

Self-financing Sub-degree Programmes in Hong Kong: Facts vs Myths

Peter P. Yuen

College of Professional and Continuing Education
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract

This article assesses the input and output quality of self-financing sub-degree programmes in Hong Kong. Quality indicators of three popular local community colleges are selected for comparison with those from three selected American community colleges. The academic performance of various cohorts of community college graduates who have articulated to two publicly funded universities are compared with the performance of university students admitted directly from year one. Employers' views on the competencies and attitudes of these graduates are also presented. The results show that Hong Kong self-financing community colleges compare favourably with US community colleges, and that the graduates of these self-financing colleges perform well after graduation in both further studies and employment.

Key words: self-financing sub-degree programmes, quality, Hong Kong

Introduction

Conscious of the relatively low tertiary education participation rate in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSARG) in 2000 initiated a policy to increase tertiary education participation rate from around 30 percent to 60 percent of the relevant age group (Education and Manpower Bureau 2006). This policy goal has been achieved in less than fifteen years, without significant increase in government spending in tertiary education, largely through the expansion of the self-financing sector. This apparent achievement, however, was not appreciated by some politicians and the media in general. Media reports often alleged that the quality of self-financed sub-degree programmes is poor, and that the prospect for graduates from these programmes is bleak, in terms of both further studies and employment (Ming Pao 2012, Headline Daily 2010, Ip 2012). This article seeks to ascertain whether the allegations about these self-financing programmes in Hong Kong can be substantiated. Quality indicators of three popular local community colleges are selected for comparison with those from three selected American community colleges. The academic performance of various cohorts of community college graduates who have articulated to two publicly funded universities is compared with university students admitted directly from year one. Employers' views on the competencies and attitudes of

these graduates are also presented

Background

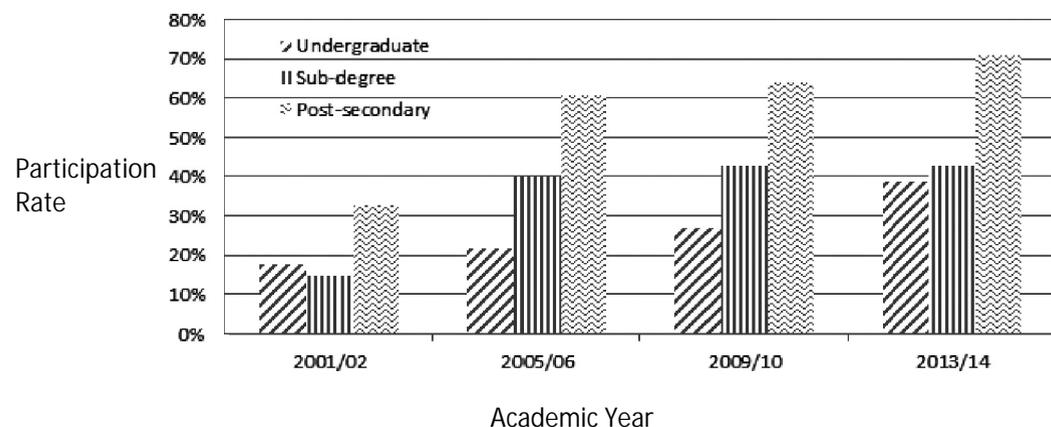
Higher Education System in Hong Kong

Publicly funded Institutions: There are eight degree-awarding institutions funded by the Government through the University Grants Committee (UGC), which altogether provide 15,000 first-year first-degree (FYFD) places each year. There is also the Academy of Performing Arts, which is also publicly funded and degree granting, but not under the aegis of UGC. Roughly 18 percent of the relevant age group gets a publicly funded university place. These institutions are well-resourced and some are amongst Asia Pacific's best universities in terms of their teaching and research achievements. According to the QS Asia University Rankings 2013, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and The University of Hong Kong are ranked number one and two respectively in Asia. The Chinese University of Hong Kong, The City University of Hong Kong and The Hong Kong Polytechnic University are also within the top 200 in the world (QS 2013). As places are limited, only students with relatively good grades in their secondary school graduation public examination (the Diploma in Secondary Education or DSE examination) are admitted to these institutions. In addition to offering degree and postgraduate studies, a small number of UGC-funded institutions, together with institutions under the Vocational Training Council, also offer publicly funded sub-degree programmes mostly Higher Diplomas.

