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Title	Quality in adult continuing education: Hong Kong perspectives
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Citation	
Issued Date	1999
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/55002
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Research Report

Serial No. 001 • December 1999

Quality in Adult Continuing Education : Hong Kong Perspectives

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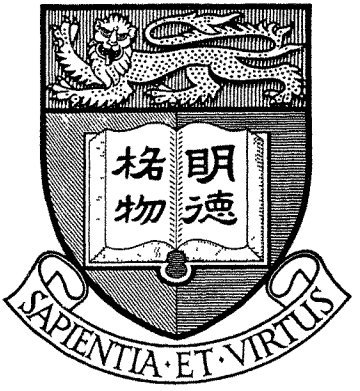

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Quality in Adult Continuing Education: Hong Kong Perspectives

F.T. Chan & John Holford

(1) Introduction: The Quality Agenda

In Hong Kong, and throughout the world, continuing education (CE) is growing fast and changing fast. In 1996 for the first time a major official report stressed the importance of CE in Hong Kong. The University Grants Committee's comments were trenchant:

> *Until quite recent years, higher education has been regarded by both students and employers as a "once and for all time" experience in which the participant was inoculated with the knowledge, skills and attitudes which would last a working lifetime. No booster dose was deemed necessary. The increasing rapidity of change in both employment patterns and the nature of society has made this "one-shot" philosophy of higher education no longer tenable. Many people will need, either for their own purposes or those of their employer, to participate in higher education on a recurring basis throughout their lives.* (UGC 1996: 76)

The UGC is only concerned with higher education (broadly, education of

the level normally provided in universities). But what is true of higher education applies also to education and training more generally. Recent years have seen a rapid expanse of continuing education and training provision for adults by public and voluntary sector organisations: the Vocational Training Council, Caritas, the Education Department, and trade unions.

One very stark indication of the importance of post-initial education and training has been the growth of the Employees Retraining Scheme. The demand for this arose from the industrial restructuring of Hong Kong in the early 1990s, as manufacturing industry moved away. Men and women who had spent often decades employed in textiles, clothing, printing, and other factories found their skills no longer required. Some service sector work was available, but generally it required work skills very different from those of the manufacturing sector. The Employees Retraining Scheme was designed to provide new skills for such workers, and to help and encourage them to get back into paid employment.

In the past, the provision of education and training has been dominated by public providers, supported by a range of organisations in the voluntary sector. One of the major features of modern continuing education, however, has been the growth of a market for education. This is a worldwide phenomenon, but Hong Kong has been at the forefront of the trend. Although the largest providers in the field remain public or voluntary bodies, commercially-oriented companies are increasingly important. This phenomenon includes the training departments of

companies training their own staff, training departments marketing their courses to other companies, the training dimensions of the burgeoning consultancy business, as well as companies established simply for the provision of education and training.

The growth of the market has not only brought new organisations into the market-place, it has also transformed existing organisations and existing modes of operation. Some changes are obvious, such as the growth of private agencies which market foreign courses in Hong Kong. But many are more subtle. The government, for instance, now sought to expand educational opportunities for primary school teachers by encouraging public sector institutions to provide new part-time, in-service degree programmes on a "full-cost-recovery" basis. Most university continuing education units, for instance, are now expected at least to recover their operating costs, and in some cases this effectively means making profits for their parent institution.

Continuing education and training, therefore, is more and more a service industry operating in a market: success is ever-more strongly dependent on meeting market demand, and doing so with a high-quality, reliable product. In recent years, concern about quality in continuing education has grown. Some people have argued that the changes of recent years have led to a decline in educational quality. Such people argue that markets have undermined professional attitudes and standards: the number of qualified full-time academic staff in continuing education units, they say, has declined in relation to the number of students as the market

has become more competitive and organisations strive to keep costs low. In the university continuing education units, for instance, the growth in provision has not been matched by growth in numbers of full-time staff.

Approaches to Quality

The growing importance of the market is a worldwide phenomenon in continuing education (and in fact in education generally). In Hong Kong for many years the most prestigious and influential institutions were the extra-mural studies departments at the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. These departments received a substantial amount of government funding (through the UGC), and quality was assured chiefly through relying on full-time academic staff to teach and organise the courses. In fact, this approach was similar to that adopted in university continuing education throughout the English-speaking world until the 1980s. Though few adult educators spoke about "quality", many organising and teaching staff were employed to ensure that courses were of an acceptable standard.

But if this approach brought a generally good standard of course provision, it had a number of drawbacks. In particular, it meant that the number of courses provided was always limited by the number of staff for whom funding — generally funding from public or charitable sources — could be secured. But this approach could not meet the growing demand for education and training. The clear perception of innovative institutional leaders was that those institutions which remained wedded to

a relatively high ratio of full-time staff to students would be passed by. From the mid-1980s, therefore, the emphasis in Hong Kong's continuing education was on meeting student demand, on growth.

In many ways, this emphasis paralleled concerns elsewhere in the world, where staff-student ratios were also becoming less favourable. Marked in CE, this was still more apparent in mainstream higher education. There the driving force was typically declining government funding, pressures to upgrade non-university institutions, and attacks on traditional methods of quality assurance, rather than growing student demand. But the result was that, internationally, discussion about methods of quality assurance grew during the late 1980s.

In Hong Kong, debate about quality in higher education took off in the early 1990s. The chief vehicle for this was the UGC, but the motor was the government's rapid expansion of higher education from 1990, upgrading some older institutions (the polytechnics and Baptist College became universities) and creating new ones (notably the Institute of Education and the Open University). Support came from the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation to "localise" validation and quality assurance tasks formerly contracted out to the British Council for National Academic Awards, and from the formation of teaching support units (under various names) at several of the higher education institutions.

The UGC's concern with quality, however, was naturally focussed on the university sector, and of this the area in which it appeared least interested

was CE. Two main mechanisms have been introduced: research assessment (to emphasise the importance of research in universities by providing some "objective" evidence about research performance in the various departments and institutions); and what has eventually become known as "Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review" (the first reviews took place in 1996).

But this official emphasis on quality in higher education has not yet had a marked impact on CE in Hong Kong. There are perhaps two main reasons for this. First, the volume of research on quality assurance in higher education (HE) in Hong Kong does not yet compare with that which now marks the UK, Australia and North America. Local research on the subject has so far tended to stress (for very sensible reasons) the special features of the Hong Kong learning environment -- particularly the fact that the great majority of Hong Kong's university students speak Cantonese as their first language, but are expected to study in English.

Second, however, there has been very little official concern expressed about quality in CE as such. Though the UGC has recently given major attention to CE for the first time, its concern with quality for HE was not carried through into the CE sections of its report (UGC 1996). An earlier research report on CE, commissioned by the UGC, contented itself with a somewhat complacent comment: "intense market competition provides the bottom line for quality control in CE" (Chung, Ho & Liu 1994: 124).

Probably the sole exception to this has been the government's concern to

control the quality of higher and professional courses offered in Hong Kong by "non-local" institutions. This phenomenon, which started in the mid-1980s and is now a marked feature of Hong Kong's CE scene, generated a good measure of press concern and it has been addressed through the introduction of legislation (the Non-Local Higher and Professional Education (Regulation) Ordinance 1996). This Ordinance requires overseas institutions seeking to offer programmes in Hong Kong to register their programmes with a new Registrar, who will register the courses only if "s/he is satisfied" that the institution is recognised according to the laws and procedures in its home country, and

> *effective measures are in place to ensure that the standard of the course [in Hong Kong] is maintained at a level comparable with a course conducted in that country leading to the same qualification and is recognized as such by that institution, the academic community in that country and the relevant accreditation authority in that country (if any)* (s.8(3)(a)).

This is, however, a relatively modest quality requirement, which relies very heavily on the standards applicable in the non-local institution's home country.

