

The Development and Challenges of Self-financing Higher Education in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In order to enhance Hong Kong's position as an international metropolis, it is essential to improve its competitiveness through the cultivation of a skillful workforce. Continuing education plays a crucial role in this aspect, particularly top-up bachelor degree programmes, which provide articulation pathways for associate degree and higher diploma holders. In the light of limited provision of government-funded bachelor's degree places, a sizeable number of these graduates need to pursue their post-secondary education through self-financing tertiary institutions. Focusing on the development of the self-financing higher education sector in Hong Kong, we review different modes of operations for self-financing institutions and highlight the achievements by the self-financing higher education sector over the past ten years. We then identify and analyze the challenges that this sector is facing. We also provide some pointers on the future development of self-financing higher education in Hong Kong.

Key words: self-financing higher education, Hong Kong

Introduction

In the light of the changing manpower needs of a knowledge-based economy, the Hong Kong Government has formulated new educational strategies to cope with challenges posed by changes in population and economic structure. In early 2000, the Government has set the target of 60% participation rate of secondary school graduates in post-secondary education. This objective has been achieved in the middle of the decade, thanks to the rapid expansion of the self-financing post-secondary institutions, especially the sub-degree and degree providers. In 2005/2006, the participation rate has already reached 66% (Legislative Council Panel on Education, 2013). However, there was limited provision of government-funded bachelor's degree places, as compared to the number of academically qualified secondary school graduates (Chao Jr, 2013). In 2014, 79,000 secondary school graduates attended the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination. Nearly 28,000 achieved grades that met the admission criteria for a university degree, while only 12,500 of them could enroll in the government-funded degree programmes offered by eight universities in Hong Kong through the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) (Ta Kung Pao,

2014). Some of the HK DSE graduates joined the workforce, while others chose further study and eventually achieved their bachelor's degrees provided by overseas universities and local self-financing institutions. These self-financing institutions took up the responsibility of providing more opportunities for young people to continue their education. In 2012/2013, a total of 6,800 students pursued bachelor's degrees through locally accredited self-financing degree programmes (Legislative Council Panel on Education, 2013). It showed that the self-financing higher education sector of Hong Kong has come of age over the years.

Modes of operation in self-financing higher education sector in Hong Kong

At the moment, different universities, colleges and institutions offer self-financing higher education programmes. The self-financing higher education sector primarily consists of three different components:

- a) Publicly funded higher education institutions that offer self-financing post-secondary programmes primarily through their self-financing continuing and professional education arms or member institutions under their aegis. There are currently ten publicly funded statutory institutions, including the eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded institutions, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts and the Vocational Training Council (Legislative Council Panel on Education, 2012).
- b) Self-financing post-secondary institutions including approved post-secondary colleges registered under the Post-Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap.320) and the Open University of Hong Kong, which is a statutory institution operating on a self-financing basis. There are currently six approved post-secondary colleges, including the Hong Kong Shue Yan University, Chu Hai College of Higher Education, Hang Seng Management College, Tung Wah College, Caritas Institute of Higher Education and Centennial College (Legislative Council Panel on Education, 2012).
- c) Operators of self-financing locally accredited post-secondary programmes and non-local programmes. Institutions such as the Hong Kong College of Technology, Hong Kong Institute of Technology and Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) are offering locally accredited post-secondary programmes. There are around 1200 non-local courses being registered or exempted under the Non-local High and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance (Cap.493) (Legislative Council Panel on Education, 2012).

Hong Kong Government's support for the self-financing higher education sector

Quality assurance in the self-financing higher education sector

Quality assurance is instrumental in upholding standards, promoting accountability

and fostering improvement. The Government attaches great importance to the quality of higher education programmes offered by both UGC-funded and self-financing institutions. To enhance the capabilities and competitiveness of the local workforce and ensure sustainable manpower development amidst a rapidly changing world, the Hong Kong Government established a seven-level cross-sectoral Qualifications Framework (QF) and its associated quality assurance mechanism, which clearly defined the standards of different qualifications and encouraged lifelong learning (Education Bureau, 2014). To ensure the credibility of qualifications awarded by a wide range of education and training providers under the QF, the Government has developed a robust mechanism of academic and vocational accreditation to assure the quality of these qualifications. Currently, there are three quality assurance bodies in Hong Kong to monitor the quality of the post-secondary education sector.