The UGC also funds a limited number (initially 2,000 a year, gradually increased to 4,000 a year) of senior year undergraduate places (places in the third and fourth year of an undergraduate degree programme) to UGC-funded institutions for graduates of publicly funded and self-financing sub-degree programmes to articulate to the publicly-funded degree programmes. As the number of such places is limited (roughly 10 to 20 percent of the sub-degree graduate population), only students with very good grades are admitted to such places.

Self-financing Institutions: As a result of the policy launched in 2000 aimed to rapidly increase the participation rate in post-secondary education, the continuing education arms of many UGC-funded universities and other independent education institutions started to offer full-time programmes to secondary school leavers on a self-financing basis. This has led to a rapid growth in the number of self-financing post-secondary programmes initially Associate Degrees and Higher Diplomas, and later on Bachelor's Degrees. The post-secondary participation rate doubled in five years' time: from 33% in 2001/02 academic year to 66% in the 2005/06 academic year. The rate then levelled off in the 2006/07 academic year, and is now maintained at slightly above 70%. A total of 27 institutions are currently accredited to provide full-time self-financing sub-degree and degree (including top-up degree) programmes in the 2013/14 academic year (Concourse for Self-financing Post-secondary Education 2015) (see Figure 1). In general, students admitted to these self-financing programmes have poorer grades in their DSE examination than those admitted to the publicly-funded institutions.

Figure 1: Post-secondary education participation rate (2001-2013)



Source: Concourse for Self-financing Post-secondary Education Education (<http://www.cspe.edu.hk/content/Statistics>)

Input Quality: Benchmarking with US Community Colleges

Quality is often assessed by input and outcome indicators. Staff qualification, staff-to-student ratio, and the grades of the admitted students are commonly used input indicators for tertiary education institutions. Three popular US community colleges from different parts of the country are selected to benchmark with the three largest Hong Kong community colleges using the above-mentioned indicators. Community colleges and Associate Degrees originate in USA — the first US public community college was founded in 1901. US community colleges educate close to 45% of all US post-secondary undergraduate students (roughly 13 million students). Presently, there are 1,173 community colleges in USA. In a review conducted by a special commission in 2012, the report concludes that "the nation can take pride in what America's community colleges have accomplished" (*21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 2012*). Benchmarking with these well-established US community colleges would shed light on the input quality of Hong Kong's community colleges. US data are taken from the website of the selected American colleges, and Hong Kong data are taken from the Hong Kong colleges' website as well as the Education Bureau portal (Information Portal for Accredited Post-secondary Programmes (IPASS) 2015).

Staff Qualifications: Table 1 shows that the three community colleges in Hong Kong tend to have a higher percentage of teaching staff with doctoral degrees than their US counterparts.

Table 1: Percentage of Teaching Staff with Doctoral Degree

Teaching Staff with Doctoral Degree (Hong Kong)	27%	30%	41%
Teaching Staff with Doctoral Degree (USA)	5%	20%	32%

Staffing Resources: Table 2 shows that while the community colleges in Hong Kong tend to be slightly worse-off in terms of teaching-staff-to-student ratio than their US counterparts, the difference is not great.

Table 2: Teaching Staff to Student Ratio

Staff to Student Ratio (Hong Kong)	1:26	1:27	1:35
Staff to Student Ratio (USA)	1:19	1:21	1:28

Students Entrance Requirements: Regarding the grades of students admitted, US community colleges generally have an open admission system, in which there are no specific entrance requirements. In Hong Kong, all community colleges have to be abided by the Hong Kong Government guidelines, requiring no less than 95 percent of the admittees to have at least five passes (level 2) including English, Chinese and Liberal Studies in the public examination — the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) Examination.

Output Quality: Articulation Rate, Academic Performance in four-year degree programmes, and Employers' views

Output quality is generally considered most important. For community colleges, output quality can be measured by articulation rate (the percentage of community college graduates transferred to bachelor's degree programmes), the academic performance of those articulated to bachelor's programmes, and the satisfaction of employers who employed the community college graduates.

