Upgrading Scheme (SUS).

The Programme Area Accreditation (PAA) exercise

One of the milestones of VTC can be traced back to 2005 when it sought PAA accreditation services from the HKCAAVQ with the following aims:

- An objective reality check
- Recognition from the public
- Increase in articulation opportunity
- Development of fully-trained students

With the accreditation result of about 60 programme areas approved, the VTC's awareness of quality assurance was substantially increased. The experience

gained was valuable and worth sharing with other VET providers. Dr Willis explained that the future core tasks under the new educational landscape are to develop mutual understanding between the sector and the HKCAAVQ.

Accreditation services provided by the HKCAAVQ should be affordable and user-friendly as the Council has a lot to contribute to VET development in Hong Kong. Although many young VET providers may not be ready to go through accreditation exercises, Dr Willis agreed that the HKCAAVQ is expected to play a role as a gate-keeper who at the same time helps the sector to grow.

Crossover between academic and vocational sectors

Under the changing landscape of education in Hong Kong, Prof Yiu-Kwan Fan, BBS, JP, Executive Director of the HKCAAVQ, acknowledged that the Global Financial Crisis has had significant impact on higher education and VET in both Hong Kong and overseas: 'How such forces affect





higher education, vocational and professional training, what will the tertiary educational scene look like, how the HKCAAVQ will ensure that the accredited programmes and qualifications are the ones that the students need, are all important questions.'

Prof Fan added that the QF is a good framework, which provides a bridge between academic and vocational sectors. 'The implementation of QF is the right direction for future development,' which is why the HKCAAVQ's core business is to develop the quality assurance mechanism underpinning the QF. The differences between the two sectors have become blurred and he cited an example of crossover to illustrate his points. 'Students holding Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications in

Australia are provided an opportunity to articulate into academic institutions, in some universities in Australia.' There is no reason that under the QF we cannot introduce similar articulation opportunities here in Hong Kong. Beyond that, the HKCAAVQ has set out a mechanism and strategies to work with local institutions and their overseas partners to proceed with non-local programme accreditation for quality assurance purposes. The HKCAAVQ, Prof Fan added, understands that some course operators are more mature and the development of a maturity model that is based on level of trust is the way forward. For less mature operators, a risk-based model could be introduced.

Challenges Ahead



Dr Liao commenced by saying that he had no immediate answers to all of the questions that had been posed during the conference and thanked participants for their patience and interest.

'Why are we at the crossroads?'

He felt that it would be better to say that quality assurance is still 'finding its road.' 'We are sometimes in the wilderness and sometimes at crossroads. There are many changes facing us.

If you look at this Council's history we have moved from emergence of the importance of quality assurance to acceptance. Through an evolutionary

process we have moved from a binary system to one that now operates across the sectors.

The vocational sector presents challenges for the Council and globally there is no consensus on what models of quality assurance to use.

There is a difference between accountability and enhancement.

The challenges for the Council are:

- The ever shifting educational landscape
- Diversity
- Evolution

These challenges have taken us beyond what we know and what we see as the disciplinary and cultural borders.

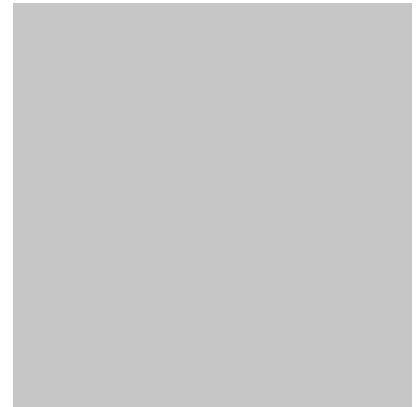
Dr Liao remarked that the most depressing idea is that 'there is a lack of a clear end point.'

He went on to quote a sentence from the Under Secretary's opening remarks that: 'Education is the equaliser of social sectors' but Dr Liao instead believes 'the internet is now the great equaliser of knowledge.'

Now every student has a laptop and teaching is facing great changes and challenges.

'The way we teach has to make some changes. Peter, in his talk, reminded us that in 800 years, universities have not changed all that much. However, the speed, coverage and cost of the Internet is making such change possible.'

Is quality assurance at the crossroads? Perhaps education as a whole is at a crossroads and the coming 20 years may bring a completely different picture.





Dato' Dr Syed Ahmad Hussein

Chief Executive Officer,
Malaysian Qualifications Agency

Ms Syuhadah Zainal Abidin

Assistant Director, Accreditation
Coordination Division,
Malaysian Qualifications Agency

Mr Anthony CHAN

Project Co-ordinator (FE),
Further Education Division, Education
Bureau of HKSAR

Dr Benjamin CHAN

Deputy Director, Li Ka Shing Institute of
Professional and Continuing Education,
The Open University of Hong Kong
(LiPACE)

Ms Canna Wai-Heung CHAN

Lecturer, Hong Kong Community
College

Dr Catherine Ka-Ki CHAN

Deputy Secretary for Education,
Curriculum and Quality Assurance
Branch, Education Bureau of HKSAR

Dr Cheuk-Hay CHAN

President and Principal, Hong Kong
College of Technology

Ms Rosalind CHAN

Assistant Academic Registrar,
Hong Kong Baptist University

Prof Tsang-Sing CHAN *

Associate Vice President (Administration
& Planning) and Shun Hing Chair
Professor of Marketing, Lingnan
University