In the absence of strong official guidance, the CE professional community has had to rest on its own devices to establish effective quality assurance mechanisms. Several kinds of approach have been attempted.

First, individual CE institutions have examined their quality assurance procedures, or made attempts to improve the mechanisms they have in place. For example, the University of Hong Kong's School of Professional and Continuing Education experimented in the mid-1990s with seeking ISO 9000 recognition, though in the event this was dropped. The same university instituted a thorough review of its CE in 1995, and this resulted in a number of proposed curriculum, managerial and structural changes.

Second, the professionalism of CE world has been strengthened by the development of new training courses for adult educators, and by the formation of a Federation of Continuing Education in Tertiary Education. The latter has provided an important forum for professional exchange between CE staff, although it still has a good way to go before it can claim to have a firmly-established role.

Third, there have been attempts to improve consumer knowledge about quality issues in CE: how to choose a good course, and how students can improve the quality of their learning. The main attempt along these lines has been the *Hong Kong Adult Education Handbook* (Holford, Gardner & Ng 1995).

Finally, efforts have been made to strengthen our understanding of quality in CE from a Hong Kong perspective. Research in CE has not been strong in Hong Kong: virtually non-existent until the 1990s, it has remained particularly weak in its relationship to professional practice. Lee & Lam

(1994) and their collaborators have explored the nature of CE provision and policy. But Hong Kong CE research has been especially weak at the level of "action research": research which is explicitly linked to the improvement of provision or professional practice. A welcome recent development has been the establishment of the Centre for Research into Distance and Adult Learning at the Open University of Hong Kong.

The research on which the present study is based was designed with this weakness in mind. The authors believed that Hong Kong CE professionals knew far too little about what their students considered "quality" in CE to be; by the same token, professionals knew little — other than anecdotally — about what their own colleagues understood by quality, and how they attempted to maintain it in the programmes they organised.

Aims and Methods

The purpose of our research was to discover what CE students and administrators mean by "quality", and in the light of this to develop what we originally termed a "client-centred operational model" of quality in adult CE. We hoped that this model would prove useful in a number of ways: in particular, we hoped that it would provide programme organisers with a fuller understanding of what they and their colleagues did, and of what students actually felt. This would mean — we hoped — that we could identify the areas where students' views differed from organisers'. It would also, we hoped, mean that programmes would increasingly be

able to take into account the desires of students.

This was in part a commonsense perspective. However, it also drew on an important theoretical tradition. Educational evaluation literature is broadly divided between two traditions. One sees evaluation as a matter of measuring how far programmes have fulfilled pre-stated aims and objectives. The second tradition sees the aims and objectives of programmes as themselves problematical: educational programmes are the product of varying, often unstated, sometimes conflicting, interests. Educational evaluation must therefore involve not merely measurement, but a process of identifying – or even evolving – the criteria against which a programme can be measured.

This second view puts a premium on finding out accurately the views of the various "stakeholders" in the educational process, to identify the issues on which the various stakeholders agree and differ, and – perhaps most challenging – attempting to resolve differences where this is possible (Guba & Lincoln 1989). In designing this study, we felt that the bulk of quality literature falls into the first tradition, assuming that quality can be measured against criteria preset by programme designers and managers. We take the view that this assumes what is to be established: we therefore position our study within the second tradition. In the present study, it was not practicable to explore the views of all stakeholders; we hope, however, that we have concentrated on the most significant.

Apart from our desire to explore (and perhaps reconcile) participants' views of quality, we also believe that this participant-oriented perspective tends to validate professional experience and expertise. This seems to us important. In part we believe this because both of us have worked as professionals within adult continuing education in Hong Kong for several years. In that period, we have experienced a wealth of professional good practice among our colleagues, and we have experienced at first hand the knowledge and perspicacity of adult students. However, there is also a strong and growing academic literature which emphasises the legitimacy and importance of such participant knowledge. Good professional practice, certainly when combined with reflection, can lead to professional wisdom. It is from this professional wisdom which we have sought to draw, and to its further development that we wish to contribute.

(2) Learning From CE Students

In order to achieve these aims, the research plan envisaged a project in several more or less distinct phases. Since the results at each stage were unpredictable, the specific design of each phase was to be developed in the light of findings in earlier phases.

First, a series of group discussions or interviews was conducted with CE students. These discussions sought to discover what the students regarded as important elements in course quality, and their relative significance. Seven groups of students were interviewed. The data from these

interviews would be analysed, and in the light of this, a schedule for interviewing course organisers was constructed. Interviews were then conducted, on an individual basis, with organisers of courses in a range of public and private sector bodies offering programmes of study to adults.

The Students

Approach. In order to establish students' views about the nature of quality in the courses they attended, we planned a series of discussions with small groups of volunteers from among the participants of continuing education courses. Each discussion session proceeded along the same lines. After a briefing on the aims of the survey, the participants were asked to "brainstorm" factors that contribute to the quality of continuing education courses. They were asked to refer not just to the course they were presently attending, but continuing education courses in general in their experience. The brainstorming sessions lasted for between 7 and 10 minutes in each case. Participants were then asked to write down all the factors mentioned on posters. Each participant was also asked to choose and mark the two most important factors. The posters were then used to facilitate the subsequent activities.

Following this came open discussion among the participants in which they were asked to elaborate on the factors they had mentioned and listed on the poster (starting with those marked as more important). New factors could also be added at this stage. This session helped to clarify the precise meaning of the course quality factors (CQFs) mentioned, and enabled

both researchers and participants to develop deeper understanding of them. (The discussion was tape recorded as part of the group discussion result.) The researchers acted only as conveners of the group discussion. They did not participate in the listing and discussion of the CQFs, which came from the course participants alone.

After the open discussion (which normally lasted for between 20 and 30 minutes), every participant was asked to rank in order the five most important CQFs mentioned. They were also asked some basic demographic information about such as sex, age, education level, and number of CE courses attended previously.

Survey Samples. The research team conducted such discussions with seven groups of continuing education students during the period from December 1993 to June 1994. Each group consisted of volunteers from one of the seven selected courses organised by the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE) of the University of Hong Kong or the Caritas Further and Higher Education Service. The courses included two English language courses, two computer courses (one from each institution in each case), one business studies course, one art course, and one technical course.

The groups ranged in size from 4 to 11: around 75 per cent of the surveyed participants had previous continuing education experience. A demographic summary of the participants is given in Table 1 as follows:

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Overall
Number	6	5	7	4	5	11	6	44
Sex								
Male	6	4	1	3	3	7	5	29
Female	-	1	6	1	2	4	1	15
Age								
21-30	-	2	1	1	5	4	5	18
31-40	3	2	5	1	-	7	1	19
41-60	3	1	1	2	-	-	-	7
Educational background								
Primary	-	-	-	-	-	7	-	7
Secondary	5	2	5	3	2	4	-	1
Post-sec	1	1	2	-	2	-	1	7
University	-	-	-	1	1	-	5	7
Post-grad	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
No. of courses attended								
1	2	1	-	3	1	4	-	11
2-4	3	2	3	1	3	4	5	21
5-9	1	2	3	-	1	-	1	8
>10	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	2
No answer	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2

Table 1: Demographic summary of surveyed participants

Method of Analysis. The CQFs emerged from the discussions could be classified into nine categories: Teacher, Course Content, Course Arrangements, Equipment, Participants, Learning Rewards, Study Materials, Organising Institution, and Physical Environment, in the order of importance as ranked by the course participants.

These nine categories all sound naturally related to course quality. However, we went on to discover in some details what was meant by each term, and their relative importance. Participants were asked to rank CQFs in the order of importance: the rankings were then aggregated on the basis that CQFs ranked most important scored 5 points, the second most important CQF scored 4 points, and so on. Hence, the fifth most important CQF cited scored 1 point. For each surveyed group, we computed the average score for each CQF cited by that group based on the responses of all the members of that group.