Articulation Rate: Most Associate Degree students in Hong Kong aspire to articulate to a "senior-year place" in a UGC-funded institution. As the number of such places is limited, many also articulate to self-financing top-up degree programmes. Table 3 shows that community colleges in Hong Kong tend to have a higher articulation rate than their US counterparts.

Table 3: Graduation/Articulation Rate

Percentage of students graduated or transferred to a bachelor's degree programme (USA)	28%	49%	90%
Percentage of students articulated to a bachelor's degree programme (Hong Kong)	73%	74%	84%
Percentage of students articulated to a UGC-funded bachelor's degree programme (Hong Kong)	33%	32%	25%

Academic Performance After Articulation: Performance of associate degree graduates admitted to a "senior year" place in two UGC-funded universities ("University A" and "University B") is compared with the general student body with those admitted to a first-year-first degree (FYFD) place constituting the great majority. The performance of those admitted to top-up degree programmes offered by the self-financing arm of "University A" is also examined.

Table 4 shows that, based on four years' data, the grade point average (GPA) of associate degree graduates admitted to a UGC-funded "senior year place" after one year of their study is not lower, and often higher, than the "University A's" average GPA.

Table 4: Average GPA of Students with Associate Degree vs Average GPA of "University A"

	2011 Av GPA	2010 Av GPA	2009 Av GPA	2008 Av GPA
AD graduates (after 1 year)	2.96	2.91	3.04	2.93
University Average	2.93	2.95	2.95	2.92

Tables 5 and 6 compare, using data from two programmes from "University B", the Average GPA of students from community colleges admitted to a "senior year" place with those admitted directly from secondary schools to FYFD places in computer science and computer engineering respectively. Again the results show no significant difference.

Table 5: Average GPA of students from community college vs GPA of students admitted directly based on their Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE) results of "University B's" Computer Science programme

	Community College Students	DSE Yr 2's Students	DSE Yr 3's Students
#students	58	74	123
GPA Average	2.54	2.46	2.55

Table 6: Average GPA of students from community college vs GPA of students admitted directly based on their Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE) results of "University B's" Computer Engineering programme

	Community College Students	DSE Yr 2's Students	DSE Yr 3's Students
#students	39	20	22
GPA Average	2.39	2.69	2.42

Since UGC-funded senior year places admit the top 20 percent of students from community colleges, Table 7 examines the performance of students whose grades are not as good as those admitted to UGC-funded senior year places, but are admitted to top-up degree programmes offer by the self-financing arm of "University A". Table 7

shows the attrition rate is very low, indicating that most of the students still perform adequately to remain in the programme.

Table 7: Attrition Rate of Community College Students admitted to programmes offer by the Self-financing arm of "University A" after One Year

	2012 - 13	2011 - 12	2010 - 11	2009 - 10
BA Top-up programmes Student No.	2072	1966	1631	1114
Withdrawal	37	42	36	5
De-registration	11	15	21	12
Attrition rate	2%	3%	3%	1.5%

Table 8 presents the graduation classification of students in UGC-funded places in "University A". It shows that while graduates from community college tend to have less 1st Class honour students than the general student body, the percentage of community college graduates receiving 2nd Class Division I, 2nd Class Division II and 3rd Class honour are similar to the overall university percentages.

Table 8: Graduation Classification of University A

	2011		2010		2009	
	Students from Community College	ALL	Students from Community College	ALL	Students from Community College	ALL
1 st class	2%	9%	4%	9%	3%	8%
2 nd class I	51%	45%	37%	42%	43%	44%
2 nd class II	46%	44%	58%	47%	49%	46%
3 rd class	1%	1%	1%	1%	4%	2%