- a) The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is a statutory body responsible for the quality assurance of all operators and programmes except the UGC-funded institutions, which enjoy self-accrediting status. It is specified as the Accreditation Authority and the Qualifications Register (QR) Authority. It has the responsibility of assuring the quality of qualifications recognized under the QF and the administration of the QR (Education Bureau, 2014).
- b) The Quality Assurance Council (QAC) is a semi-autonomous non-statutory body under the aegis of the UGC to conduct quality audits of UGC-funded institutions and programmes offered at undergraduate level and above, however funded (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2008).
- c) The Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC) was established by the Heads of Universities Committee to provide peer review of the quality assurance processes of self-financing sub-degree programmes offered by the UGC-funded institutions. JQRC has three functions, including quality assurance of self-financing sub-degree programmes offered by eight universities, helping with the implementation of the QF by the Government and increasing the quality of self-financing programmes (Wen Wei Po, 2014).

In order to unify the quality assurance institutions for Hong Kong's post-secondary education sector, the UGC report suggested that the above three quality assurance bodies be incorporated into one unit (University Grants Committee, 2010). In its report, the UGC has highlighted the need for the establishment of a single quality assurance body that is capable of integrating and rationalizing the approaches of quality assurance across the entire system (University Grants Committee, 2010). According to the chairman of JQRC, the "three in one" model was still under discussion by the Education Bureau and the UGC with no firm conclusion as yet. One possible scenario is the establishment of two separate quality assurance bodies, one for independent self-financing institutions and another for university-affiliated self-financing institutions (Wen Wei Po, 2014).

Provision of Government support to the self-financing higher education sector

On 1 April, 2012, the Hong Kong Government set up a self-financing higher education committee, that is, Committee on Self-financing Post-secondary Education, to monitor the rapidly developing self-financing higher education sector, and to advise the Secretary for Education. The Hong Kong Government has also put in place a series of schemes to support the healthy and sustainable development of the self-financing higher education sector, particularly those institutions offering full-time locally accredited post-secondary programmes, which complement the UGC-funded universities in broadening and diversifying study opportunities (Legislative Council Panel on Education, 2012).

- a) Land Grant Scheme - The scheme provides land or vacant school premises at nominal premium to self-financing non-profit-making post-secondary institutions for the construction or renovation of college premises.
- b) Start-up Loan Scheme - The scheme provides interest-free loans to self-financing non profit-making post-secondary institutions in support of the development of college premises and re-provisioning of existing premises operating in a sub-optimal environment.
- c) Quality Enhancement Grant Scheme - The scheme supports projects/initiatives dedicated to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning of self-financing programmes.
- d) Self-financing Higher Education Fund - A \$2.5 billion fund was established in November 2011 to provide scholarships to outstanding students pursuing full-time locally accredited self-financing sub-degree or bachelor degree programmes, and supports worthwhile initiatives and schemes to enhance and assure the quality of self-financing higher education.
- e) Qualifications Framework Support Schemes (QFSS) - As part of Government's efforts to support the development of the QF, QFSS encourages and assists education providers in seeking accreditation of their programmes and registering the qualifications and programmes on the QR.
- f) Research Funding - The Government has earmarked \$3 billion in the Research Endowment Fund to support self-financing degree sector in enhancing its academic and research development. After two phases of consultation, a total of eleven institutions offering locally accredited degree courses were included. In Phase I which began in 2012, seven institutions were included: Caritas Institute of Higher Education, Centennial College, Chu Hai College of Higher Education, Hang Seng Management College, Hong Kong Shue Yan University, the Open University of Hong Kong and Tung Wah College. In Phase II consultation exercise, four remaining institutions were included: Hong Kong Baptist University-School of Continuing Education, Hong Kong Nang Yan College of

Higher Education, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University-School of Professional Education and Executive Development and the Vocational Training Council-Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (University Grants Committee, 2014a).

- g) Student Finance - The Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) provides means-tested and non-means-tested financial assistance for students in the self-financing post-secondary sectors.
- h) Information Portals - The Government has launched a dedicated website known as the Information Portal for Accredited Post-secondary Programmes "iPASS" since 2007 to enhance the transparency of the self-financing post-secondary sector and for easy access of information by members of the community.
- i) Study Subsidy Scheme for Designated Professions/Sectors (SSSDP) - On 24 July, 2014, the Government announced on the launch of a new subsidy scheme to subsidize up to 1000 students per cohort starting from the 2015/16 academic year to pursue designated full-time locally accredited self-financing undergraduate programmes in selected disciplines to nurture talent to meet Hong Kong's social and economic needs (Hong Kong Government, 2014).