There were, of course, ambiguities of meaning for each CQF; these were generally clarified through the discussion.

The primary aim of the study was the exploration of CQFs and the meanings attached to them. The study does not claim to be statistically representative of CE students in Hong Kong as a whole.

Findings and Analysis

Teacher. The category "teacher" had the highest overall ranking among

the nine CQF categories. Participants saw "good" or "high quality" teachers as able to arouse students' interest and be encouraging. They should be qualified and experienced in their subject matter; organise their teaching well, and be good at presentation. Well prepared for their teaching, they would meet the needs of their students.

A few participants also felt that a good teacher should both be punctual, and be available for questions beyond class meeting hours.

While many participants thought academic qualification a necessary requirement for a good teacher, attitude and teaching skills were seen as even more important. It is, of course, administratively relatively easy to control the academic qualifications and experience of CE teachers (within the demand and supply context for the specific category of teacher). It is, however, more complicated for CE institutions to evaluate and control the attitude and teaching skills of their teachers, especially when — as is common in Hong Kong — many of them are engaged on a part-time, hourly-paid basis.

Course Content. The next most important category relates to the content of the course. Participants stressed that the course content should be designed to address their needs as adult learners: they should be practical, interesting, related to their work or the job market, and appropriately structured to suit their levels and characteristics as adult and part-time learners.

Course Arrangements. The third important category was course arrangements. Participants were concerned in particular about meeting location and time. They wanted the location of meetings to be easily accessible (ideally, the same course would be offered at different locations so that they could select a more convenient one). The meeting time should be "not too early and not too late". Some said after 7 p.m.; obviously the time was related to the meeting location.

There were some arguments about the duration of each meeting. Some said they should not exceed two hours, some said at least two hours: probably, two hours is about right overall. Many asked for a break after about an hour of learning.

Many participants preferred a course duration of less than 6 months, with the implication that longer courses might best be broken into relatively free-standing modules. A few participants said that CE courses should not break except during public holidays (i.e., school and university holidays should be disregarded).

Practical sessions should be arranged as appropriate to support the teaching of skills and techniques and should be designed in alignment with the lecture meetings.

Equipment. Participants referred to general classroom facilities (audio-visual equipment, microphones, whiteboards, etc.) as well as to specific equipment supporting a course (such as computers and computer

networks). The general equipment can make the class more interesting and teaching more effective. As a basic part of the course, specific equipment should be in good working order and up-to-date.

Participants. In the discussions, adult learners saw themselves (and other learners in their class) as playing a part in establishing course quality. They felt factors such as diversity of participants' backgrounds had an impact on the pace of progress and on the class environment. Some thought that they were not capable of following the course, or were dragged by less able classmates. Diversity also created difficulties for the teacher in devising a teaching plan which would be fair to all students. Students' attitudes can reinforce a positive learning and teaching atmosphere or discourage other participants or the teacher. Participants influence each other, but they also have an effect on the teacher. Among the factors mentioned in discussion were participants' absence or late arrival (which can disrupt their own and others' learning). Teachers were seen as having sometimes to help them at the expenses of others, perhaps more assiduous, students.

Good interaction between the participants and the teacher was believed to be constructive to the learning process.

Learning Rewards. Many participants welcomed the recognition involved in certification, and saw assessment as positive reinforcement in the learning process. It would also clearly be preferable if qualifications were also recognised by professional societies, employers, or other

bodies.

However, there is always a trade-off between the reward and the input (effort, time, money). Some participants expressed concerns that "demanding" courses can be difficult to complete. Some also expressed the view that a certificate or qualification which does not reflect a recognised or required standard has little value.

Study Materials. Most participants want to receive handouts. They also want good quality handouts which are useful to their study; easy to read; and precise.

Organising Institution. Little was mentioned under this heading. Many participants were concerned about fee levels, and some felt that the reputation of the organising institution was important. However, only a few mentioned supporting functions such as accurate course descriptions; accessibility of course information, or job search assistance at the end of the course.

Physical Environment. Very little was mentioned regarding the physical environment, perhaps because the standard of accommodation in SPACE and Caritas courses is generally quite good. The very few participants who raised this topic wanted a quiet environment, a neat and tidy classroom, whiteboards rather than chalkboard (which pollute the air), and desks and chairs which are comfortable for adults (sometimes a problem where courses meet in school accommodation). Availability of

drinks and light refreshments before class and during breaks was also seen as highly desirable.

Discussion

What have we learnt from these students? The findings of this study allow us to identify various course quality factors (CQFs) which, in the view of course participants, have an impact on quality in adult continuing education courses. The course quality factors can be broadly classified into nine categories: teacher; course contents; course arrangements; equipment; participants; learning rewards; study materials; organising institution; and physical environment. We also have some preliminary ideas of which CQFs and which categories are more important than others.

After discussing the findings from the interviews with CE course administrators, we shall compare and contrast the views of these two groups. The next stage will be to prepare guidelines to assist CE course administrators to build quality into their courses at the planning stage, to incorporate quality assurance mechanisms in course operation, and to evaluate levels of quality achieved.

(3) Learning From Programme Administrators

Continuing education is offered by various kinds of institution. Some are

in the "public sector": universities, technical institutes, and so forth. Some are voluntary or non-profit organisations. Some are definitely profit-making businesses. They offer programmes in highly diverse subject areas, in different parts of the territory, at different "levels". Some programmes lead to qualifications; others do not. We believe that research on quality should attempt to reflect this diversity. Continuing education specialists in various sectors should know the views of their counterparts in other areas: what they think "quality" is, and the ways they go about achieving it. Although practice in one sector may not be appropriate for others, we may well find that there are useful lessons to be learnt. In any case, there is no good reason for rejecting a priori the possibility of positive interaction between areas.

For practical reasons, however, we were unable to reflect every possible source of administrator diversity in our study. We chose to concentrate on diversity in the types of institution (private, public, etc.), and in the types of programme offered. We also attempted to control for diversity in levels of course: this as a potential source of confusion, since issues of quality might be clouded by associating them overmuch with perceptions of the quality of qualification and the standing of the awarding body. As with the student research, therefore, we sought to interview administrators primarily in relation to their activities with non-qualification-bearing courses. Since many of the administrators were responsible for programmes at several levels, however, it was not always easy for them to confine their comments and ideas as we might have wished.

Interviews with Programme Administrators

Continuing education, in Hong Kong as elsewhere, has grown in an unplanned and often opportunist way. This affects the people who work in it. There are no clear, and certainly no uniform, job categories: no equivalents of the Lecturers, Assistant Professors, Principal Assistant Masters, and so forth, which form relatively uniform grading and promotional structures across other sectors of education. Originally, the extra-mural departments of the two universities used the term "staff tutor", a grade quite common in their British equivalents. But what each university meant by the term – that is, what the men and women who held such posts in the two universities were actually expected to do – was by no means the same, and in any case the usage was not taken up by the polytechnics and new universities when they set up CE units, nor in general by other organisations.

In our research, therefore, we sought common function, rather than a common title. The function we sought was the development and administration of courses: we therefore use the term programme administrator to refer to our interviewees. However, a reality is that the way in which organisations allocate programme administration tasks varies. In some organisations, the allocation is by programme, with the relevant administrator taking on (as the "title" suggests) all aspects of administration of that programme. In other cases, however, tasks may be broken up, with different aspects of programme administration being taken over by several personnel. The term "programme administrator",

therefore, should be treated as an approximate one: at best as an ideal type, to which reality can only approximate.

