4 VALIDATION OF PROGRAMMES

Validation

Purpose and method

Programme validation is a process carried out within the tertiary institutions themselves (internal) and by the HKCAA (external) whereby a proposed programme is examined against criteria related to academic standards and to the aims of the programme.

The objectives of programme validation for both the institution and the validation body are to

(a)   establish that the academic standards of the programme are equivalent to those of comparable degree programmes in Hong Kong and elsewhere; and

(b)   assist the institution and the course team to improve all aspects of the programme.

Both internal and external validation processes are means whereby those responsible for teaching the programme (the programme team) can make improvements to the proposed programme. This may occur by

(a)   challenging and stimulating the programme team through discussion to clarify aspects of the existing or proposed programme;

(b)   encouraging the team in the development of new areas of curriculum and teaching methods, and in areas of scholarly activity which help to develop and improve the programme; and

(c) bringing to the attention of the team good practices elsewhere and new developments in curricula and teaching methods.

The institutions themselves carry out internal programme validation, cognisant of the fact that they should establish, maintain and improve the standards of their programmes, as part of their responsibility as academic institutions. The most common mechanism is to have the programme team refine its proposal in response to such interaction with a group of academic peers and others as described above.

The external validation process is conducted by the HKCAA consulting appropriately qualified academics (from Hong Kong and overseas) usually including one from the institution itself, and local lay people. Information on the programme (see page 17) is considered by the HKCAA and its experts, eventually a panel convenes in Hong Kong to meet the programme team, students and senior staff of the institution, and such other people as are deemed appropriate. This process generally is a continuation of the internal validation. In certain cases, following the scrutiny of documents and consultation, the HKCAA may decide that a meeting or visit to the institution is unnecessary. In some cases, the local members of the panel and the HKCAA staff may convene a brief meeting with appropriate staff of the institution. A formal report is produced after the visit and submitted to the commissioning body.

Principal issues to be considered in programme validation

The main matters considered by HKCAA validation panels are as follows:

(a) *Academic Staff:* The general authority, intellectual level and scholarly and professional standing of the teaching staff within their academic discipline as demonstrated, *inter alia*, by their research and subject strengths, articles, refereed papers, consultancy and any other contributions to their profession.

(b) *Programme Structure:* The structure and content of the programme, its coherence and progression, the level of the intellectual challenge to students, its success in meeting its stated aims, the currency of its contents and its relevance to good professional practice.

(c) *Learning and Assessment:* The effectiveness of the learning process, the quality of teaching and the performance of students as measured by course work, laboratory work, design studies, projects, formal examinations and other forms of assessment.

(d) *Facilities and Support:* The level of academic, technical and other non-academic staff support, of resource provision and of facilities provided for the programme.

(e) *Quality Assurance:* The monitoring, critical evaluation and maintenance of the standards of the programme by the institution.

(f) *Staff Development:* The policies for and practice of staff development, the professional activity of staff, the potential for future development and training and the quality of programme leadership and management.

Information requirements for programme validation

The HKCAA expects to receive the following information about a proposed programme:

(a) Confirmation that

(i) any necessary administrative approval to offer the programme has been granted; and

(ii) the proposed programme has the support of the Academic Board and the Council of the institution.

(b) Basic data relating to the programme, such as the title of the programme, its awards, admission requirements, length, mode and pattern of attendance.

(c) Rationale and objectives of the programme, including, for example, whether the programme is intended to achieve professional recognition.

(d) Relevant background information; the philosophy and context of the programme in terms of institutional policies and plans and of local demands.

(e) The programme specification, covering

   (i) curriculum, including content and structure of the programme, showing relationships between its units or modules;

   (ii) details of the syllabus and teaching methods for each element or unit of the programme; and

   (iii) the student experience, including the total student workload , balance of lectures, tutorials, laboratory/studio work, etc., periods of supervised work experience, and any special learning methods.

(f) Assessment details, including any special patterns of assessment, and regulations for the progression of students through the programme.

