

## **APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE AUDIT FINDINGS**

HKUST warmly welcomed the opportunity presented by the QAC Audit to demonstrate and enhance the high quality of its educational programs and its robust culture of frank self-evaluation – a culture that has been the basis for the University’s rapid advance.

We were therefore very pleased that the Panel found “that students hold HKUST’s teaching staff in high regard and that the staff, in their turn, are committed to supporting the students” (paragraph 9.1), and that the Panel observed “a strong quality assurance culture with robust processes in place” and is confident that the University “will continue to enhance the quality of its teaching and learning” (Executive Summary).

### **Educational Quality**

#### *A priority for excellent teaching*

As a research university, HKUST especially values the close relationship of its highly qualified, international faculty with students. The Panel observed “that there is a strong sense of community among and between staff and students” and that “data from surveys indicate that students have a high incidence of face-to-face discussions with professors and instructors” (paragraph 5.2, **Commendation 2**). As the Panel notes, this linkage is sustained by a commitment to “an extensive and effective system of advising and mentoring” (paragraph 5.3, **Commendation 3**).

Universities that value scholarship and research are sometimes accused of neglecting teaching. It is therefore very important to HKUST that the Panel confirmed that “in recent years the University has increased its emphasis on teaching performance” (paragraph 9.5), and that “the Panel was persuaded that the University takes teaching performance seriously in substantiation and promotion” (paragraph 9.6).

The University’s strong commitment to excellent teaching is reinforced by well designed support for academic staff. The Panel “heard of many instances of good practice in teaching and learning” (paragraph 3.14, **Affirmation 3**) and notes “a rich array of resources for staff to improve their teaching and technology skills. ...it is clear that the services provided, including one-to-one tutoring and personal support, are highly regarded” (paragraph 9.9).

The Panel singled out the support of new academic staff and notes that new academics quickly adapt to working at HKUST. Preparation for Teaching Assistants is also commended. This is particularly important to us, given new recruitment for the 334 transition (paragraph 9.3, **Commendation 5** and **Commendation 6**).

HKUST has also remained a leader in the use of IT tools in education and was pleased that the Panel noted “...an impressive number of on-going initiatives to extend the use of technology in teaching and learning, including remote video capture of lectures; a Personal Response System (PRS) to allow immediate feedback during large scale lectures; and mobile phone access to University information through an iPhone application” (paragraph 5.8).

#### *Reinventing undergraduate education*

HKUST has been working hard to develop an undergraduate educational experience that makes

academic excellence a central goal, while providing opportunities for intellectual breadth and personal development. The basis of this effort is a statement of graduate attributes: ABC LIVE. The Panel confirmed that ABC LIVE is “a succinct and appropriate statement of graduate attributes” and that “ABC LIVE...is clearly a significant driver of educational development” (paragraph 2.4, **Commendation 1**) and the Panel “was impressed by widespread progress in mapping ABC LIVE onto the curriculum” (paragraph 4.3, **Affirmation 5**).

The University has been building on its research base to deliver a more interdisciplinary and inquiry-driven education. The Panel understood the importance of this effort and was able to affirm the priority it is being given (paragraph 4.6, **Affirmation 4**).

The Panel has also affirmed our efforts to provide students with a developmental and holistic education (paragraph 5.6, **Affirmation 7** and paragraph 6.4, **Affirmation 9**). Key elements include: internships, about which the Panel heard positive reports and found the “potential to build on the current good relationships with alumni and employers” (paragraph 6.2, **Affirmation 8**); an extensive international exchange program commended for its scale and management (paragraph 6.3, **Commendation 4**); a vibrant residential campus-life, about which the Panel heard positive comments from students (paragraph 5.2, **Commendation 2**); and the high priority for achieving the English language competence of graduates” (paragraph 4.9, **Affirmation 6**).

### *Postgraduate education*

A special feature of HKUST’s mission is postgraduate education. Given this we were gratified by the Panel’s strong endorsement of the quality of programs for research students.

The Panel was “impressed by the extensive support provided to research students” and notes that “the facilities and the support they receive on a day-to-day basis are very satisfactory and that the intellectual climate in their schools is productive for their work”. The Panel found that the “University has an institution-wide approach to postgraduate research education” and that “the objectives for research postgraduate education include the development of higher-order generic intellectual skills, research skills, and knowledge at the forefront of the discipline” (paragraphs 11.2 and 11.9, **Commendation 7**).

Several features of research-student education particularly attracted the Panel’s attention, finding that “students can obtain financial support to present papers at international conferences, and in many disciplines there are opportunities to spend time in overseas research institutions and universities” (paragraph 11.4), and that language support is provided where necessary (paragraph 11.7). Since most research students also gain valued experience as Teaching Assistants (TAs), the commendation for our training of Teaching Assistants and the effectiveness of the system of TA Coordinators is very welcome (**Commendation 6**).

### **Quality Assurance**

As the Panel notes the University undertook “a rigorous and frank process of self-review in preparation for the QAC audit” and “identified a number of areas in which improvements were needed” (paragraph 1.9). The Panel has broadly concurred with the outcome of this self-review exercise and has made recommendations in a number of areas where plans for improvement are already well underway: **Recommendation 1**: benchmarking; **Recommendation 2**: closing the feedback loop with students; **Recommendation 3**: taking a more strategic approach to the

development of IT in education; **Recommendation 4:** enhancement of annual reports on teaching and learning; **Recommendation 5:** external review; and **Recommendation 8:** clarification of expectations of teaching performance.

The Panel's support is welcome, as is the observation that the University's openness "gives confidence that the quality assurance systems at HKUST are well embedded in the culture and that the University will continue to work on those aspects identified as needing attention" (paragraph 1.9).

The Panel has also suggested that there might be further development of institutional student assessment policy (**Recommendation 6**). While this development is ongoing in the context of the implementation of the learning-outcomes approach, the recommendation is a timely reminder that more traditional concerns should not be overlooked.

Since 2006, the University has moved away from a policy of grading-to-a-curve to grading based on students' demonstrated achievements of learning outcomes. Historical experience with course-grade distributions is made available, but only for information, not as "recommended bands". The Panel has called on the University to reintroduce grading-to-a-curve (**Recommendation 7**). The University is proud of its reputation for high academic standards, standards that are confirmed by academic accreditation, external review, annual benchmarking with course grades gained by HKUST students on exchange, and the experience of a very qualified international faculty. HKUST remains confident in its arrangements for course grading, and strongly believes that maintaining academic standards is consistent with course grades that reflect students' achievements.

## **Management and Planning**

HKUST is engaging in an effort to enhance the linkage of its strategic thinking with rolling plans and resource allocation. We are also broadening the range and increasing the impact of measures of performance. Given this we were pleased that the Panel was able to affirm "the intention to redevelop the University's strategic plan" and noted that increased support for the analysis of institutional data "is a significant step towards achieving a culture in which data are routinely used for planning and decision making" (paragraph 3.6, paragraph 3.12, **Affirmation 1**, and **Affirmation 2**).

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The University has benefited greatly from the Audit process, especially the opportunity it presented for self-review. We have already moved forward on the issues that emerged in the self-review, in line with the Audit Panel's judgment that "HKUST has appropriate procedures in place to pursue its stated purposes in teaching and learning, that it engages in activities designed to achieve those purposes, and that there is verifiable evidence to show that the purposes are being achieved" (paragraph 12.2).