We conducted interviews with fifteen programme administrators, each drawn from a different CE or training organisation. They were chosen to provide a spread of programme and organisation, and were categorised into four groups:

1. Those drawn from universities which fall under the aegis of the University Grants Committee. CE units in UGC institutions are normally called upon to be self-financing or income generating. They thus work under financial regimes which are in some ways comparable with those of the private sector. However, they function under the control of relatively well established organisations which have adopted or evolved systems of academic control broadly in line with university-type bodies in the English-speaking world.

2. Organisations from a range of other public bodies. These were principally organisations under the aegis of the Vocational Training Council, the Hong Kong Productivity Council (a body established by statute), and the Open University of Hong Kong. As a degree-granting body, the OU might be thought in many ways more properly categorised with the universities; however, it does not fall under the aegis of the UGC, and as a distance learning institution its academic systems are in many respects different (and in some respects, from a quality assurance perspective, superior).

3. A number of organisations which we have termed semi-public: these included Hong Kong provision offered by foreign government bodies, such as the Alliance Francaise, and programmes offered by voluntary sector bodies such as the Federation of Hong Kong Industries.

4. Finally, we interviewed staff at a number or private educational and training organisations: in the computer field, an organisation offering overseas courses in Hong Kong, and a well-known secretarial training organisation.

The interviews lasted on average about an hour. They were designed to be primarily open-ended, and the administrators were encouraged to contribute their own views about quality in as open-ended way as possible within the constraints of their busy programmes. In order to give a loose structure to the interviews, however, they were asked a series of broad questions (e.g., "what, in your perception, are the factors which make up a "high quality' course?"; "please elaborate on these factors"). In addition, when the interview was nearing its close, the interviewees were asked to answer a number of specific questions about their opinions or practice in relation to quality. The administrators were asked to rate these on a 5-point scale. A copy of the Interview Schedule and Questionnaire is given in the Appendix (see pages 57 - 62).

Interviews were conducted, normally in the interviewees' offices, either in English or Cantonese. They were recorded, and written abstracts of the recordings (translated into English where appropriate, and including

extensive quotations) were prepared. From the recordings, a list of the chief "quality factors" identified by each interviewee was prepared.

Course Quality Factors

The administrators identified a range of factors as contributing to course quality. These fell into several groupings: (a) the role of the teacher (trainer, instructor, tutor or lecturer); (b) the course content; (c) study materials; (d) clients; (e) learning; and (f) awards and institutional context. In order to preserve anonymity, the sources of individual quotations and specific references are only given by category as appropriate.

(a) **The Teacher**. The importance of the teacher was widely agreed by the administrators, although there was variation in the aspects of the teacher's role which were prioritised. The most commonly emphasised characteristic was experience and background, summed up by one respondent as a "professional tutor". Three main characteristics stood out, however:

i. Academic or subject expertise. Several respondents mentioned this, but it tended to be a minimum requirement rather than a defining characteristic of a good tutor. The tone was implicit in the view of one respondent that instructors "should have sufficient qualifications in order to present the course".

ii. Professional experience was regarded as more significant than

academic or subject qualification. One man administering government programmes for business stressed that trainers must have enough professional working experience/ expertise: the approach was to "take a professional and train him to be a trainer", not vice versa. A colleague of his stressed that tutors need "practical knowledge of the job. It is not enough to have academic knowledge of the subject from text books." He claimed that in his organisation no tutor would be appointed without at least 6 years practical experience. A private college administrator asserted the "important role" of "hands-on experience":

> *Tutors must have experience in the field. They must have work experience of at least 5 years, [including for certain courses] ... at least 3 years at managerial level. If you are just a teacher it will not help the students because ... 99 percent of the students in the evening are working ...*

Interestingly, however, this view was held as strongly by several respondents in the university sector as by those in the commercial sector. "Academic qualification is not that important", commented one programme administrator from one of the older universities: "experience in the field [and] up-to-date knowledge of the market are more important". The local organiser of an overseas university masters degree programme also stressed practical experience: his tutors were expected to have "five years post masters experience and ten years past [work] experience". In a revealing afterthought, he

added that "for the MBA [tutors should] preferably [have] some teaching experience as well."

iii. The third aspect stressed was good "presentation skills", so that tutors could "deliver the subject knowledge well to the students". As this suggests, the most common model of teaching was of knowledge transfer: the "ability to communicate/convey information to the students as required by the curriculum". A few respondents spoke in terms of broader "teaching skills". This was most strongly expressed by a language course administrator: "the teacher apart from teaching the course syllabus must make the students not afraid to speak and give confidence to the students." But few organisations thought training in teaching methods worth mentioning: teaching skills were generally thought to be achieved by such measures as employing only "full-time [university] departmental staff".

(b) **Course Content**. For several respondents, aspects of course content were as important as the quality of tutors – or still more so. One university respondent who saw it as "the most important" mentioned "coverage of subject matter, knowledge acquired, level of difficulty, relevance to needs .... We have to offer a course which is relevant and useful to the needs of the participant." There was a strong tendency, as this example shows, to see course content not from a subject or disciplinary point of view, but from the students'; and this view was strong in the universities as well as in the more commercial sectors. Curriculum should be "properly matched to the needs and expectation of

the students".

Outside the universities, however, the language was perhaps even more stark. "Courses have to be as practical as possible and designed so that students can relate what they have learnt in class to their workplace, ... [enabling students] to perform better at their job or solve particular problems they are experiencing at their workplace". This practical emphasis does not imply no variation in views about content, however. For some course content was clearly seen as providing specific skills rather than wider growth. "Course content should enhance practical knowledge related to trainees' jobs"; the task is "not training people's minds or whole being but equipping them with a specific work-related knowledge". For others, however, relevance was seen in rather more broadening terms. "On business behaviour we don't just teach them make-up, we bring in image consultants to work on personality development and we bring in past students as role models".

Our impression is that there was a considerable degree of conflation, among our respondents, of the language of relevance with the language of practical skills and application. One respondent remarked, "we use more practice than lectures and theory".

(c) **Study Materials.** For several respondents, course materials or "handouts" were an important feature of course quality. Handouts "should be of relevance to the course so the participants will not be lost afterwards and always have something for reference". A widespread concern was

that the materials should be relevant and up-to-date: as one respondent put it, "course material should have the latest information and sources of reference for the students and suitable exercises". One language institution emphasised the importance of teaching aids ("good materials such as tape recorders, maps, to aid teaching". The computer trainers especially emphasised the importance of hardware, and others put facilities issues in broader terms ("the right equipment").

(d) **Clients.** For many organisers, the determining factor in course quality was what clients thought of the course. "client satisfaction has to be Number One". But this view was expressed in two rather different forms.

For some, the views of students were the key. "The most important factor is that students feel they are learning something and teachers are teaching to make the students happy." Others spoke of the need for students to be "satisfied" with their learning.

For others, the key participant was not the student but the student's employer. There should be "clear objectives" which should "show employers how the training would improve profitability for the organisation where possible." This clearly relates to (though it is not quite the same as) the concern that courses and materials should be "relevant to the workplace".

One institutional respondent referred to several other bodies which, though not formally clients, may be regarded at least as "stakeholders":

these included "peer institutions" (both in Hong Kong and overseas), professional practice, and "contribution to the community".

(e) **Learning**. One issue addressed in different ways was the importance of how far learning took place. Several respondents spoke in terms of satisfying students' learning needs. One respondent felt that "how much students have learnt determines the quality of a course". For others, the issue was whether students were "good", were capable of "self-study", developed understanding, or retained knowledge.

(f) **Awards & Institutional Context**. For some administrators, the quality of a programme was defined not intrinsically, but by its institutional context. This was not chiefly a matter of institutional prestige, although a few bodies referred to the extent to which a qualification was recognised, or to the rigour of the assessment process. On the whole they spoke of administrative efficiency, the provision of information to students, or keeping to the planned schedule. A few referred to the physical environment; as two administrators put it, a "good and quiet learning environment".

