

CUEGU suggestions to CUHK Strategic Plan 2016-2020

As the University is formulating a new Strategic Plan to cover the period from 2016 to 2020, CUEGU would like to contribute to make the plan truly work for the betterment of various stakeholders. The following suggestions are made after consultations with various University members in seminars, forums, surveys, and through handling numerous grievance cases in the past few years. Some of the suggestions are made by observation and direct participation of CUEGU EXCO frontline colleagues.

Our submission is divided into the following parts:

- A. General Staff Morale;
- B. University Governance and Management;
- C. Education and Research.

A. General Staff Morale

The various ranking systems are appeared as objective measurements of the University's performance. The trade-off of these endless exercises is that much efforts are diverted to quantifying output, preparing reviews, on top the unfailing effort of colleagues on the various initiatives for the sake of the University's development and the maintenance of its infrastructure. Performances of department and faculties are tied to resource allocation and inevitably personnel decisions, putting managerial and frontline staff in high tension. Staff at all levels are persistently under stress. Although the University is a community of 7400 staff, colleagues are having high workload as reflected by long working hours. Some frontline positions can hardly be filled up or with high turnover rate. Many colleagues reflected the increased workload and cumbersome appraisal suffocating, and feeling staff's opinions were not heard. Personnel decisions to young research faculties are demanding and lack of transparency. Lack of job recognition, difficulty of staff promotion, persistence work pressure together with the non-competitive salary and fringe benefits drive the departures of many young and energetic colleagues.

- Long working hours: in our recent survey conducted to all CUHK colleagues, 52% has an average weekly working hour >45;
- Cumberseome appraisals: teaching staff appraisal usually lasts for 9 months, while other personnel decisions (e.g. promotion, substantiation) may even last for 1 year. For non-teaching staff appraisal, the average time-spent is around 6 months. It is not difficult to imagine that the effort invested to the annual appraisal cycle of 7400 staff is incredibly enormous. An efficient check-and-balance system is therefore essential to streamline the workflow. It is also worth to consider whether an annual appraisal is essential for positions like academic posts, which usually take time for the colleagues to build their portfolios (details regarding teaching staff appraisal will be covered in part C of this submission);
- Salary and fringe benefits are not competitive: in some frontline positions, the salary is not comparable to the average market range and the posts could have been vacant for some time even for years. The University is reluctant to review the salary scale while the situation persists, on the other hand the recruitment

problem was left untreated. The consequence is the original workload of this vacant post have to be shared among colleagues. For office-based posts on the other hand, very often the vacancy followed by staff retirement or departure are to be filled up by open recruitment rather than internal promotion. Contract colleagues are not essentially nominated to continuous appointment (CA) even if s/he has fulfilled the year of service and appraisal requirement. In general colleagues cannot see the future to continue serving in the University.

We certainly understand competitiveness of the University is important and is a driving force for improvement, yet it is not necessarily be worked on the scarification of staff morale. The University's governance and management direction set the conditions of its ecosystem, whether it is healthy or not is crucial for its sustainability. Yet according to our study, low staff morale and job dissatisfaction are serious issues appeared in staff at all levels which needs urgent attention. These will be detailed in part B of this submission. Grievances specific to teaching colleagues are also alarming, and the analysis of the relevant survey and our suggestions will be detailed in part C.

(b) University Governance and Management

Though the current strategic planning does not cover the issue of governance and management, it should be plain that no university can make any meaningful plan that truly reflects stakeholders' values and no strategic plan can be effectively implemented unless the university's governance and management is sound and healthy. As reflected in CUEGU's survey on all CUHK staff conducted between July and October (sample size 295), many colleagues do not find that this is currently the case at CUHK:

- 47% agreed and 28% strongly agreed that *the University' policy-making and operation are so opaque that it is difficult for middle or lower rank staff to understand the university's development.*
- About half (47%) agreed or strongly agreed that *the University's policies change so frequently that it is difficult to execute them.*

While for high-profile initiatives like the current strategic planning, the University does emphasize consultation and engagement (at least in form, if not in substance), in a more general sense, many do not find they are engaged or their views respected:

- 20% strongly disagreed and 41% disagreed that *CUHK encourages staff to express their opinion.*
- 22% strongly disagreed and 47% disagreed that *the University is able to consult its staff before making decisions that affect them,* only 10% agreed with this statement.
- 44% agreed and 24% strongly agreed that *in the University, authority rules over rational discussion.*

