MOBILITY, FLEXIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

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Abstract: In its recent consultative document, the Education Commission recommended that, through portable and transferable credits, learners’ achievements attained through different channels are recognized.

However, this paper argues that:

• Increasing participation should not be viewed as equivalent to widening participation.
• The distinction between continuing education and higher education becomes blurred.

The paper concludes that the policy on lifelong learning seems to have been shaped by two factors economic and social equity. The development of these policies is part of a wider process of change – change in the higher education system, funding mechanisms, and university curricula.

INTRODUCTION: CHANGE AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Recently we often hear people saying that the world is moving towards the information age and a knowledge-based society. Issues such as how people can adapt to this shift as well as the problem of unemployment remain to be solved. However, education, in particular lifelong learning, is frequently perceived as the solution to all these problems.

Some educators and policy-makers believe that, with lifelong learning as a way of keeping people to adapt to the shift towards an information age and a knowledge-based society, there should be a scheme for credit accumulation, thus creating ladders of opportunity for people to gain qualifications. This process will emphasise student choice and student-centred learning; and, through portable and transferable credits, will allow learners to undertake study in one institution and transfer achievement/credits to another at will. This paper attempts to analyse the Education Commission of Hong Kong’s policy of widening learning opportunities by facilitating credit transfer among higher education institutions in Hong Kong. In particular, it focuses on considering the merits and challenges of such a shift.

MOBILITY, FLEXIBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Countries such as the UK and Australia believe that investment in human resources and in particular, an increased participation rate in both post-school and higher education are essential in gaining competitive economic advantage (Robertson, 1996a; Gallacher et al., 1996). As such, their
policy of increasing and widening access to higher education has an underlying economic agenda (Gallacher et al., 1996).

As Edwards (1993) pointed out, in a Post-Fordist framework, governments will emphasize the need for more highly skilled and multi-skilled flexible workforces if their countries are to compete in the global economy. This in turn leads to educational systems which emphasize vocationalism and flexibility, and help students to gain the kinds of education and training required for them to contribute to economic growth.

The post-secondary education system in the US is characterized by transferable credit, great flexibility and mobility, an approach which is perceived as suitable for mass rather than elite education (Robertson, 1996b). In the UK, the credit accumulation and transfer schemes (CATS) which facilitates student mobility through recognition of learning acquired from participating institutions may also be seen as a development to cater for democratic participation by large number of students (Robertson, 1996b). Hong Kong is now also moving in a similar direction (Education Commission, 2000). As part of the globalization process, the widening of access to adult learners and the practice of credit transfer in countries such as the UK, the US and Australia are influencing policy formation in Hong Kong within a much shorter time scale. However, the problem now is whether Hong Kong has changed, or will change, from elite education to mass education.

THE EDUCATION COMMISSION'S PROPOSAL

In its recent consultative paper, the Education Commission (2000) recommended that ‘post-secondary learning opportunities should be increased to align with the knowledge-based society’ (p. 7). It also recommended ‘universities to work towards a transferable and articulated credit unit system among institutions and departments to allow students more choice of learning modules that suit their pace and learning needs (p. 42). It also suggested that ‘universities give recognition to qualification conferred by community colleges’ (p. 44). In other words, there should be credit transfer among universities and between universities and community colleges. This would be quite similar to the CAT schemes in the UK which allow students to break away from the traditional model where a degree is acquired by studying a particular curriculum for a set period at a single institution (Dfee, 1998).

Conceptually there are two kinds of credit transfer. One involves recognition of credits gained at a lower level of study which can then be articulated to a higher level of study which is referred to in this paper as ‘vertical’ transfer of credits, leading to ‘upward’ mobility of learners. Examples of this are the articulation of the qualifications of Project Springboard (a new programme designed for students who do not have good results in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination), Community Colleges and university degree programmes. The other form of transfer involves recognition of credits gained at a particular institution by another institution at the same level of study ‘horizontal’ transfer of credits, leading to ‘lateral’ mobility of learners. An example of this is credit transfer among universities.

WHAT IS THE POLICY FOR?