A second important theme, however, was how far the institution had in place effective procedures to enable students to give evaluative feedback on course quality. These might evaluate students and tutors. It might involve evaluation forms, or a monitoring committee. These are clearly all dimensions of what one respondent spoke of as an "internal quality system", and it is to this important theme (what an institution did, rather

than what its staff thought) that we now turn.

Actions for Quality

Words are (often) easy. We know what these administrators think leads to good quality continuing education provision. We also wished to discover what the administrators actually did about quality. It needs to be said, of course, that what individual respondents did was only in part a matter of what they themselves wished to do: for the most part, their actions were determined by the requirements of their institution, its policies and practices. By the same token, their views on quality were likely to be influenced by institutional policy and practice, though perhaps negatively as well as positively. However, it seemed to us that it was as well to investigate (as far as we could) theory in action as well as theory espoused.

Mechanisms in use for quality assurance included:

Committees and Advisors. In the university and public sectors, committee and advisor structures to provide an opportunity for feedback -- from students and others -- appeared quite common. Four administrators explained that their institutions had Boards or Advisory Committees (one had both), while two also had formal external advisors and committees which included external members.

Tutor evaluation schemes. A large number of organisations appear to

have mechanisms in place for student feedback by questionnaire, in order to evaluate either the performance of the tutor or the course as a whole (or both), while two mentioned the use of random telephone surveys of participants. One, which used e-mail communication between tutors and students, apparently monitored the content and response times of tutors when dealing with student work. How institutions used the information gathered – or how they spoke about its use – varied. One administrator asserted that her institution dismissed teachers with low evaluation scores, but more common were less specific claims, such as that the information was used to improve courses, or to evaluate the benefits to participants after the course.

Teacher Recruitment and Support Systems. Reflecting the stress placed on tutor quality in their opinions, several administrators we interviewed mentioned a number of practical measures taken by their institution to recruit good teaching staff. These included relatively informal procedures, such as seeking competent teaching staff by selecting from other departments of their institution, and using external staff only after referral. Another university department relied on its subject advisors to recruit tutors. But several organisations were more rigorous. One had an apparently firm process of tutor recruitment, involving a selection committee and interviews. In the private sector, another mentioned its thorough recruitment interviews.

In terms of tutor support, the types of action favoured by institutions varied. Formal tutor training courses seem relatively rare, as one might

expect from the shortage of such programmes in Hong Kong: one private organisation provided induction training for tutors, while another semi-public one arranged training programmes on subject-matter as well as teaching methods and techniques. Three organisations arranged class visits. Others relied on specific, "local" factors, such as a long-term relationship with tutors. One public body claimed, for instance, that tutors were well known to the administrative staff, with the implication that this helped to maintain quality. An organisation delivering overseas programmes stressed that overseas academic staff monitored and supervised local tutors.

Learning Materials. In many cases, it is clear that courses are designed by the institution, and that the role of the tutor, lecturer or trainer is essentially to teach a pre-established syllabus. One stressed that full-time staff wrote the course materials, another discussed course content with external tutors. In this context, some mentioned that they adjusted course contents to meet the level of the class concerned, or tailored course design to suit participants' needs. One checked tutors' handouts. Some institutions mentioned that they provided support in updating course materials and audio-visual aids. One was particularly proud of its on-line support, with computer conferencing and e-mail.

Other Features. Clearly the provision of assessment, continuous or end-of-course, was of central importance in several institutions. Others mentioned the provision and maintenance of good equipment (especially computer-training providers), specific types of teaching assistance, or

recruiting the right students. One organisation stressed its close liaison with company training managers.

(4) Comparing the Perspectives between CE students and Programme Administrators

Teacher

"Teacher" was mentioned by CE students as the most important CQF category. Even though most course administrators refused to rank CQFs, it was apparent that "teacher" was an outstanding category among all administrators. When we look into the details of the CQFs within this category as elaborated by the two parties, nevertheless, we find that there are quite some differences in what they focus on.

Administrators stressed on qualifications, relevant working experience, and presentation skills of the teachers. Yet, students generally only regard qualifications and experience as necessary requirements of teachers. Teaching skills and attitudes of teachers were regarded as more important. Students expected a good teacher to arouse their interest and be encouraging. Teachers should be well prepared for their teaching. It requires great effort for the participants to come to classes after a long day work. It is understandable that the last thing they want is meeting a boring or unprepared teacher. While it is easy to scrutinize the academic and professional qualifications or industrial experience of the teachers, it is not easy to ensure their teaching skills and attitudes.

In Hong Kong, most CE teachers serve on a part-time basis. Their full time jobs may not be related to teaching. On the other hand, few CE organising institutions afford to provide training in teaching methods and presentation skills to their part-time teachers. Even though some organizations have some kind of training programmes, it is difficult to enforce a systematic training scheme to include all part-time teachers. Good part-time teachers are scarce and are likely to be very busy people.

It is therefore important for CE organising institutions to develop a strategy for the training, support, and monitoring of their teaching teams. This is essential in delivering quality services to their clients – the course participants.

Some participants expressed their desire to have the teacher be available for questions beyond class meeting hours. This service, which is normal to students under the formal education system, is rare in CE. This is largely due to the fact that the teachers are part-time and paid hourly. To allow student-teacher contact outside meeting hours has significant resource implication. With the development in information technology (IT) and its pervasive use in the community, CE organising institutions may consider to employ IT-based communication support such as electronic mail and electronic forum to satisfy their clients in a more manageable fashion.

Characteristics of adult learners

In addition to general presentation and teaching skills, do CE organisers

in Hong Kong pay sufficient attention to the fact that their students are part-time adult learners? As adult learners, their feelings towards the teachers are far different from students engaged in formal education. They may have their own experience in the subject matter or work at senior positions in their organisations. These factors can contribute positively to the teaching and learning or create confrontations between the teachers and the participants, depending on how the teachers handle the feelings and views of the participants. A relevant issue here is whether curriculum design, assessment schemes, and teaching methods need to be adjusted to suit the characteristics of adult learners.

Currently, there are too few training and education programmes catering for CE course organisers and teachers. Very little research, not even market research, has addressed the needs of adult learners in terms of curriculum design and effectiveness of teaching methods.

Fellow students

Many students reveal that the characteristics of their fellow-students have a strong influence on the quality of the course they were attending. They indicate that diversity of backgrounds among students has an impact on the pace of progress and on the learning environment. Moreover, attitudes of students influence each other as well as the teacher. However, none of the course administrators indicate the same concern over these issues. Many CE courses are recruited on a "First-come-first-served" basis, with little or no control over the nature of students admitted. When some students exhibit disciplinary problems such as absence or late arrival,

disruption to others' learning are caused when teachers pay attention to them at the expenses of others. Teachers have only nominal authority to deal with problematic students as they are adults as well as clients.

Organising Institutions

While course administrators expressed strong concern about their institutional context such as administrative support and quality assurance structure, students mentioned very little on these aspects. Why do they say so little about the institutions that organise the courses? Teachers are, of course, employed by the institutions; and the institutions are also responsible for course contents and arrangements. But participants do not seem to relate these issues directly to the institutions. They are conscious of fee levels, but (this factor apart) organising institutions do not have a strong presence in their mind. Ideally, institutions should play a role in course delivery as well as in publicity, teacher and student recruitment, and arranging classrooms and equipment. However, the impression left by this research is that Hong Kong's CE institutions appear to participants as remote. From other sources, we learn that even participants have bad comments towards a course, they often do not raise the issue to the organising institutions but just quit. How institutions can overcome this, bridging the gap between themselves and their students (and indeed whether they should do so), is a subject which requires further investigation.