Achievements by the Hong Kong self-financing higher education sector

The Hong Kong self-financing higher education sector has seen a series of achievements over the past ten years.

Significant increase in the post-secondary participation rate in Hong Kong

The post-secondary participation rate in Hong Kong, reflecting further higher education opportunities for secondary school graduates (the 17 to 20 age group) has increased significantly. Due to the vigorous development of sub-degree sector, the post-secondary participation rate in Hong Kong doubled within five years, from 33% in 2000/2001 to 66% in 2005/2006. As the market stabilized, the participation rate has remained at a level slightly above 60% since 2006/2007 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2008). This indicated that the target set by the Hong Kong Government in 2000 has been achieved. Meanwhile, places for self-financing bachelor's degree in Hong Kong increased from zero in 2000/2001 to 3,056 in 2009/2010 (see Table 1). In 2012/2013, there were 7,900 full-time locally accredited self-financing degree places and 6,800 students studied in these local self-financing degree programmes (Education Bureau, 2013). It showed that these self-financing degree programmes still have capacity to meet the demand from qualified secondary school graduates. Starting from 2016, there will be 8,000 places for self-financing degree programmes each year (see Table 2). The Government expects that more than one third of secondary school graduates will have the opportunity to enroll in bachelor's degree programmes in the future (Education Bureau, 2013).

Table 1: Supply and Actual Intakes of Full-time Self-financing Bachelor's Degree Programmes from 2000/2001 to 2009/2010

	2000 / 2001	2001 / 2002	2002 / 2003	2003 / 2004	2004 / 2005	2005 / 2006	2006 / 2007	2007 / 2008	2008 / 2009	2009 / 2010
No. of places	–	245	490	958	1922	2550	2465	2960	3180	3056
No. of Intakes	–	285	605	1030	1353	1527	2033	2468	3004	2798

Source: University Grants Committee (2010), *Aspirations for the Higher Education System in Hong Kong - Report of the University Grants Committee, December*.

Table 2: Supply and Demand in the Coming Years: Post-secondary Education

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
No. of Eligible Graduates								
HKALE (attain pass in 1 A Level/ 2 AS Level)	27300	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
HKDSE (attain 5 "Level 2", including Chinese and English, or better)	47800	49000	46000	44000	40000	37000	37000	34000
HKDSE (attain core subjects at 3322 or better)	26400	27000	26000	24000	22000	21000	21000	19000
No of Places								
<i>Undergraduate Programmes</i>								
Publicly-funded	30300	15200	15200	15200	15200	15200	15200	15200
Self-financing	7900	7200	7100	7500	8000	8000	8000	8000
<i>Sub-degree Programmes</i>								
Publicly-funded	10900	10000	10000	10000	10000	10000	10000	10000
Self-financing	32600	29000	24500	24300	24100	24100	24100	24100
Total Post-secondary Intake places	81700	61400	56800	57000	57300	57300	57300	57300

Note: The estimates have not taken into account non-HKDSE graduates (e.g. International school graduates and students returning from overseas), graduates pursuing further studies overseas and repeating S6.

Source: Education Bureau (2013), *Self-financing Post-secondary Education Programmes, EDB (FE) 1/12/2041/00, August*.

Providing young people with a platform for their personal development and increasing the opportunity for upward mobility of talented youth

Social mobility can be loosely defined as the ability of individuals or groups to move upwards or downwards in a social hierarchy, based on changes in wealth, occupation and education (Ng, 2013). According to the Chinese University survey released in March 2013, 43.6% people foresee that upward social mobility will become more difficult in the next decade (Ng, 2013). Under such an ever-changing economic environment, higher education qualifications will help young people pursue better future careers. The self-financing higher education sector broadens the choices for further education and offers quality, diversified and flexible pathways for young people, thereby providing them with more opportunities to move up the social ladder (Education Bureau, 2013). Results from research using census data on earnings mobility in Hong Kong showed that there has been a remarkable improvement in terms

of upward mobility opportunities for degree holders, who have maintained their relative advantage in the age bracket of 31-35. Beginning in 2011, upward mobility showed an improvement for all cohorts at the higher income end among degree holders and the mobility ratios of degree holders born after 1980 were higher than almost all of the earlier cohorts (Ho, Huang and Wei, 2013).

