
**COVER
STORY**

Vocational training: Students at Baptist College's Journalism and Communications Department.

HONGKONG had never seen anything like it. Higher education had previously been regarded as important, but hardly of front page significance.

So when lecturers and management at Hongkong Polytechnic began a protracted public slanging match, it was clear that something had gone seriously wrong.

And though some have sought to dismiss the row

as "a little local trouble," others are beginning to see it as indicative of a fundamental split over the path taken by tertiary studies in the territory.

As ALLISON JONES and CHRIS JASPER report, at the heart of that divide lies the question of whether Hongkong's future is better served by seats of academic learning — or institutions preparing students directly for the workplace.

**COVER
STORY**

THE move seemed eminently sensible. Hongkong had long neglected the higher education of its young people, and the transformation of three tertiary-level institutions into universities would make up for lost time. But then things began to go wrong. The pressures of making the shift started to take their toll, and though for a time the lid was kept on, it eventually blew off in spectacular style when internecine strife erupted between management and staff at Hongkong Polytechnic.

Nor is there any reason to believe that Hongkong Poly's woes represent an isolated case. Murmurings of discontent have been heard elsewhere, and insiders suggest the dust-up in Hung Hom is representative of a general malady pervading much of the higher educational tier.

Indeed, the most pertinent question now seems to be not so much whether the system's transformation can be painless (it plainly cannot), but whether the pain will be worthwhile.

The *raison d'être* behind the overhaul of the tertiary system was a simple one. It was one thing for Hongkong to have skimped on higher education while it remained a manufacturing base — but as a modern, service sector-led economy, it could ill-afford to do so. And at the same time, the territory's newly affluent millions were demanding access to good college places for their offspring.

With degree places available to only seven per cent of the relevant age group in 1989, Hongkong was failing on both counts, and the decision to greatly expand the tertiary tier was a relatively uncontroversial one.

If that had been all that was done, many of the problems besetting the territory's colleges today might have been avoided. But there were other considerations to be taken into account.

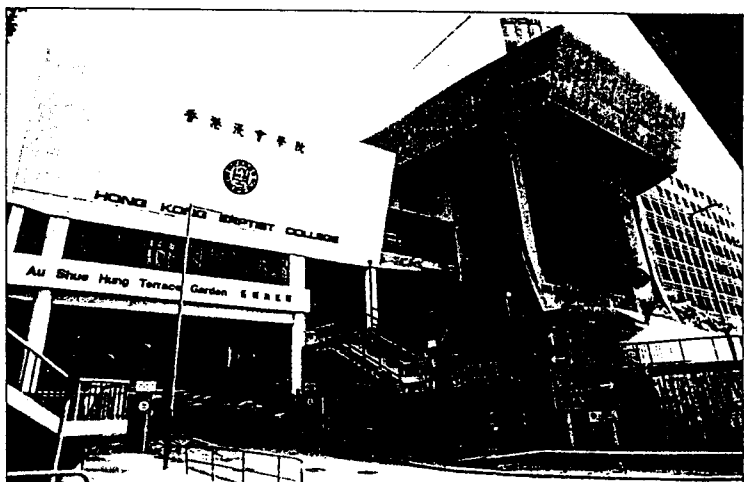
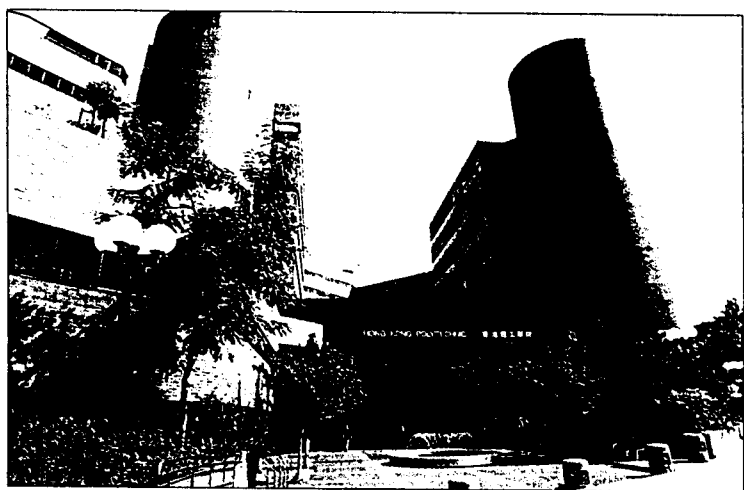
Traditionally, the University of Hongkong, the Chinese University of Hongkong and the new Hongkong University of Science and Technology had concentrated on first and higher degree work, with the emphasis on scholarship and research.