(5) Learning From Overseas

Concern about quality in CE is not confined to Hong Kong. Probably the longest-standing writing on the subject has arisen in North America, which has strong traditions of institutional evaluation and validation. But CE in countries with education systems much more similar to Hong Kong's (e.g. the U.K., Australia) have also been expected over the last decade or so to demonstrate that they have effective methods of maintaining quality in their programmes. Research, supported in some cases by professional associations of continuing educators, has investigated how the notion of quality assurance can best be operationalised in a CE context. This section does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of this research, but to draw upon it in order to help us to make sense of our own findings — what the students and administrators we interviewed have told us.

A key feature in the literature is the relationship between quality and the market. This is hardly surprising. Education, traditionally seen as superior to the commercial world, has over the past decade or so been expected by policy-makers to become more and more like business, selling products in a market-place. In business, of course, it is often said that "the customer is always right". For some, this is also a good motto for education, or at least continuing education: as a recent report submitted to Hong Kong's UGC on continuing education argued, the market is "the bottom line for quality in continuing education."

The overseas literature, however, is more complex. It contains an interesting irony. Broadly speaking, it is in the UK and Australia, which have traditionally had strong state intervention in educational and welfare provision, that confidence in the market as a factor ensuring quality has recently been strongest. In the US, by contrast — which has a far stronger and longer-standing tradition of free markets, and far weaker belief in the power of the state to provide services — that the role of the market has been most questioned.

In the US, for example, continuing educators are acutely aware of the increasing centrality of their work in the context of growing awareness of the importance of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning in the US, as elsewhere, is a market-driven phenomenon. However, there is a strong sense that, as Freedman (1987: 8-9) puts it, "the market-place inevitably forces on all of us some compromises with quality". The compromises may be in curriculum, as when a university CE department is tempted to provide courses which are popular, but not of university level, or in a subject in which it has no real expertise. The significant point is that these are seen as threats to quality, as compromises. Above all, institutions seek to survive: if quality conflicts with survival, the outcome is clear.

In the UK and Australia, by contrast, the stress on the market has been far greater, driven in particular by governments' enthusiasm for importing market mechanisms into the public sector. Where it has proved difficult to import market mechanisms, funding is often distributed in proportion to output-related performance indicators, a model followed in much of Hong

Kong's public sector (Lee & Cheung 1995). Professional continuing educators have broadly been reluctant to accept that quality should be reduced to market factors alone. As Stern, a north American university continuing educator writes,

> *we in continuing education are pragmatic professionals. Up to now, we have been our universities' chief ambassadors to the market place. We are, however, ambassadors, and the university, not the market place, is our home.* (Stern 1982: 64, quoted Tovey 1994: 87)

Nevertheless, we find that in Britain, for instance, university continuing educators have adopted far more flexible views of "quality" that their predecessors would have espoused 15 or 20 years ago. In a major report by the British Universities' Association for Continuing Education (Bell et al. 1995), for instance, the stress is not on absolute standards of quality assurance but on adopting approaches to quality which are viable in the specific context of the particular institutions. A key feature of this context is market position. The report states, for example,

> *CE departments vary significantly in size and type and it is not possible (or desirable) to suggest that one format will suit all contexts. A department which has a large and widely-dispersed programme, but very few full-time staff, will not be in a position to produce procedures which are staff-intensive. It will do its best in difficult circumstances — and that*

> *should be acceptable for the universities concerned and for external auditors and assessors.* (Bell et al. 1995: 4)

In other words, what matters is not some "absolute" standard of quality, but that "any system should be appropriate for the particular departmental context" (Bell et al. 1995: 4). This "contingent" approach is so common today that it seems hardly worth comment. It has much in common, for example, with the approach of the TQM movement, for whom the point is not what standard of quality is achieved, but that the standard which is achieved should be reliably that which an organisation says it is.

However, it is worth noting that university adult educators of twenty or thirty years ago asserted very different views. One of the most influential, for instance, wrote

> *The case for university participation in adult education has always been that university teaching is distinguished by qualities of scholarship, objectivity, originality and independence not usually found to the same degree elsewhere ...* (Raybould 1964: 114)

It, he continued, meant that university adult education should be taught in large part by specialist full-time university adult education staff. These people would ensure that "university standards" of rigorous study and scholarship were maintained. One remark is particularly telling in the present context. If it was difficult to find well-qualified staff to teach full-

length and rigorous university courses, "the proper remedy is not to drop the long, intensive courses, but to appoint ... full-time tutors who will make this work their special skill and set a standard in it for others." (Raybould 1964: 118)

Despite moving away from absolute standards, few continuing educators have been persuaded that TQM or ISO-9000 type approaches are appropriate to their field. In one of the main studies of the topic, Tovey (1994: 74) for instance argues that ISO-9000 brings to continuing professional education, and higher education generally, "such a weight of inappropriate focuses that the case for it looks anything but convincing". It is, he says, weak ideologically: It has an "uncompromising affinity with image and commercialism as the basis of quality"; it pays no attention to "the nature, distinctiveness, purpose and influence of education"; it makes spurious claims to objectivity and is implicitly conservative. It is weak practically: its language and content are inappropriate to education; it presses practitioners towards easily attained, narrowly defined standards. Financially it is very costly. Organisationally it requires strong hierarchical structures. Although there is considerable enthusiasm for ISO-9000 at present, he argues that if and when this begins to fade, one question must be posed: "how a system wedded to such problems can promote educational quality (rather than administrative compliance and predictability)?" (Tovey 1994: 75)

That said, "process" approaches are very influential in the literature today. Bell et al. (1995), for instance, divide their Handbook into eight sections,

reflecting aspects of the management and programme development process. They discuss approaches to quality in: policy and planning; course design; programme review; evaluation of teaching and the promotion of learning; staff; students; marketing; and administration. Each section centres on a checklist of issues for consideration by a CE department. The checklist relating to students can be taken as illustrative. Departments are asked to consider what action they are taking, or should take, in relation to such matters as: "system for providing personal tutors"; "criteria and methods for marking and grading work"; "system for providing feedback on progress and performance"; "format and procedures for maintaining student records"; and "facilitating student feedback and comments". Although there is a commentary, these points do not prescribe specific action to be taken, but illustrate the kinds of approach which can be taken in different departmental contexts. And it is worth noting that the emphasis is on the management process and feedback procedures for charting progress, rather than on specific output standards.

(6) Improving Quality in Continuing Education

We have discovered a good deal about what Hong Kong's CE students and administrators think makes for quality in adult continuing education. It is implicit in our study, however, that the knowledge we have gained will contribute positively not only to our understanding, but also to the improvement of quality in CE institutions. This section therefore

discusses the implications of our findings for the policy and management of continuing education.

Our discussions with CE administrators suggest that CE organisations' approaches to quality in Hong Kong could usefully be analysed according to three dimensions. The first is how far the institution adopts a process- (as opposed to a product-) orientation to quality assurance. The second is how far it has formalised its quality assurance systems. And the third is how far the organisation is oriented to accreditation of its programmes.

Process and Product. The distinction between a product and a process orientation to quality is well-developed in the literature. Broadly, modern and market-oriented quality assurance approaches are process oriented. Thus, for example, TQM and ISO-9000 series approaches emphasise not what the end result of a product development process should be, but that the customer should be assured that a stated specification is achieved. In relation to continuing education, therefore, the concern would not be, for instance, that all courses offered by universities should be of a "university standard", but that students should know at the time they enrol more or less precisely what it is that the course will deliver.