(g) Details of programme organization and staffing to include

   (i) a list of the teaching, technical and administrative staff to be involved in the programme, with details of new posts or vacant posts to be filled;

   (ii) brief curricula vitae of the academic staff who will be involved, including qualifications, teaching, research, consultancy and other scholarly activity relevant to the programmes; and

   (iii) the constitution and operation of the programme committee and its relation with the academic policy-making organization of the institution.

(h) The resources, covering

   (i) the capital and revenue budget proposed for the support of the programme in the institutional context;

   (ii) library, computing and other relevant supporting provision ; and

   (iii) information on any special accommodation requirements and major items of equipment.

(i) Any additional relevant information, such as

   (i) programme book lists indicating the range of reading considered essential and/or recommended to students;

(ii) where relevant, any requirements for the selection of project topics, provisions for supervision and requirements for submission of projects which are not detailed in the programme assessment regulations; and

(iii) any relevant information on related programmes (such as student performance or employers' comments).

Outcome of validation

A programme validation panel prepares a report on the programme considered. The report may recommend that

(a) the programme should be approved as presented;

(b) the programme should be approved with conditions to be met and/ or with recommendations to be taken into account; or

(c) the programme should not be approved.

The most common outcome is (b). Non-approval (c) is rare as the HKCAA discourages institutions to submit programmes until they have a good chance of approval. In general, as there is close liaison between the HKCAA and the institution, the HKCAA and the institutions are able to modify the timescale of a validation exercise to seek the best possible outcome.

If a programme is approved, a date for revalidation (typically after 6 years, but sometimes earlier) is also specified.

The report of the validation is presented to the commission body that invoked the services of the HKCAA.

If a programme is approved subject to the meeting of certain conditions, mechanisms are specified for the monitoring of these conditions. The HKCAA normally takes the responsibility for checking the fulfilment of conditions specified by HKCAA panels.

If a programme is not approved, the panel provides reasons for this decision, usually with suggestions for amendment or further development of the programme proposal.

Programme Amendments

Once a programme has been successfully validated, it is expected that there will be evolutionary changes within the period of approval. Indeed, there would be considerable concern, on a revalidation visit, if there were no signs of progress and development of a programme. Modifications would, however, be expected to maintain the spirit of the programme as approved. Such modifications could be in response to feedback from students, or to changes in the content or techniques of the discipline.

An institution should inform the HKCAA (and the relevant funding body) if it proposes to make any of the following changes to a programme:

(a) a change in the title of a programme or award;

(b) changes in the mode of attendance or the length of a programme;

(c) a change from an ordinary to an honours degree;

(d) addition of options and/or streams; or

(e)   significant reduction in provision of resources (staff, finance or equipment) for the programme.

If significant changes are to be made to the structure or content of a programme which result in its becoming a radically different programme to that originally validated, the institution is also advised to declare this to the HKCAA (and to the relevant funding body).

Revalidation

Purpose and method

A revalidation exercise, again using an external panel, normally takes place within six years of the date of the original validation, when the programme team and the institution have had actual experience of the operation of the whole of the programme. Revalidation after a shorter period may be a condition stipulated by a previous validation or revalidation exercise.

The purpose of revalidation is essentially the same as validation, but with the benefit of some years of implementation of the programme in coming to an opinion on the academic standards of the programme. Revalidation involves an assessment of the following points:

(a)   whether the programme as validated has been successfully implemented;

(b)   any conditions and recommendations specified on the advice of the validating panel;

(c)   whether standards have been attained and recognized by other parties, such as external examiners, employers and relevant professional bodies;

(d)   whether the programme has met its identified aims;

(e)   whether all the previously expressed aspirations and ambitions have been fulfilled;

(f)   whether the programme has developed appropriately since validation;

(g)   how the institution has monitored the programme and maintained its standards at a level comparable with international expectations for such programmes; and

(h)   whether the institution is able to continue to provide an environment in which the programme can flourish.