By contrast, Hongkong Polytechnic, the City Polytechnic of Hongkong and Hongkong Baptist College had offered a range of programmes, not all of them leading to degrees, and with the emphasis on professional and vocational qualifications.

Though it obviously needed expanding to take account of increased demand, the system itself seemed adequate enough. Yet it suffered from one intractable problem. Although the universities were rooted in academia and the polytechnics in things practical — and thus in theory complemented each other — the latter were nevertheless regarded as poor relations.

The establishment of Vocational Training Council centres over the past decade had to some

**Universities-in-
waiting: City
Polytechnic,
Hongkong
Polytechnic,
Baptist College.**



TERRY LEUNG / WINDOW

extent undermined one key role of the polytechnics, forcing them to concentrate more on degree work. But students — and to an extent employers — regarded university degrees as more desirable. Furthermore, in countries such as the US, polytechnics — relics of a peculiarly British educational experiment — were an alien concept, making their alumni less attractive as potential employees. Most importantly, perhaps, polytechnic lecturers — and administrators — were irked at common perceptions of their relative importance. They were also jealous of larger university pay packets.

University deal: For these reasons, rather than because of real educational requirements, a deal turning the two polytechnics and the Baptist College into universities was struck, as University and Polytechnic Grants Committee (UPGC) secretary general Nigel French explains.

"We have a lot of very bright kids who want to go to university — and they would like to do so in Hongkong," he says. "That's the reason for the name change. It's purely a formality."

The UPGC, charged with advising on the development and funding of higher education in the territory, was asked to oversee the restructuring programme in 1991.

"We made it clear to the institutions concerned that there were essentially three main preconditions that had to be met before the committee would recommend that they should call themselves universities," adds French.

Those preconditions lie at the heart of current clashes. The first said that the new universities should be of a sufficient standard to undertake self-accreditation. In order to satisfy itself of this, the UPGC conducted reviews in January 1993, giving the institutions the thumbs up last September.

A second precondition was that the government should agree to the extension of university salary scales to all academic staff primarily engaged on degree-level work.

The move was implemented in September 1992, well in advance of the three colleges' assumption of university status, and was extended to Lingnan College, which will not become a university for some years. These first two requirements were to some extent a sop to lecturers, who at a stroke won pay parity and recognition as the academic equals of their university rivals.

However, the third precondition sought to impose restrictions on the newly transformed institutions, and required that they accept that the change of title would have no material affect on their agreed missions. These missions are very different from those of the older universities, which have academic remits and far higher numbers of research student places.

"The role of the polytechnics was to be more in the applied research area, and more closely related to industry and business," says French. "The polys will still have that emphasis — although they will be expected to do some pure research because that's part of scholarly activity."

The UPGC soon satisfied itself that the three preconditions had been fulfilled, and recommended that the name changes be processed as a "mere formality." The government and the Executive Council



TIM HAMLETT

"At the end of the day, Hongkong Polytechnic is not a university, and it can't be expected to move a million feet towards being one"