Prof Chung-Nan CHANG

President, Chu Hai College of Higher
Education

Ms Hester CHEANG

Head of Academic Affairs Department,
Chu Hai College of Higher Education

Mr Kenneth CHEN

Under Secretary for Education,
Education Bureau of HKSAR

Ms Jeanne CHENG

Assistant Secretary (FE),
Further Education Division, Education
Bureau of HKSAR

Ms Aster CHEUK

Vice President, Hong Kong Institute of
Technology

Ms Anna CHEUNG

Acting Head, Quality Assurance and
Accreditation Office, Vocational Training
Council

Mr Juhanie CHEUNG

Manager, Transnational Education,
British Council Hong Kong

Mr Peter P T CHEUNG

Secretary-General, The Federation
for Continuing Education in Tertiary
Institutions

Ms Virginia Wai-Kam CHOI

Chairperson, CPD Alliance

Mr Paul CHONG

Chairman, E&M ITAC, Southa Group of
Companies

Mr Albert CHOW

Director of Qualifications,
Hong Kong Institution of Engineers

Prof S P CHOW

Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President
(University Relations),
The University of Hong Kong

Dr Andrew CHUANG

Executive Director, Gold Peak Industries
(Holdings) Limited

Dr Hong-Sheung CHUI

President, Hang Seng School of
Commerce

Ms Mimi CUNNINGHAM

Director of Human Resources and
Sustainability, The Hong Kong Jockey
Club

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Executive Director, HKCAAVQ

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Associate Provost, City University of
Hong Kong

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Director, Education Services, British
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Chairman, Joint Quality Review
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Dr Edward Pui-Wing FUNG

Dean, Community College and Further
Education, Lingnan Institute of Further
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Director (Education), Australian
Education International, Australian
Consulate-General, Hong Kong

Mrs Susan HA

Principal, CCC Kung Lee College

Prof Kit-Tai HAU

Chairman of University Extension Board
and Professor of Educational Psychology,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Ms Annie Siu-Wah HO

Deputy Executive Director (Operations),
Vocational Training Council

Ir Dr David Chi-Shing HO *

Group General Manager,
Hong Kong Ferry (Holdings) Company
Limited

Prof Richard M W HO

Chairman, Standing Review Committee
for Qualifications Assessment, HKCAAVQ

Prof Richard Y K HO *

Chair Professor of Finance,
Department of Economics and Finance,
City University of Hong Kong

Ms Andrea HOPE

Associate Academic Vice-President,
Hong Kong Shue Yan University

Dr Henry HU

President, Hong Kong Shue Yan
University

Dr Herbert HUEY

Associate Director (Administration) and
Registrar, The Hong Kong Academy for
Performing Arts

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Chairperson, Social Workers Registration
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Prof Kerry KENNEDY

Acting Vice President (Academic),
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Prof Edmond KO *

Senior Advisor to the Vice-President
for Academic Affairs (Deputy to the
President) & Adjunct Professor of
the Department of Chemical and
Biomolecular Engineering,
Hong Kong University of Science and
Technology

Mr Shu-Lam KONG

Chairman, Hairdressing ITAC, New Idol
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Prof Yau-Pak KONG

Vice President, Chu Hai College of Higher
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Prof Reggie KWAN

College President, Caritas Francis Hsu
College & Caritas Bianchi College of
Careers

Ms Anna Sum-Yee KWONG

President, Hong Kong Institute of
Architects

Mr K T LAI

Executive Council Member,
Hong Kong Institute of Human
Resources Management

Dr Eric LAU

Vice President, Hong Kong Institute of
Technology

Mr Peter LAU

Dean, Hong Kong Central College

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Principal, YMCA College of Careers

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Chairman, Printing & Publishing ITAC,
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Training Development Subcommittee,
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Australia

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Dr Hip-Hung LEUNG

Senior Assistant Executive Director,
Skills Upgrading Scheme – Secretariat,
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Director, Corporate Development
AsiaPay (HK) Ltd

Mr Kong-Yui LEUNG

Senior Programme Director,
Associate Head of College of Humanities
and Law, HKU SPACE

Dr William LEUNG

Country Manager, Hong Kong Office,
City & Guilds

Ms Michelle LI *

Deputy Secretary for Education, Further
and Higher Education Branch,
Education Bureau of HKSAR

Mr Martin LIAO *

Barrister, Martin Liao Barrister

Dr York LIAO *

Managing Director,
Winbridge Company Ltd

Mr Charles Chi-Hong LO *

Chief Executive Officer, C&C Joint
Printing Co (HK) Ltd

Prof Yu-Hon LUI

Director, Li Ka Shing Institute of
Professional and Continuing Education,
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(LiPACE)

Mrs Dorothy MA

Deputy Secretary-General, University
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Executive Director, iPrinciple Ltd

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Manager (FE), Further Education Division, Education Bureau of HKSAR

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Deputy Chairman, Joint Quality Review Committee

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Dr Charles WONG

Chairman, The Federation for Continuing Education in Tertiary Institutions

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Manager, Hong Kong Institute of Bankers

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Chairman, Nursing Council of Hong Kong

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Executive Director, Joint Quality Review Committee

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President, Beijing Normal University

HKCAAVQ Organising Committee

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**Hong Kong Council for
Accreditation of Academic and
Vocational Qualifications**

10/F & 23/F, Cambridge House,
Taikoo Place, 979 King's Road,
Quarry Bay, Hong Kong

Tel: (852) 3658 0000

Fax: (852) 2845 9910

E-mail: info@hkcaavq.edu.hk

Website: <http://www.hkcaavq.edu.hk>