A process approach tends to be considerably more bureaucratic, since there is a strong emphasis on documentation of the product development process. Product specifications must be clearly stated (this is difficult in many service industries, and particularly so in an area such as education). Effective routines and procedures must be set in place for ensuring that

stated specifications are attained as a matter of course. Attaining ISO-9000 certification is perhaps the pinnacle of process-orientation, requiring very detailed documentation indeed. (One Hong Kong CE institution which experimented with moving toward ISO-9000 certification did not proceed far partly because of the heavy administrative costs involved.) But process-oriented quality assurance comes in many forms, of which ISO-9000 can be regarded as merely the most sophisticated and detailed.

At the opposite end, a product-oriented approach to quality assurance looks most carefully at the end product, rather than at the production process. In education, of course, the quality of the end-product is often not easy to specify. In the past, definitions were often in very broad terms (Is this course of "university standard"?) However, more recently, as different forms of qualification have been developed, it has been possible to give rather more detailed descriptions. There have been Certificate, Diploma, and various levels of degree courses, as well as various kinds of professional qualification. However, product orientation can also be considered in another form, as for instance when we judge the quality of a class by whether the teacher performed well.

As this last point suggests, the distinction between process and product orientation is not a totally clear one: the two can be seen as opposite poles, but between them lies a spectrum in which aspects of process and product are intermingled to varying degrees.

Formal and Informal. The distinction between formal and informal

approaches is also one chiefly of degree. We take formal approaches to be those which are clearly specified in policy statements or other documentation. Informal approaches, on the other hand, can be seen as having two forms. There are situations where quality is a more or less accidental consequence of measures taken for other reasons. An example would be where the administration of a department is overhauled for financial or managerial reasons: if the department provides classes, this will very probably have an impact on educational quality. Another example, very pertinent in continuing education, is where class size or teaching approach is determined not by the tutor or even the CE administrator, but by the size and design of teaching rooms designed for primary used by other organisations (e.g. schools).

Secondly, there are those situations where quality results from views or actions, but where these are not clearly set down as a policy. For instance, most organisations have a particular ethos, and in educational organisations this ethos often includes attitudes to such matters as teaching, how students should be treated, how rapidly students' work should be returned, and so forth. In a "traditional" university, such attitudes can evolve over years or even decades: they clearly have a major impact on the quality of education, but they may well not be written down. Such imprecise "understandings" still underpin much work in education.

Such informal systems have many strengths: perhaps the most important is that it is almost impossible to write down much of this "tacit knowledge" or ethos, so that attempts to formalise it tend to leave out

things which may seem trivial, but are actually crucial to the humans who compose the "systems". In addition, an ethos is by its nature internalised, so that staff will carry such attitudes with them into new situations. But they also have weaknesses: in particular, it is often difficult to avoid the problem that different staff may have internalised the ethos in different ways, and the outcome is therefore not easy to predict in detail. Arguably, this does not matter; but if CE is regarded as a service industry, in which courses are products sold in a market-place, many would argue that the purchaser has a right to know the detailed specification of the product he or she is asked to buy.

In view of what we have said about the documentation involved in much process-oriented quality assurance, it is important to discuss briefly the relationship between the process/product dimension and the formal/informal dimension. First of all, it should be clear that although process approaches to quality assurance are often highly documented (and therefore very formal), this is not always the case. For example, a CE organisation may have an ethos in which all part-time tutors are lunched by full time staff once or twice a year, at which teaching issues are discussed. This will contribute to teaching quality, and is a form of staff development: it also contributes to the quality process. But unless records are kept of who is lunched, and when, what topics are discussed, and so forth, it cannot be termed "formal".

Conversely, many forms of product-oriented quality assurance are set down formally in documents. Exam papers are written; examinations are

set and taken; standards are established (often imprecisely, but nevertheless formally) in examiners' committee minutes, syllabi, and so forth. These are output standards, and mean that graduates of a particular programme will (broadly speaking) have met a particular standard. What they do not do, of course, is establish mechanisms to ensure that teaching, for example, will reach certain standards of quality, or that feedback from staff to students will be of a certain kind, or whatever.

Accreditation orientation. The third dimension which we identified from our research was how far an institution (or more accurately a programme) was accreditation-oriented. Although in the past, and indeed today, many CE programmes have led to no formal qualification, the trend internationally (and to some extent in Hong Kong) is that more and more courses lead to qualifications. Nonetheless, a large sector of the adult learning market is non-accredited, and likely to remain so. People who wish to know about calligraphy, or how to use spreadsheets, or how to speak French, do not always seek a qualification: the fact that they can ask for a meal when they next visit Paris is enough!

Clearly organisations differ in how far they are oriented toward accreditation. For some, in particular for some of the universities, accreditation is now a major dimension of their work. Some private sector organisations are concerned solely with the delivery of courses leading to degrees of overseas universities and colleges. But others offer only unaccredited courses, and several university sector institutions continue to offer very large number of non-accredited CE courses.

Again, although the accreditation dimension overlaps with the "formal/informal" and "process/product" dimensions, but it is identical with neither. Accreditation of course involves a certain element of formality: degree regulations must be written, and so forth. But the extent of formalisation is often rather limited. By the same token, a non-accredited course may involve very substantial formalisation, with extensive documentation of standards, syllabus, teaching contributions, and so forth.

Analysing your Organisation

How does this schema help us to operationalise quality assurance in Hong Kong CE institutions? We suggest that it is possible to use these dimensions to "measure" the current nature of an institution's orientation to quality assurance in CE. We also believe that it provides a framework for working out institutionally-located strategies for improving quality assurance. We believe this can be demonstrated by exploring case studies of CE institutions in Hong Kong. As far as possible, these will be kept anonymous. We attempted to characterise the institution as "high" (h), "medium" (m) or "low" (l) on each of the dimensions: extent of accreditation (h/m/l); extent of formalisation (h/m/l); extent of process-orientation (h/m/l). The exercise of locating the institutions on these continua is, of course, to some degree a subjective one: the locations were the subject of discussion between the researchers, so that we have some confidence that the locations are firmly based, they are grounded in qualitative judgement rather than measurement.

Case 1. This organisation is a government-sponsored body committed to the provision of adult education (chiefly at degree level) through distance learning. Although our research was conducted with the section of the institution concerned with delivering chiefly non-accredited courses on a "face-to-face" basis, it seemed to us that the accreditation-orientation of the wider organisation had an impact on this section. Overall, we considered the organisation to be in the mid-range in its accreditation orientation, but high in both formalisation and process orientation. This appeared to stem from its situation: its parent institution, a relatively newly-established university institution, had sought to extend into a new sector of the continuing education market, and inevitably did so with structures and approaches developed for degree-level programmes.

Case 2. This organisation is the extra-mural arm of one of the older universities. Although it has moved significantly over the last decade toward increased accreditation, and has always had a relatively formalised bureaucratic-administrative structure, it has only very recently begun to move toward process-oriented approaches to quality assurance. We thus classify the organisation as medium in its accreditation orientation, high in its formalisation, but low in its emphasis on process - that is, it was product rather than process-oriented. This, we suggest, is the characteristic of an old-established university, long reliant on tradition, and on academic and professional ethos. Yet the increasing stress on qualification was only beginning to be reflected in attention to quality as process.

Case 3. This is a private-sector training college. It provides its own qualifications; these are well-regarded by employers, and the maintenance of their standing is regarded as important. However, many non-certificated programmes are also offered. Overall, we categorised this organisation as in the middle range in accreditation orientation, but low in both formalisation and process orientation. This may reflect its private sector location: on the whole, it appeared that it was the public sector institutions which were more subject to influence by the educational quality-as-process agenda.

Case 4. This is a private sector computer-training company. It offers short training courses to the public, on quite clearly-defined aspects of computer studies. None is certificated. We therefore classified the organisation as low in accreditation orientation, formalisation and process-orientation. Immediate customer satisfaction is the clear priority. This, it needs to be said, may well be a rational business strategy for a small operator in a fast-changing market, and one not constrained by the demands of public scrutiny.