— TREVOR SOFIELD

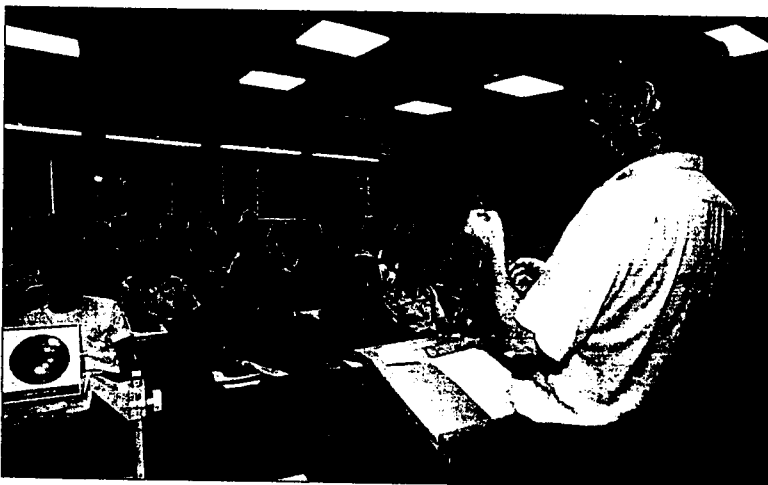
accepted that advice last month, and legislation amending the ordinances of the three institutions, modifying their governing structures and, of course, changing their names, is now pending. The three will thus become Hongkong Polytechnic University, the City University of Hongkong and Hongkong Baptist University.

But though the UPGC claims to be happy with the course of the changes so far, others are most definitely not.

The critics claim that, in particular, the precondition stating that the institutions should retain their old missions has caused untold confusion or even been ignored completely.

It is not difficult to see why this might be the case. For though Hongkong may wish its new universities to do the work of polytechnics, if they are

Tim Hamlett at Baptist College: "People are skimping on teaching to produce worthless research good to neither man nor beast."



MCCORMICK

**COVER
STORY**

**New and old:
The recently
opened University
of Science and
Technology
(below) and
Hongkong
University
(bottom).**

to gain global credibility they must abandon that role. In this respect the demands of the territory — mirrored in the requirements of the UPGC — have become subordinate to those of international academia, and administrators eager to elevate the status of their various institutions have sought to emphasise research work.

That has been no easy task. In the past, the research element was very often nil — with the polytechnics, seeking to impart technical skills and knowledge to their students, concentrating on teaching and having little time for work at the cutting edge.

Research needs: In order to square this particular circle, institutions have taken radical steps. At the most basic level, they have — to varying degrees — begun to transform their staff profiles; out have gone experienced teachers, in have come academics.

The latter may lack experience at the whiteboard, but they are in possession of all-important PhDs. In practical terms this has meant an influx of foreign-educated lecturers, many of whom have only recently completed their doctorates. Moreover, because the cream of overseas universities are unwilling to work in Hongkong's upgraded polytechnics, a significant portion of the new faction have been mainlanders, some of them with a questionable command of English — the medium for most tertiary-level teaching. Among those losing out have been non-PhD Western teachers and overseas-educated locals.

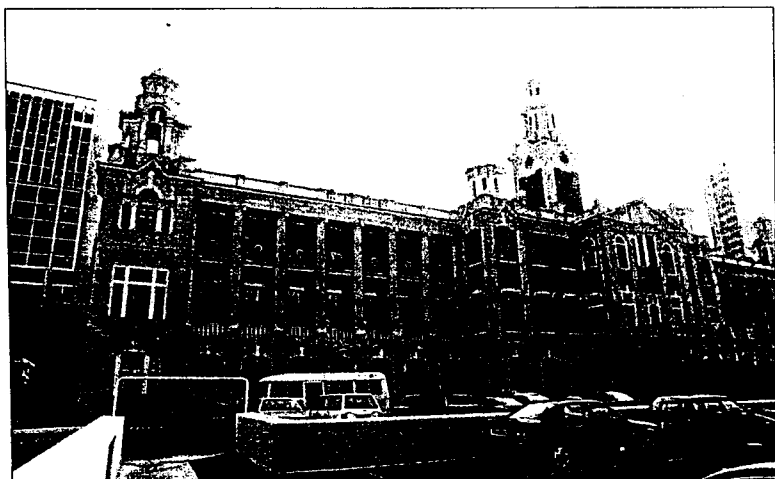
To date, this staffing overhaul has run into its severest opposition at the 25,000-student Hongkong Polytechnic, the territory's largest tertiary institution.

