

Academic autonomy 'must be respected'

By C.K. LAU

AN academic yesterday warned against tampering with the autonomy of universities in the run-up to 1997 when Hongkong will revert to Chinese rule.

And a suggestion to align Hongkong's education system with China's was described as untimely and dangerous to the territory's interests by another scholar.

Speaking at a forum on the proper length of a degree course, Dr Kwok Siu-tong of the Chinese University's history department said academic autonomy was a venerated tradition.

Even the terms of reference of the University and Polytechnic Grants Committee, which advises the Government on the funding of tertiary institutions, specifically provided that the institutions would have autonomy in admissions and its curriculum structure, he said.

At present, most degree courses offered by the University of Hongkong are for three years, while those run by the Chinese University are for four.

The different systems adopted have caused havoc in sixth form education and there has long been a call for uniformity by the two.

Dr Kwok said tampering with the university's autonomy and forcing it to change

because of social and economic pressures could have undesirable implications for the institution, especially during the transition period.

"A university represents a society's drive to seek the truth," he said.

"No matter which Government rules Hongkong, university students must seek to preserve the university's autonomy."

Speaking at the same forum, Mr Cheng Kai-ming from the University of Hongkong's faculty of education described the call to align Hongkong's education system with China's as untimely and dangerous.

For one thing, Mr Cheng noted, China's education system was rapidly changing and it would be pointless to align Hongkong's system with one that did not yet have a definite shape.

Secondly, Hongkong's existence owed very much to its international characteristics and the same was true with academic life, he said.

Citing HKU as an example, particularly in respect of its continual use of English as the medium of instruction, Mr Cheng said the university would play a special role after 1997 only if it remained a special university in China, not just another Chinese university.