Upgrading the quality of human resources and improving the global competitiveness of Hong Kong

The quality of manpower is the key in shaping the competitiveness of a society. Hong Kong has already been transformed into a service-oriented economy, which places a lot of emphasis on high technology and creativity. If the ratio of degree holders among Hong Kong's population increases, Hong Kong's global competitiveness will be enhanced. The self-financing higher education sector, which provides people with various opportunities in continuous and professional education as well as lifelong learning experiences facilitates the further development of higher education and increases the diversity of higher education in Hong Kong. It plays a vital role in upgrading the quality of human resources in Hong Kong and broadening the knowledge structure as well as increasing the academic qualification level of the people. It also makes great contribution to Hong Kong's further development as a regional education hub (Education Bureau, 2013).

Challenges facing the self-financing higher education sector

Nevertheless, the Hong Kong self-financing higher education sector faces a series of problems and challenges.

Heavy financial burden

a) High operating cost

Although some self-financing higher education institutions receive loans guaranteed by the Government to construct buildings for teaching and learning, the cost for construction and daily maintenance of the buildings is very high. Dean of College of Professional and Continuing Education, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University mentioned that the institutions have found it difficult to pay off the loan with the sole source coming from the tuition fee which cannot be increased periodically as it would lead to negative publicity (Chan, 2015).

UGC-funded universities receive support from the Government of approximately HK\$200,000 per student, while self-financing institutions depend on tuition fees to pay for salaries for academic and administrative staff and to build and maintain the daily operation of libraries, gymnasias and computer labs, etc. The tuition fee for self-financing institutions is around HK\$60,000 per year, which cannot cover the cost. Meanwhile, extra-curricular activities also face a shortage of funds. In addition, it is not easy to recruit talented lecturers. Attracting talents and ensuring good teaching quality

also requires financial support. As the tuition fees charged are relatively low, the Open University of Hong Kong faced heavy financial pressure in its operations. In order to cover the cost, they adopt a tuition fee lock-in-system (The Open University of Hong Kong, 2014).

b) High entry barrier for accreditation of qualifications

HKCAAVQ and Cap.320, the authoritative assessment mechanisms for post-secondary education, charge self-financing institutions relatively high fees for qualifications accreditation and require a long accreditation process. These increased the entry barrier for self-financing higher education institutions. Those self-financing institutions, which cannot afford to pay for accreditation of qualification, will not receive proper recognition from society.

The long accreditation process also imposed high barriers for self-financing institutions to pursue further development. After two rounds of accreditation process, it would take those institutions ten years to become accredited self-financing universities (Ta Kung Pao, 2011). Some institutions have cancelled certain programmes as they have not received accreditation on time. Members from HKU SPACE and Hang Seng Management College showed their concerns that such a policy will hinder the development of those institutions which seek to be upgraded to private universities (Ta Kung Pao, 2011).

Quality assurance and award recognition issues

a) Problems in teaching quality and inadequacies in curriculum design

There were concerns about teaching quality and issues of over-recruitment of some self-financing institutions (Hong Kong Commercial Daily, 2013; Hong Kong Economic Journal, 2013; Oriental Daily News, 2010; Oriental Daily News, 2013a; Oriental Daily News, 2013b; The Sun, 2010a). Hong Kong Association of Career Masters and Guidance Masters expressed its concern to the Legislative Council Panel of Education on the quality assurance issue of the self-financing higher education sector (Legislative Council Panel of Education, 2013c). They indicated that in 2012, some institutions had recruited 50% or 60% more students than they original planned. Given the limited resource in terms of classrooms, campus space and facilities as well as qualified lecturers for these self-financing institutions, it is difficult for them to maintain the teaching standard without sacrificing the quality (Legislative Council Panel of Education, 2013c). The president of Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union questioned the quality of self-financing institutions. He queried how self-financing institutions with HK\$60,000 annual tuition fee can afford to achieve the same teaching quality as those UGC-funded universities with HK\$200,000 from the Government do (Sing Tao Daily, 2013b).