Revalidation focuses upon an active programme, its academic health and its relationship with the community. The revalidation panel and the programme team discuss how the programme might in future develop more fully to meet its aims, the demand of employers and the local community and how to ensure the continued maintenance of its standards.

The programme team's appraisal report on its perception of the operation and development of the programme, and its strengths and weaknesses, forms the central theme in a revalidation exercise. The institution may propose changes and improvements to the programme based on its experience and evaluation, and its perception of changing community needs. These are documented for the HKCAA.

5   REVIEW OF INSTITUTIONS

Institutional Reviews

Purpose and method

An institutional review is a review of the academic and general standards of an institution. For degree-granting institutions, the overall purposes of such reviews are related to ascertaining whether the actual (or potential) academic environment is (or will be) suitable for implementing degree programmes which have (or will have) standards comparable with those recognized internationally. For non-degree granting institutions, such as sub degree or post secondary institutions, the overall purpose of a review is to ascertain whether the academic and institutional environment is suitable for maintaining their programmes at internationally comparable standards.

Thus an institutional review must be appropriate to the institution and its current stage of development. The review could be intended to advise a non-degree-awarding institution on its general standards and the standard of its programmes; or to advise it on appropriate steps towards degree-awarding status, or to comment on whether the institution has already reached such a stage. For another institution that already awards degrees, the review may be intended simply to ascertain whether the institution is continuing to maintain this standard. Alternatively, the review may be intended to assess the institution's readiness to take full responsibility for the standards of its own programmes (institutional accreditation); or it may be an occasional review of an institution that already has this responsibility, having regard to its quality assurance processes and its ability to maintain a suitable academic environment.

Institutional reviews are conducted by the HKCAA on the assumption that the institution is involved in a continual process of self-review. This self-evaluation leads the institution to a greater knowledge and understanding of itself, which may well result in a revision of its goals and activities. The external review then enables the institution's own evaluation of its aims, processes and performance to be scrutinized externally. It also provides an opportunity for an institution and an external peer group to share their experiences of institutional practices and developments, and (where relevant) permits the HKCAA to consider the institution's progression towards degree-awarding status, or institutional accreditation. In conducting an institutional review, the HKCAA also brings to bear the knowledge that it has gained through working with the institution.

An institutional review is conducted by the HKCAA using a panel of appropriately qualified academics (from Hong Kong and overseas) and local lay people. In consultation with the HKCAA, the institution prepares a submission based on its self-evaluation. This is considered by the HKCAA and forms the basis for discussion and interaction during a visit of the panel. At the institution, the panel consults the senior staff, and makes whatever other investigations it deems appropriate.

Principal issues to be considered in an institutional review

The main matters considered by the HKCAA are:

(a) *Institutional Structure:* Is the institution an academic community? Are there opportunities for staff and students to contribute to the formation of academic policy? Can the priorities between various institutional activities be successfully determined and action initiated?

(b) *Government and Management:* What is the committee structure? What are the committees' terms of reference and policies? Is the academic board effective in guiding academic policies? Are the committees and boards properly accountable? Is the management structure effective? Does the institution have adequate processes for internal review?

(c) *Programme Development and Design:* Are the academic staff able to make a full contribution to the design and development of programmes? Does programme development benefit from the research and consultancy work done by the staff?

(d) *The Development of New Work:* Is there adequate management information and employment data? Is there an intelligent and integrated approach to academic and resource decisions? Is academic planning responsive to the changes in institutional profile and educational philosophy and *vice versa*?

(e) *Academic Staff:* What is the quality of the teaching staff and how is it monitored and maintained? How do the staff respond to subject and programme developments? What are the expectations of the staff for development? Do the staff provide a stimulus for student learning?

(f) *Scholarly Activity:* Does the institutional environment encourage scholarly activity, including research and innovation? What is the staff's record in this respect as indicated by, for example, level of research grants, publication in international journals, acquisition of patents, etc? Does the environment encourage consultancy and collaboration with industry in research and development work? What is the extent of such activity?