Case 5. This organisation was established to offer in Hong Kong degree programmes from an overseas university. The teaching is offered chiefly by forms of on-line distance teaching. We classified this as high in accreditation orientation, highly formalised, and also high in process orientation. Whilst it would be unwise to generalise overmuch from a single case, it may be that it reflects the need for a private sector agency to be able to demonstrate to an overseas university institutions that its

distance learning organisation is sound and reliable. Having selected the delivery of high-technology distance learning on behalf of overseas universities as its market niche, the pressures on the agency to deliver and satisfy the university were substantial. Strong formalisation and process orientation helped it achieve this. It may well also have been influenced by the legislative and policy environment of the university for which it was agent in its home country.

Quality Positioning

This model allows us to "map" the location of individual institutions, in terms of their approaches to quality. It raises, however, two important questions: Does it matter where on this "map" an organisation is? Is it possible to move from one position to another?

Our answer, in common with much contemporary literature on quality assurance, is that it depends. The position of an institution in relation to these dimensions is in large measure a matter of strategic choice. Of course, "choice" is often not deliberate: organisations "end up" in particular positions as the accidental result of decisions taken (or not taken) for reasons largely unconnected with "quality". Nevertheless, organisations are making choices in accepting the position they are in.

But does it matter where an organisation is? Again, our answer is a contingent one. It matters; but there is no "best" position. What is "best" for a particular organisation will depend on the characteristics (including

market position) and aims of, and resources available to, that organisation. So it could well be inappropriate for an organisation developing short computing courses in a highly volatile market to devote major resources of time and effort to process-oriented quality assurance, just as a low-accreditation, informal, product orientation would be inappropriate to a large educational institution.

This is not to say, of course, that all decisions will result in the same "quality" in educational provision. Decisions may be made for sound strategic reasons, but they involve the acceptance that some decisions will tend to result in lower quality programmes than others. Broadly speaking, we take the view that more formalised, and more process-oriented, approaches to quality assurance generally lead to the offering of higher quality programmes. But there are exceptions (for example, in a rapidly-changing environment, the "best" programme may be one of relatively low quality, because the alternative is no programme at all).

The contemporary trend internationally is toward accreditation, process and formality. Hong Kong cannot escape this. But the trend is not uniform, and is more marked in some sectors of the market than in others. Broadly speaking, formalisation and process orientation provide rational strategies for organisations capable of major investment in internal systems, and for which a significant market share is realisable and relatively predictable. Such systems enable the organisation to 'add value' to their product, and demonstrate its value to the market. In some sectors of the market, and for some - especially smaller - organisations, business

is far more risky in the short term. The pattern of demand is unpredictable. It is highly susceptible to new products launched elsewhere - computer trainers, for instance, must essentially follow the new software and hardware developments in the computer industry. Small organisations in general are less able to spread their risks over different sectors of the market.

Organisations which wish to establish or maintain a role as a brand or market leader - that is, those which wish to become or remain major and publicly-recognised providers of CE - will find it difficult to escape the demands of formalisation and process. They will find it difficult to avoid the need to invest heavily in quality assurance systems and procedures. This pressure is strong, simply as a market phenomenon. But it is also difficult to escape the conclusion that the organisations which have led the way in establishing formalised quality assurance procedures have been in, or strongly influenced by, the public sector.

However, it is clear from our study that organisations are not uniform. Large organisations with strict and tight quality assurance procedures may have to loosen their procedures in order to remain competitive in certain sectors of the market. Typically, for instance, they may have rather looser controls over short, uncertificated courses than over accredited programmes. This appears a rational strategy. We suspect that the general quality agenda of a large organisation tends to 'rub off' even on such non-certificated programmes. This is, however, an assumption which remains to be investigated.

Our view, however, in contrast to the suggestion of an earlier study (Chung, Ho, and Liu 1994), is that a strong and energetic public sector of continuing education, subject to continuing scrutiny from the public and official sectors, provides a strong positive influence for the maintenance and improvement of quality in Hong Kong continuing education. While there are market pressures toward higher quality, it is far from clear that they would override the countervailing pressures for short-term returns and market flexibility in an entirely open market. As it is, Hong Kong's continuing education continues to be organised on the basis of constrained markets, strongly led by oligopolistic and market-oriented, but ultimately publicly-controlled, institutions. By and large, we take the view that this strengthens quality throughout the market for lifelong learning.

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Acknowledgements

This research is partially funded by the Committee of Research and Conference Grants (CRCG) and the SPACE Research Award, the University of Hong Kong. The authors wish to express their gratitude to Dr. Y. F. Mok, Mrs. Lillian Lau, Miss Lulu Chan, and all the participating organizations for their invaluable support.

Questions:

Q1. Can you tell us something about yourself?

a. What area of courses are you working on?

_____

b. How long have you been working in this field?

_____ years

Q2. What, in your perception, are the factors that make up a "high quality" course?

(interviewer will write down the items)

(If asked to define the term "course"; interviewer will state that the main focus of the study is on the short courses)

Q3. Please elaborate these factors.

(the interviewer will summarize the factors mentioned and prompt whenever necessary; i.e. the interviewer will ask sufficiently to facilitate interviewee to elaborate his/her view)

Q4. Please rank the five most important factors that you mentioned.

Q5. We are interested in what an course administrator can do to ensure his/her programmes are of high quality. You have told us what

you think the important factors are.

a. Can you tell me what you do in relation to each of these factors?

b. Are there any other steps you think should be taken?

c. Can you say what have stopped you taking these steps so far?

Q6. Before we end this interview, we have a checklist that we'll ask every one.

Check List

Please circle the answer that would most accurately describe the situation in your work/your institution.

(Always = 5, Mostly = 4, Often = 3, Occasional = 2, Nil = 1)

Tutor Selection

a)	Do you or your institute interview applicants before appointment?	5	4	3	2	1
b)	Is there any minimum academic qualification required?	5	4	3	2	1
c)	Do you keep CV/application form of tutor?	5	4	3	2	1

Tutor Performance

d) Do you evaluate your tutors by

-	class visit	5	4	3	2	1
-	discussion meeting after course completed	5	4	3	2	1
-	students evaluation	5	4	3	2	1
-	examine attendance & assessment record	5	4	3	2	1
-	others					

_____

_____

e)	Do you keep student attendance record?	5	4	3	2	1

Tutor Support

f)	Do you provide teaching handbook/guideline to tutor?	5	4	3	2	1
g)	Do you provide any training to tutor?	5	4	3	2	1

Notes and Handouts

h)	Do your students receive notes & study materials?	5	4	3	2	1

Student communication channels

i)	Do you provide course evaluation form to students?	5	4	3	2	1
j)	What other channels are available to obtain students' comments?	5	4	3	2	1
	_____	5	4	3	2	1
	_____	5	4	3	2	1
	_____	5	4	3	2	1

Education Equipment

k)	Do you allow individual student to use education equipments such as computer, language laboratory or other instrument outside class hours?	5	4	3	2	1

Student Admission

l) How many of your courses have student selection exercise?	5	4	3	2	1

Award/examination

m) Do you or your institute provide certificate for all courses?	5	4	3	2	1
n) Does student need to pass any assessment before obtaining a certificate?	5	4	3	2	1

Course Evaluation

o) Before a course is repeated, do you review course design by					
- comments from colleagues	5	4	3	2	1
- comments from tutors	5	4	3	2	1
- comments from students	5	4	3	2	1
- comments from formal committee	5	4	3	2	1

- others

_____

_____

Finally, we would like to have the following information:

a. What is your education background?

   Secondary/Post-secondary/University/Post Graduate/Phd

b. Have you received any specific training on organizing ACE courses?

   Yes/No

Thank you again for your help.

For our reference and information, we would like to get a copy of Prospectus/Course information published by your institute. Thank you.

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