Employers' Views: The Education Bureau of the HKSAR conducts, on a regular basis, surveys on employers regarding the performance of graduates of tertiary education they employed (Education Bureau 2010a, Education Bureau 2010b). Employers were asked to assess the performance and attitude of the graduates including their Chinese language proficiency, English language proficiency, numerical competency, information technology literacy, analytical and problem-solving abilities, work attitude, interpersonal skills, management skills, and technical skills for the job. The survey on Publicly-funded First Degree Graduates shows that the average score for all nine aspects was above 3.0, with the overall score being 3.58 ("5" being "always exceeds expectation", and "1" being "always fails to meet expectation"). The percentage of employers who were "quite dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the performance of publicly funded degree graduate was 4 percent. The survey on Self-financing Sub-degree Graduates shows that the average score for all nine aspects was also above 3.0, with the overall score being 3.41, which is only slightly lower than that of the publicly-funded degree graduates. The percentage of employers who were "quite dissatisfied" or

"very dissatisfied" with the performance of self-financing sub-degree graduate was 8 percent, which is still low and is only slightly higher than the degree students, but not by a big margin.

Conclusions

The above analyses show that Hong Kong self-financing community colleges compare favourably with US community colleges — our teachers' qualifications are better; our staff-to-student ratios are comparable, our admission requirements are much more stringent; and our articulation rates are much better. US community colleges have been in existence for over one hundred years, and have been receiving heavy subsidies by their state and local governments. Hong Kong community colleges are relatively young institutions — all under twenty years old — and they receive no recurrent subsidies from government.

The above analyses also show that the graduates of these self-financing colleges perform well after graduation. For those got admitted to UGC-funded programmes, they perform just as well as the FYFD admittees in terms of grade point average and, to a large extent, graduation classifications. Those admitted to self-financing top-up degree programmes also perform well, and the great majority is able to graduate with a bachelor's degree. For each FYFD student admitted, the publicly funded university receives around \$200,000 each year from government through UGC. Self-financing institutions receive zero recurrent subsidy from government for their sub-degree programmes.

Furthermore, the above analyses show that employers are generally satisfied with the skills and attitude of self-financing sub-degree graduates. The employers' level of satisfaction towards them are only marginally lower than those of publicly-funded degree graduates, even though the programme that these graduates' went through is only one-half to two-thirds of a bachelor's degree programme.

The above refutes the allegations that quality of self-financed sub-degree programmes is poor, and that the prospect for graduates from these programmes is bleak, in terms of both further studies and employment.

All of the major self-financing institutions in Hong Kong operate on a non-profit basis. There are no private gains to be made by the operators. The institutions were established to support Government's lofty goal of expanding the tertiary education participation rate in Hong Kong. They have provided tens of thousands of additional tertiary education opportunities for Hong Kong secondary school leavers. Their graduates have contributed to Hong Kong's knowledge-based economy and society in no small way. All these have been achieved with little burden to Hong Kong taxpayers. Self-financing institutions in Hong Kong deserve much greater recognition than what they have hitherto received.

Acknowledgement:

The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Prof Peter Walters of PolyU-College of Professional & Continuing Education, for his assistance in the benchmarking exercise with US community colleges, and the contribution of Dr Anthony Loh of PolyU-Hong Kong Community College for his assistance in the analysis of the performance of associate degree graduates in UGC-funded institutions.

References

- 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (2012). *Reclaiming the American Dream, A Report from the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges*, Washington DC.
- Concourse for Self-financing Post-secondary Education (2015). <http://www.cspe.edu.hk/content/Statistics>
- Education and Manpower Bureau (2006). *Review of the Post-secondary Education Sector*, Hong Kong. http://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/about-edb/press/consultation/review_report.pdf
- Education and Manpower Bureau (2010a). *Survey of Employers on Major Aspects of Performance of Publicly-funded First Degree Graduates 2006*, Hong Kong.
- Education and Manpower Bureau (2010b). *Survey of Employers on Major Aspects of Performance of Sub-degree Graduates 2006*, Hong Kong.
- Headline Daily (2010). 自資副學士課程參差 86%老師指質素成疑, 頭條日報2010-06-21
- Ip Kin Yuen (葉建源) (2012). 自資副學士往哪裡去? 教協報 2012-12-10
- Ming Pao (2012). 自資副學士本地升學 明愛僅7% 中伸8%. 明報 2012-03 - 27
- QS (2013). *QS University Rankings*. <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings>