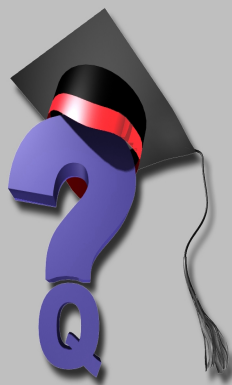


*From the Editor:*

*Learning Matters at Lingnan are short papers that aim to promote a dialogue on teaching and learning. I encourage all staff to consider this as a vehicle for sharing thoughts on educational issues as they might affect us at the University. If you feel you have something which might be appropriate for inclusion in an issue of this publication, then please forward it to the TLC. I would be delighted if staff (and not only academic staff) from outside the Teaching and Learning Centre were to be prominent or even occasional contributors.*



## Some External Forces

## Why Quality Matters?

The past decade has brought unprecedented public demands for higher quality in colleges and universities. Higher education institutions today are under increasing pressure to introduce and maintain some system for monitoring or assessing quality as a result of both external and internal forces.

The first and most acute external pressure facing public colleges and universities is a reduction in the public funds received. There is less taxpayer's support today to fund the higher education system than it used to be in the past. In addition, there has been the rapid and enormous expansion of the university sector. The dramatic increase in the student population has not been matched by appropriate funding increase to safeguard quality. It is generally acknowledged that quality will suffer when resources diminish. Allegations that quality and standards are falling tend to produce the reaction that checks or controls are needed.

In such times of expansion it has become necessary to address the question of the quality of education and whether it would be sacrificed for quantity. There is a general argument of 'more means worse' which raises concerns about the quality of university graduates, quality of teaching and quality of learning.

Alongside the developments in government finance and student participation in higher education, the general public has also become more critical of authority and is no longer willing to place total confidence in the 'ivory tower' image of tertiary institutions, but expects evidence that higher education is providing good quality and value for money.

## The Internal Demands

This has been coupled with increasing demands from government for accountability in the expenditure of public funds in an environment where greater accountability and openness on the part of the professions has become the norm.

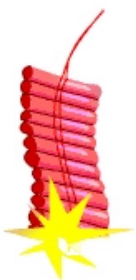
Another external pressure for quality comes from business and industry. In industry, in commerce, in government circles and also in higher education, the word 'quality' is on everyone's lips: quality control, quality circles, total quality management, quality assurance, and so on. The maintenance and enhancement of quality, and attempts to define and measure quality, are now major issues for higher education worldwide.

To deal with these external challenges, the internal structures and environment of higher education need to change accordingly to keep pace with the unprecedented demand for quality. However, it is not uncommon for higher education to find that its management structure and culture make change very difficult. Existing management systems are outmoded and can no longer ensure success in an increasingly competitive world. The fact is that the role and importance of higher education in society have changed dramatically over the years, but institutional practices have not.

For example, from the 1950s through the 1970s, higher education achieved a high level of quality through selecting the brightest students and graduating those fittest who survived through the most strenuous examination system. The result has been that institutions could not help but produce high quality graduates. But today, higher education is no longer seen as a privilege but as a right and an economic necessity. The old practice of controlling quality primarily through selecting only high-quality students is no longer acceptable. Colleges and universities now need to pay greater attention to quality, and to transform whenever necessary their organizational values, norms, structures and processes for a higher level of effectiveness and efficiency. Also, university teachers need to become more skilful of bringing about quality learning in students. There is no longer an abundance of students entering with wonderful learning competencies, which university teachers do not necessarily need to be competent educators for their students to be successful in their academic studies.

Facing these internal and external demands for quality, the challenge for higher education is to maintain or achieve a high level of standards whilst attempting to meet the continuing requirement of doing more with less, and to juggle with 'quantity' and 'quality' to come up with a suitable balance.

Maureen Tam



Happy Chinese New Year

恭賀新禧