In addition, the curriculum design of some self-financing institutions may not match the human resource development needs of Hong Kong, leading to a result that

their programmes do not meet the current demands of society. This situation influences the employability of graduates from those self-financing institutions, which in turn, affects the image of the self-financing higher education sector. At the Seminar on Closer Alignment between Post-secondary Education Institutions and Industries, Dean of School of Business, Hang Seng Management College, pointed out that the critical issue was how to integrate industry requirements with the curriculum design. Currently, communications between educational institutions and industries existed only among certain organizations and not among different industries (Wen Wei Po, 2013). The convenor of Education and Training Sub-committee of Banking Industry Training Advisory Committee also mentioned that there were relatively weak alignments and communications between educational institutions and industries. The curriculum from education institutions focusing on generic banking & finance knowledge should reflect the real world which emphasizes technical and soft skills. There were few dialogues between institutions and the industry on knowledge, skills and attributes that banks require. Therefore, institutions encountered practical difficulties in meeting industry needs (Lin, 2013).

b) Lack of recognition on self-financing awards by the society

Increase in the number of self-financing institutions in Hong Kong has led to questions about the quality issues and the qualification of a degree seemed to be devalued (Sing Tao Daily, 2013c). The lack of recognition on self-financing qualifications from students and parents has become a perennial issue. Compared with UGC-funded degree awards, people's perception towards self-financing awards may not be the same (Sky Post, 2012). The media's coverage of difficulties in employability and limited articulation rate for associate degree graduates as well as quality issues may lead to a low level of recognition from the society on self-financing awards (Chan, 2015). The former president of Hang Seng Management College stated that even if the college becomes a private university, it will be considered as a second-tier institution (Sky Post, 2012). It is essential for self-financing institutions to enhance the recognition of their awards by students, parents, employers and the society, through ensuring good teaching quality and achieving better student employability.

c) Questionable quality assurance process

Some members of the public questioned about the reliability of the quality assurance assessment of self-financing institutions affiliated to the UGC-funded universities, as these institutions are normally self-accredited by the related universities (The Sun, 2010a; The Sun, 2010b; Oriental Daily News, 2010), although these self-financing institutions are also under external audit (Wen Wei Po, 2014). Representatives from the eight UGC-funded universities may tend to favour programmes from their own universities in the JQRC review process (The Sun, 2010a). As the UGC-funded universities have self-accreditation qualification, the control of their affiliated self-financing institutions by the quality assurance institutions may be less compared with those institutions without such a background (Oriental Daily News,

2010). It seems that relying on the self-regulation of institutions is not an effective way to monitor the quality (Sing Tao Daily, 2012). More independent assessments by the third party should be used in the quality assurance process (Hong Kong Commercial Daily, 2013).

Problems in the internationalization process for the self-financing higher education sector

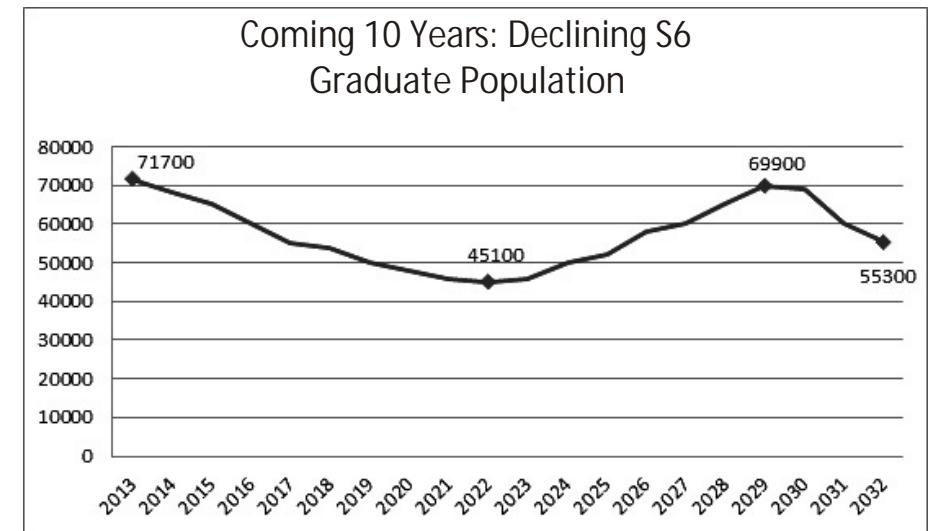
a) Low level of internationalization development