Embattled director C.K. Poon, rocked by criticism from lecturers and students alike, has recently sought to defend the shift of emphasis away from the lecture room.

He reassuringly stated that his institution's mission should be "to serve the community by providing the right kind of graduates, programmes and technological support for the industries, businesses and professions of Hongkong."



MOON/INA



BEN WONG

But rather than meeting the territory's needs through sound, practical instruction, Poon believes that the onus should be on research which, he says, "is important because it leads to higher quality teaching and attracts high calibre staff."

Others, however, argue that the best researchers rarely make the best teachers. They fear that competent lecturers will be replaced by academics with little interest in standing before a class.

With six universities placing scholarship above practicalities, say the critics, the tertiary system will churn out graduates lacking the know-how needed for Hongkong to remain competitive.

One of Poon's most outspoken opponents is the former principal lecturer in Hotel and Tourism Management (HTM) at Hongkong Polytechnic, Trevor Sofield. Sofield was sacked after submitting a damning 200-page dossier to a panel investigating irregularities at the institution.

Ironically, though critical of the acrobatics being performed to accommodate the new stress on research, saying staff "can't all become researchers overnight," he believes the shift has been largely cosmetic.

"The polytechnic has a system which approves projects for research, but many departments have problems coming to grips with somebody actually doing that work off-campus," he says. "Underneath all the rhetoric and the bags of money, unless you can actually sit in your office in the poly, your superiors won't allow you to do that much research."

He adds: "The problem has arisen largely because we're dealing with a polytechnic still only halfway along the road to moving towards a university. It's been an uphill battle to get them to understand what social research actually is. When it comes to the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake, the poly culture has difficulties coming to grips with it."

And he warns: "At the end of the day, Hongkong Polytechnic is not a university, and it can't be expected to move a million feet towards being one."

It is perhaps no coincidence that the very public blood-letting at the polytechnic occurred within a department particularly ill-suited to university-style studies. The HTM department had always been rooted in practical tuition, yet suddenly it was being asked to research leisure as a science rather than teach students how to work within the industry.

Other departments grouped with HTM in the Faculty of Business and Information Systems — namely Computing and Management — have experienced similar traumas.

Over at the Baptist College, journalism lecturer and *Window* columnist Tim Hamlett is equally critical of the restructuring. The shift towards academia is, he insists, the result of blind devotion to the US model. "The emphasis on research is essentially an American disease," he says. "But even in the States there is now a general feeling that they've overdone it. Yet just as they're realising their mistake, we're following their lead."

Hamlett too believes that, though teachers are currently feeling the heat, the tertiary overhaul will eventually hurt students and the territory itself. "Teaching is already being sacrificed to allow lecturers to do more research," he says. "Such work can in

theory improve teaching quality, but what's actually happening all over Hongkong is that people are skimping on teaching to produce worthless research good to neither man nor beast."

Another major criticism of the restructuring programme concerns its applicability to the annual pool of Hongkong school-leavers seeking to enter higher education.

The expansion of student numbers has been a keystone of the plan since its inception, and by 1995 the aim is to offer first-degree places to some 14,500 youngsters each year.

That figure will represent 18 per cent of the relevant age group — a distinct improvement on the seven per cent of six years ago, but still significantly below the 28 per cent offered places in the UK.

Postgraduate numbers are also due to rise, with an increase of around 45 per cent (to 8,705) planned by 1998. In the same year, the territory hopes to have more than 53,151 students engaged in graduate and postgraduate studies, as compared to 48,800 today.

Below standard: Impressive figures. But though all agree that Hongkong needs more tertiary places, it is becoming increasingly clear that the bulk of matriculants applying are well below university standard. The territory's secondary education system has long been a shambles, with few students gaining high passes. That being the case, many should be refused entry to institutions aiming to better their academic standing.

But having seen student intakes rise in the transition to university status, department chiefs are loath to put their budgets at risk by turning applicants away.