(g) *Students:* Is the environment suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate teaching? Are the learning resources and teaching methods appropriate? How are the students selected for entry to the institution and programmes? How are they guided in relation to their academic programmes? What are the standards of student counselling, medical care, accommodation, and recreational and other communal facilities?

(h) *Programme Evaluation and Standards:* Is there regular monitoring of programmes? Are validation and revalidation procedures and mechanisms employed? Are they adequate and are they properly applied? Are appropriate standards set for programmes and are these standards achieved? How is student assessment carried out? What criteria and methods of assessment are employed?

(i) *Quality Assurance:* Are there institutional policies and processes for monitoring the quality of the institution's educational provisions and the effectiveness of its operation? Are there processes and systems for the setting of objectives, for regular review and for institutional change? Are there processes for collating feedback from staff, employees and students and do processes exist for action to be taken and results to be monitored?

(j) *Resources:* Are the present and planned resources (fiscal, support staff, accommodation, equipment, furniture, books, software, etc.) realistic? Do they match the future development of the institution? Is resource administration and management of an appropriate standard? Are there suitable research facilities?

(k) *New Technology:* Does the institution take sufficient account of new technologies?

(l) *Collaboration:* Does the institution actively seek and exploit collaborative teaching and research with industry, and local and overseas institutions?

(m) *Past Reviews:* Has the institution taken account of advice given or recommendations made following past reviews?

Based on this general list, the HKCAA draws up a set of guidelines specifically related to the institution under review and to the terms of reference of the review.

Information required for institutional reviews

The documentation provided by the institution is expected to include the following:

(a) the institution's self-evaluation;

(b) previous institutional review documents, if any, with details of how any specified conditions have been met;

(c) academic development proposals;

(d) academic regulations;

(e) committee handbooks;

(f) lists of selected publications of institution's staff; and

(g) report on academic support facilities.

The precise form and content of the information for institutional reviews varies more than that for programme reviews, as it is determined by the nature and goals of the institution and its stage of development.

Outcome of institutional review

Based on the findings of an institutional review panel the HKCAA prepares a report on the institution considered. Depending on the terms of reference of a review the report may conclude that the institution

(a)   has a suitable academic environment for conducting programmes at the sub-degree/post secondary level; or

(b)   is ready to introduce degree level programmes; or

(c)   is not yet ready to mount programmes at degree level (such an outcome would normally be accompanied by conditions and/or recommendations on appropriate measures that could be taken by the institution to move towards this goal); or

(d)   continues to have the ability to sustain a suitable environment to maintain an appropriate degree standard (but its programmes will be validated and revalidated externally); or

(e)   is ready to be accredited (and take full responsibility to validate and revalidate its degree programmes); or

(f)   continues to have accredited status (and will be subject only to occasional institutional review).

The report of the review is presented to the body that sponsored it for the decisions on the actions to be taken as a result of the review. The review would also normally be the subject of consideration and action by the HKCAA and the institution. Such action would include the monitoring by the HKCAA of the fulfilment of any conditions specified or recommendations made.

The usual period between institutional reviews is five to seven years.

Institutional Accreditation

As previously stated on page 29, for any institution, the HKCAA should gradually change its activities away from monitoring the institution's individual programmes and standards, and towards affirming its ability to maintain its own standards. The process of accrediting an institution to do this involves the acquisition by the HKCAA of detailed knowledge of that institution over a period of time through the execution of programme validations and revalidations and institutional reviews. It is likely that this process would culminate in an institutional review involving a panel visit, for which the major term of reference would be to ascertain whether the institution is ready to be so accredited. Clearly, such a review would involve detailed consideration of the institution's own quality control and assurance mechanisms. An institution may apply for consideration for institutional accreditation, which will only be performed at the request of the relevant funding body.

Any institution that has full responsibility for the validation of its own degree programmes will be subject to occasional reviews. The process will enable an external assessment of the effectiveness of the quality assurance mechanisms of the institution and provide the basis for improvement. It also enables formal external interaction and the sharing of ideas and experiences of practices and developments in tertiary education.