Perhaps a greater challenge to the University is the failure to channel oppositional views from the frontline:

- 66% found that *many of the management staff do not express their opinion to their superiors even when they disagree with the university's policies.*
- 67% found that *their departments execute university policies that they find problematic.*

It is not surprising then, that 41% agreed and 50% strongly agreed that *the university should introduce mechanisms to solicit staff views on the University's management and policies.*

For better or for worse, the **University's various proposals on governance reform**, particularly that of the restructuring of the Senate and that of the Council, have been put on hold since 2009. In the past months, there have been growing concerns in the society over governance and governance structures of the University. Most importantly, the University communities and the public at large are gravely concerned about the **composition of the Council** (or Board, depending on the nomenclature) in a university and its impact on academic freedom. CUEGU has joined a greater network of students and staff unions of local universities to demand a review of 1) the HKSAR Chief Executive's power in appointing Council members and 2) the ratio of seats democratically elected from and by students and staff.

Aside from the fact that CUHK is the only UGC funded institute that does not have elected staff or student representatives in its Council and Senate, the decision-making power of the University has been increasingly centralized in the past 10 years or so, especially after the change to **Appointed Deanship** for Faculties in 2007.

CUEGU does not want to comment on individual Dean's performance and qualities here. But it is necessary to point out some inherent and interlinking problems of the system:

1. It further **de-democratized decision-making in the university and damaged the legitimacy of its policies.** The Faculty Deans used to be the only democratically elected members of the academic management personnel. They were accountable to their electorates – their peers and colleagues in their Faculties. Their ex-officio representations at the primary decision-making bodies at CUHK, namely, the Council, the AAPC and the Senate thus carried more legitimacy (assuming that the university community takes democratic and collegial governance as more legitimate than an authoritarian model). In the current appointed model, in theory the Deans are accountable to the VC. In practice, according to the management's line of duties, they report to the Provost, the VC's deputy.
2. **A dangerous level of concentration of power** came with the appointment system. The Appointed Deans are given more power than ever before in personnel decisions, resource allocation and academic directions within the Faculties. Their power to override departmental views and decisions are written into all new policies in these critical areas – in personnel reviews, in financial budgeting, in allocation of student places, in initiation of new academic programmes, etc. All these with the only check-and-balance system of an annual opinion survey on the

Deans' performance. How the data is interpreted and used is solely at the discretion of the VC and the Provost.

3. The level of **overlapping of membership in the high-power committees of the University** has also reached a new height with the Appointed Deanship and the establishment of the so-called "Deans Committee". As mentioned above, the Appointed Deans are ex-officio members of the three main governance bodies of CUHK: the Council, the AAPC and the Senate. Since the appointment system came into being, the Provost also initiated a so-called Deans Meeting, which formulated important academic and personnel policies. This meeting was formalized by the AAPC (8 of its 22 members are the Faculty Deans themselves) as its sub-committee in 2013 upon CUEGU's protest of its illegitimate status. Ad-hoc committees on various critical issues comprising the Deans had also been set up by the Provost. It may be argue that never before has CUHK seen such a dangerous level of overrepresentation of interests that are so far away from colleagues' values and concerns.

With the above observations in mind, CUEGU would like to take this opportunity to solemnly urge the University:

1. To define a timeline to renew its governance review and reform;
2. To introduce better check-and-balance systems for the top management;
3. To introduce democratically elected members to its various governance and management structure;
4. To introduce greater transparency in the University's decision-making;
5. To set up mechanisms to solicit staff views on the University's management and policies.

(c) Education and Research

One of the goals of the Strategic Plan 2016-2020 is said "to achieve another level of excellence in teaching and learning" on the one hand and "to achieve research excellence" on the other. The core to the achievement of these goals is the commitment of staff. In order to have its teaching and research staff commit to their profession, the University is obliged to provide a stable and supportive environment to them, whom the University has recruited through rigorous procedures. Unfortunately, many staff members do not feel this way. The dissatisfaction and disappointment of staff are clearly seen in the survey on the Annual Appraisal/Contract Renewal/Substantiation/Promotion Mechanisms of **teaching- and professoriate-track staff** that CUEGU conducted in early Nov 2015.