The Government Secretariat told *Window* it had no statistics on the average A-level results of students admitted to UPGC-funded institutions. But a spokeswoman admitted: "It will not be surprising if the average results in recent years have been lower in comparison with past years . . . It is important to appreciate that Hongkong has moved away from an elitist system of higher education and is now providing wider education opportunities at tertiary level for its young people."

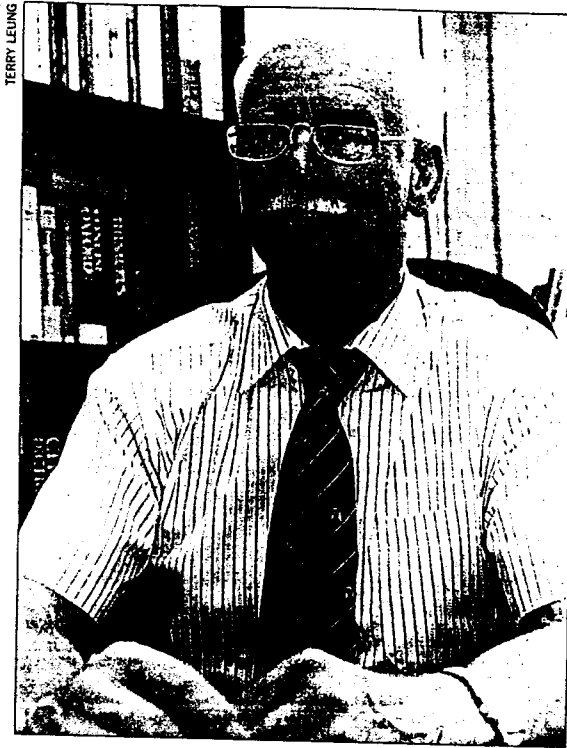
Ironically then, as student numbers rise, less able school-leavers are being admitted and academic standards are being eroded just as they are supposed to be improving.

Tim Hamlett raises another point, asking whether Hongkong can hope to support half a dozen universities when, traditionally, around 10 per cent of those seeking higher education go abroad.

"A fair proportion of the relevant student age group — including many of the better educated ones — go to overseas universities," he says. "So those who finish up in the system here are probably not ideally suited to university-style education."

Even the UPGC itself has recognised the problem. In a recent report it says: "An initial worry was that in the middle years of the expansion there might be difficulty in recruiting enough well-qualified matriculants."

The biggest worries concern language skills. Schools are only now beginning to move away from English as their sole official medium of instruction, and in the past many topics were only crudely understood by confused pupils. But though the shift to Cantonese instruction may mean schoolchildren



"The notion that British tertiary institutions are superior to those here is simply prejudice"

— JACK WING

learn more, it is a double-edged sword in that students arrive at university with an even poorer grasp of English than their predecessors — leaving many unable to understand lectures.

Amy Tsui, a teacher trainer at Hongkong University, points to a further problem with the current schooling system. Although it may help pupils gain admission to university, she says, it does nothing to prepare them for life once they are there.

"Learning things parrot-fashion is not the best way of preparing for the intellectual challenges of university," says Tsui. Drilling, rote learning and reliance on past papers fail to promote individual work, she contends, so that most students flounder when asked to think for themselves.

With the much-vaunted tertiary overhaul faltering some are beginning to ask whether the polytechnics should have been left unchanged.

Lingnan College business faculty head Dr Jack Wing, who once lectured at North London Polytechnic and has been involved in higher education in Hongkong for 20 years, believes the territory compares favourably to the West.

"The notion that British tertiary institutions are superior to those here is simply prejudice," he says. "The overseas view is revealed by the acceptance of Hongkong graduates onto British masters programmes."

Whether or not the territory's postgraduates will remain as popular in the future is another question, although Wing believes it to be "too soon to say that they're awful compared to previously."

Sofield, for one, remains sceptical. "I'm not sure the territory needs another university, or if there's a market for it," he says. "Perhaps someone should have done a market survey before they embarked on this venture. After all, that's what we teach our students to do."