The UGC highlighted in its report that internationalization should be one of the central themes of all UGC-funded universities (University Grants Committee, 2014b). An integral part of internationalization is the plan of the Hong Kong Government to develop Hong Kong into a 'regional education hub' which was first proposed by the Executive Council in October 2007. As an international city and an open economy, Hong Kong has what it takes to be an education hub. Hong Kong's education services are diversified, its educational programmes and academic qualifications are internationally recognized, and as it has established close ties with Mainland China, coupled with our background as a meeting point of East and West, these are favourable conditions which we can capitalize in the quest to become an education hub. Since the promulgation of this policy goal, the progress has been haphazard without noticeable achievements. According to a recent paper (Mok, et al., 2013), Hong Kong is a latecomer in getting on the bandwagon of developing itself into an education hub. The reasons are manifold: including lack of a clear policy goal on the part of the Government, lack of underpinning policies such as provision of land and tax incentives to attract top-ranked overseas universities, restrictive quota on admission of non-local students, and publicly funded universities have reached limits of growth and do not have capacity to admit more non-local students. Although there may be room for self-financed institutions to play a role in the development of the education hub, for example by collaborating with overseas institutions to offer joint awards, the lack of a clear policy direction from the Hong Kong Government has put a spanner in the works.

b) Shortage of local secondary school graduates pursuing post-secondary study

In the next decade, there will be a problem of a shortage of local secondary school graduates who will have the need for further studies in universities and colleges. The demand for post-secondary education in Hong Kong will reduce as the school-age population declines. In accordance with the relevant projection, by 2022, the number of Hong Kong secondary school students of the right age will reduce from 71,700 in 2013 to 45,100 (see Figure 1). In the long run, the Hong Kong Government needs to find ways to help the self-financing higher education sector to actively expand and recruit more students locally and internationally, so as to make Hong Kong an education hub with sustainable competitiveness.

Figure 1: Coming 10 Years: Declining S6 Graduate Population



Notes: 1. For the coming 11 years (i.e. from the 2013/14 to 2023/24 academic years), the projected figures of S6 students in public sector schools are based on actual number of P1 to S5 enrolment at each grade at present. 2. Projected figures of S6 graduates beyond 2023 are based on projected enrolment with reference to official population projections and our projections of cross-boundary students. These projections are subject to uncertainty on their assumption in particular the rate and time of return of Type II babies.

Source: Education Bureau (2013), *Self-financing Post-secondary Education Programmes*, EDB(FE)1/12/2041/00, August.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the self-financing higher education sector in Hong Kong has reached a mature state of development which will enable it to maintain its sustainable competitive edge through enhancement of the teaching quality and the promotion of internationalization with the government support in terms of increased resources and better quality assurance. Looking ahead, the following issues will be of overarching importance which will shape the further development of the self-financing higher education sector.

1) The Hong Kong Government should provide more resources to support the development of the self-financing higher education sector.

The Government should provide more resources and formulate effective measures to create opportunities and support the development of the self-financing higher education sector. For example, the Government can help the construction of student hostels, or provide jointly built dormitories and off-campus hostels to offer more living places to attract non-local students studying in self-financing institutions. In order to improve the teaching quality, the Government should support the training of local talents to engage in high quality teaching, while at the same time, actively attract good lecturers internationally to come to Hong Kong to teach and conduct research.

2) Self-financing higher education institutions should design appropriate curriculum to meet the needs of society and enhance the teaching quality.

Self-financing higher education institutions should conduct in-depth research to understand the current needs of society and engage employers and professional bodies to participate in the curriculum design so that it will fit in with the industry needs (Education Bureau, 2013). Meanwhile, these institutions should improve the quality of teaching and increase extra-curricular activity opportunities for students, therefore enhancing graduates' employability and their overall quality. Graduates then can successfully find a job and make contributions to the community.

3) The Hong Kong Government should promote the development of internationalization of the self-financing higher education to strengthen Hong Kong's position as a regional education hub.

In order to strengthen Hong Kong's position as a regional education hub, the self-financing higher education service should be competitive and among the top level in terms of quality, effectiveness and reputation (University Grants Committee, 2010). The Government should continue to engage in promoting the development of the self-financing post-secondary sector towards internationalization and diversification, with a view to developing a skillful workforce to support the economic development and enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong. For example, to attract non-local students to study self-financing programmes and work in Hong Kong after graduation, the Government can provide more scholarships for non-local students and relax the regulations regarding immigration and employment (Cheng, Cheung and Yuen, 2011). The development of internationalization of the self-financing higher education sector in Hong Kong will help improve the quality of the population, which will contribute to the development of various industries and enhance the power to building a competitive knowledge-based economy (University Grants Committee, 2010).

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