In as short as two days' time, 174 responses, equivalent to about 11% of our teaching staff, were received. Among them, 69% are from Terms A and 31% from Terms B. The years of service vary from less than 1 year to 32 years. In the survey, we ask colleagues' opinions on the transparency and objectiveness of the review systems, the check and balance mechanism if any, the specific appraisal criteria of individual departments, and the overall satisfaction of the review systems.

Here are some alarming figures:

- **76% strongly disagree or disagree** that the review systems are transparent and objective.
- **84% do not know** the specific review criteria of her/his department.
- **85% strongly agree or agree** that clear and specific appraisal criteria should be made known to staff for better preparation for appraisals.

The Union has been told more than once in official meetings with the University Senior Management that the senior management advises department heads to meet with staff for better communication in the review process. However, only **24% said that their appraisers meet with them before the appraisal reports were submitted to FAPC**. In fact, this is one of the critical flaws in the design of the current assessment and appraisal system, which puts the appraisal meeting **AFTER** rather **BEFORE** the assessment results are finalized and put into effect. The design means to put absolute discretion into the hands of the FAPC – too often meaning the Faculty Dean, and assumes absolute truth of the materials and comments submitted by the DAPC, at the expense of allowing clarification or contextualizing of facts by the appraisee concerned.

There is *no appeal mechanism*, not even a check and balance mechanism, in any kind of personnel review. It is not surprising that more than **86% strongly agree or agree that an appeal mechanism is essential** for a fair and objective review.

As for the appraisal interval, **64% strongly agree or agree that appraisal on an annual basis is too short** for developing substantial research and good teaching practice.

The annual performance assessment forms the basis of many critical staff reviews including continuous appointment, substantiation, promotion, and extension of service. For a huge institution like CUHK, we may say that measurement of performance is a necessary evil. Yet, the bottom line is that performance in teaching and research can never be objectively quantified. Transparency and check and balance are necessary to give fairness and credibility to both the process and the results, and to lessen the evil. Over the past three years since the system was launched, CUEGU has received grievances even from numerous senior staff colleagues at the managerial level, and many frustrated cases regarding the various applications on which the review was based. The general picture is that:

- There is no clear mechanism on how the colleagues were categorized at the Faculty level;
- Departments and Faculties contradict each other in how the assessment and comments are arrived at and what evidence they are based on;
- The lack of feedback and appeal mechanisms for review processes, including those for applying for promotion, continuous appointment, substantiation, and extension of service, has led to increasing frustration, discontent and distrust.
- The existing feedback “mechanism” of the appraisal system (a text-field in the system for input of the appraisee after the review result was long finalized) is ineffectual, largely just a decoration;

- For applications for promotion, continuous appointment, substantiation and extension of service, no feedback is provided for the applicant. The summary of result merely describes the generic process an application has gone through. However, by the time colleagues have received the summary, all the review materials concerned are already destroyed. (In this, the University is dangerously playing with a grey area in the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance.) Such practices are not conducive to staff development or morale.
- No measure to countercheck the correctness of even factual data e.g. CTE scores, teaching load, research output submitted by the DAPC.
- Pay increment result is always ahead of the review result – difficult for colleagues to rectify the wrong information which has already adversely affected the review result and therefore pay increment, not to mention appeal against the negative review result.

CUEGU has iterated tirelessly the problems of the 3-category ranking system, the importance of a transparent review mechanism and the need for an appeal system starting from the beginning when the review system was at its consultation stage. Three years into the implementation of this problematic system, obliged by the above desperate cries of teaching colleagues, taking the opportunity of the strategic planning when the University is strategizing ways to enhance its teaching and research – the key to which is talents that are dedicated to CUHK, CUEGU solemnly requests the University Senior Management to seriously respond to the demands of colleagues for the following:

1. To review the usefulness of the 3-category system in terms of staff development and make necessary changes to it where appropriate;
2. To adopt concrete procedures and measures to increase the transparency and objectiveness of the review mechanisms in all levels.
3. To make the specific review criteria of individual departments known to colleagues concerned;
4. To restore the tried-and-true procedure of putting the appraisal meeting BEFORE finalization of the performance assessment result instead of after, to allow clarification or contextualizing of facts by the appraisee concerned;
5. To establish proper appeal mechanisms for all personnel reviews; all documents related to these personnel reviews should be kept for a reasonable duration after the designated appeal period has passed and all related procedures completed;
6. To provide constructive feedback to applications for promotion, continuous appointment, substantiation and extension of service;
7. To revise the appraisal interval to a reasonable and healthy one which genuinely benefits research and teaching.

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