

An uncomfortable seat of learning

Something is very seriously wrong at the Hong Kong Polytechnic, so badly wrong that the staff association has felt compelled to go on record in expressing its concern.

The centre of the problem is the Department of Hotel and Tourism Management, which is the subject of an internal polytechnic inquiry. The charges relate to corruption, unethical behaviour and a general malaise resulting in an apparent breakdown of trust between the department's heads and their staff.

We should never overlook the tendency for internal academic politics to be about as vicious as internal politics can be. Nor can we overlook the reality that academics in dispute often abandon the traditions of scholarly research in a flagrant manner.

With these caveats in mind, there is still cause for concern. On the one hand, we are talking about an institution funded by

public money. On the other, we are looking at a teaching institution responsible for training some of Hong Kong's future key personnel.

Academic bodies often think of themselves as somehow set apart from the rest of society, assuming an aura of superiority which is not justified by their performance. The polytechnic may, or may not, fall into this category but its leaders are doing a poor job in providing information to their own staff and students, let alone the public at large.

Were the problems confined to the Hotel and Tourism Department, the concerns about the polytechnic would not be so profound. However, it appears the virus of suspicion and unease has spread much further. Accusations of plagiarism and malpractice are being made in a number of different departments.

The public, which funds this institution, has a right to know what

is going on. More importantly, the polytechnic's management owe it to their staff and students to operate a more open and accessible form of governance.

Having called for accountability to the public, we are aware that this is fraught with dangers. Institutions of higher education

are rightly anxious to preserve academic freedom and independence. Demands for public accountability could be seen as attempts to curtail these freedoms.

Yet academic freedom, like most other things in life, has a price. That price is responsibility. The polytechnic can only insist

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on non-interference from outside if it can demonstrate that its internal affairs are under proper control.

This is clearly not the case. However, in the short term, the polytechnic should be allowed to pursue its own inquiry into the affairs of the Department of Hotel and Tourism Management. The findings of that inquiry should be made public and remedial action taken.

The danger of self-regulation is that the institution regulating itself will decide to close ranks and conclude the greater benefit is to be gained by admitting to no problems and keeping all knowledge of problems firmly hidden from the public.

In practice, this tends to accentuate the problems and cause a great deal of resentment among those who feel their grievances have been ignored.

It would be invidious to suggest

the polytechnic alone is suffering from internal strife. To a lesser extent, the problems of plagiarism and unethical behaviour have been evident at most of Hong Kong's institutions of higher education.

This is a small place and the academic world is even smaller, often filled with in-fighting, gossip and extraordinary rumour. These problems detract from the essential functions of the territory's universities and polytechnics, which are supposed to create centres of excellence where students are stimulated to perform to their fullest potential and the environment is encouraging for innovative research.

These essential functions are so often undermined by the internal politics of the institutions supposed to carry them out that they tend to be overwhelmed by the mechanics of keeping the show on the road and are satisfied with second-best.

We wish we could supply some easy, ready-made solution to this problem. The truth is that we cannot. Outside regulation of academic bodies can create as many problems as it is likely to solve and begs the question of who could reliably undertake the task.

Allowing the system to flounder on, without change, is also unsatisfactory.

The alternative seems to be a drive to make the management of institutions more open and accountable. Abuse thrives in the twilight world of closed-door regulation and small fiefdoms of academic power.

If the polytechnics and universities were subject to some of the accountability requirements of other publicly-funded bodies, it might produce a shock to the system.

But some shocks are worth suffering if they encourage new approaches to inadequate ways of doing things.

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