Colebatch (1998) listed some elements in policy analysis, including the questions ‘Who makes the policy?’ and ‘What is it for?’. He argues that policy-making is a game that not everyone can and does play, and that ‘participation is not a neutral question; who participates in a policy issue helps to shape what the issue is’ (p. 26).
The key issue appears to be dissatisfaction with the large number of ‘failures’ in the school system, but this raises a variety of questions. Is there general dissatisfaction with the school system in the society? Who are those most dissatisfied? What is the nature of the dissatisfaction? Is there a need to widen learning opportunities? Who needs these new opportunities? The whole policy is based on perceived answers to the above questions of those who participate in the policy process.

Hong Kong has shifted to a knowledge based society, but this has been accompanied by an increase in unemployment rate and a high level of failure in the school system. It is against such a background that lifelong learning is advocated by the Government. McGivney (1990) identified three major factors that have shaped the policies on widening access for adult students in other countries. Of the three factors, two of them ‘government’s interest in its economic competitiveness’ and ‘social justice’ can be identified as underlying factors in shaping this policy in Hong Kong. For example, the emphasis on lifelong learning for adaptation to a knowledge-based society assumes that widening learners’ access to higher education can develop the economy of Hong Kong. On the other hand, the emphasis that there should be ‘no failures’ (Education Commission, 1999) is similar to the concern over social equity. It advocates the idea of providing a ‘second chance’ for those who gained relatively little from education at the school level. But, as will be discussed later, there remains the issue of whether those who fail to benefit from education at the school level are likely to benefit from continuing education.

The Government also advocates flexibility and mobility of students. However, no research has been done to find out the barriers to their learning. It has been assumed by the Government that it is simply a matter of lack of learning opportunities and inadequate flexibility and mobility. But, with the existence of the Open University of Hong Kong since 1989, is there really a lack of learning opportunities? Do the students really need these upward and lateral mobility? Without research, it is hard to justify the argument that the provision of further flexibility and mobility (both upward and lateral) will automatically cater for the needs of the students.

SOME LIKELY CONSEQUENCES OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

More market-oriented higher education

The credit transfer system will give more choice to the students who can choose his/her own path of study and mix different courses and programmes from different institutions. This will make higher education more market-oriented.

Blurring of the boundaries between higher education and continuing education

It appears that there are some discourses underlying the formulation of policies by the Hong Kong Government in the areas of education in general and in adult and continuing education in particular. These discourses are:

- Obscuring the boundary between formal secondary schooling and adult and continuing education,
- Eroding boundaries between sectors, institutions and sites of learning.

Changes in the funding system

Since there will be greater mobility of students across higher education institutions if the new policy is implemented, there are funding implications. At present, the universities are funded by the University Grant Committee (UGC) according to the number of full-time equivalent students. As students can move to other universities in their second or third year of study, the funding policy needs to be changed as well. Also, in order not to increase the public expenditure to cope with the widening of participation in higher education, there is a tendency for the Government to adopt a
‘user-pay’ philosophy in its higher education policy. The Education Commission (2000) stated that ‘the proportion of private contribution to education is less than 10% of the total expenditure on education. This is smaller than that in many places’ (p. 15).

Transferability of courses

If the universities can agree on a list of ‘foundation courses’ or ‘general education courses’, the credits of which can be mutually transferable, these courses would then be regarded as more ‘transferable’ or more ‘marketable’ than others. In the present situation in Hong Kong, these courses are more likely to be in the areas like information technology and language skills. Such a development would have an impact on shaping the boundaries of adult education and higher education.

CO-ORDINATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

Colebatch (1998) indicated that

‘policy work takes place across organizational boundaries as well as within them, and consists in the structure of understandings and commitments among participants in different organizations as well as the hierarchical transmission of authorized decisions within any one organization.’ (p. 39)

When the philosophy or rationale adopted by the Education Commission is transmitted to the organizations which implement the policy decisions, how can one ensure that these organizations have the same degree of understanding and commitment. This is particularly significant in an area such as credit transfer as it involves consistent implementation among the institutions concerned. The problem is how to persuade the academic staff involved to acknowledge the benefits obtained as a result of the change a shift in perspective which is unlikely to be achieved by a top-down approach.

ALL ROADS LEADING TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION?

Can credit transfer enhance social access, participation and equity? There may be new barriers created by the Education Commission’s proposal. For example, the programmes in the Community Colleges are, at least to a great extent, self-financed, thus disadvantaging those with limited financial resources.

The notion that learning opportunities has been widened by the policy is more complex that it appears at first to be. At present, 18% of the school leavers can enter the first year of university. If this provision is not going to be changed, it is only a matter who gets the places. As far as sub-degree programmes are concerned, many opportunities already exist in Hong Kong, including the various certificate and diploma courses offered in some universities and their Continuing Education Units as well as the Vocational Training Council. There is already intense competition among the providers for a limited pool of students, so the introduction of Community Colleges and the arrangement for articulation of their programmes to degree programmes cannot be seen as a step towards the widening of opportunities for learners.

Another related issue is that the relative proportions of Associate Degree graduates of these community colleges entering the employment market as against entering universities is not yet
known. However, Tight (1993, p. 66) argued that ‘the prospect of obtaining a degree is used as a major, and usually the major, selling point in the marketing of access courses.’

Increasing participation should not be viewed as equivalent to widening participation. Implementation of the policy of credit transfer can result in the former without necessarily leading to the latter. It may be the same group of learners (probably the advantaged group) who can climb up the ladder under the system. In other words, those who can successfully get the certificates will go on for a diploma and finally a degree programme.

**SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES: ECONOMIC GROWTH VS SOCIAL EQUALITY**

The Education Commission espouses the advantages of widening access to learners and credit transfer among other higher education institutions as if it was a new concept in Hong Kong. But one cannot overlook the fact that the Open University of Hong Kong has put this concept into practice and implemented a policy of open access and credit transfer for ten years.

Open education philosophy derives from a ‘democratic’ view of education – education that is accessible to all students regardless of social origin (Gallacher, 1996). Robertson (1996a) described two different perceptions of the role of universities in society from two sociological positions: right-wing governments see universities as engines of economic growth while the left-wing governments view them as agents of social equality. One may use this distinction in ideology (economic growth vs social equality) as an analytical tool to analyse the Hong Kong Government’s views on higher education, in particular the policy of establishing a comprehensive mechanism for qualifications to be freely transferable.

It is debatable whether the Hong Kong Government views higher education essentially from an ‘economic growth’ or ‘social equality’ perspective. On the surface, it would like to increase the flexibility of students’ learning paths. But research in the UK (Dfee, 1998; NIACE, 1997) has indicated that students who are not successful in their formal education are also less likely to benefit from other forms of adult and continuing education, especially those leading to qualifications. Also, the fact that a substantial proportion of the population is denied access to higher education results from a combination of low motivation to learn and inadequate supply of places. However, the underlying assumption in the policy document is that only the latter needs to be considered. That is, the Government assumes that students wish to study but have been deprived of opportunities in the past. Is this really the case? Therefore, the Government’s intention – to solve problems arising from formal secondary school education by continuing education may not work as it wishes.

**CONCLUSION**

The policy on lifelong learning proposed by the Education Commission seems to have been shaped by two factors economic and social equity factors. However, it appears that the former is the main concern of the Government, with the latter serving only a rhetorical role. Similar to developments in other countries (Robertson, 1996b, Commission of Social Justice, 1996), the intention of the Government to widen access to higher education is also a shift from elite education to democratic mass participation. Credit transfer, in particular where it leads to upward mobility of learners, is one of the means to achieve these ends. But, as the Commission of Social Justice (1996) pointed out, ‘if standards are to be maintained, more students mean more resources’ (p. 196). Although the Education Commission consultative document has clearly indicated its wish to increase the post-
secondary learning opportunities, it has neither proposed an increase in funding in the sector, nor an increase in degree places. Therefore, the credit transfer system alone will not genuinely increase the learning opportunities in society. It is a matter of who gets the places.

The policy, driven by underlying economic agendas, will be far reaching and the process of change will continue to shape higher education and continuing education in Hong Kong. How can those under-skilled workers and failures in the secondary schools adapt in a society claimed to have changed to a knowledge-based one? Can the new policy help them? In all these approaches to change, the emphasis on access to higher education will be associated with a growing concern with vocationalism. The development of these policies must be seen as part of a wider process of change – change in the higher education system, funding mechanisms, university curricula and role of higher education in society.

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