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HK institute thrives in 'open' world

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IN 1989, the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong faced a community unconvinced of the validity and credibility of open and distance learning.

"They were still saying that the on-campus student was getting better education than the off-campus student, even though in many cases the opposite was true," said Associate Professor Michael Robertshaw, who has been with the institute since it started. It was accorded university status in May this year.

"Tertiary education at that time typified the closed nature of traditional ivory towers. Existing standards were perceived as dependent on high entry standards and the quality of conventional education was taken for granted.

"The introduction of an open education system produced disbelief that anything of value could be produced there," he said.

"Aware of this, the institute's staff worked hard to address this misconception," he added.

The university now offers more than 50 distance learning degrees and sub-degree programmes to 70,000 adult learners.

The institute was set up to meet the need for greater access to tertiary education for working adults and to retrain workers to meet the changes in industrial and commercial sectors.

Robertshaw was speaking during a pre-conference workshop at the 11th Annual Conference and Exhibition of the Asian Association of Open Universities at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

This was the first time that the conference, on the theme "Quality Assurance In Distance And Open Learning", was being held in Malaysia. It was hosted by Institut Teknologi Mara and was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last Wednesday.

The New Straits Times is the official newspaper for the conference.

Robertshaw said the Hong Kong Government gave the founders of the institute four months to prepare for the first intake.

"There was also pressure from students for the speedy development of programmes. They were eager to improve their qualification and earning power quickly. Many hoped to emigrate before the change of sovereignty to China and educational background played a major role in an individual's eligibility."

He added that the institute used standards and quality systems from other established distance education providers and this was a key factor in the speed with which the school achieved recognition as a provider of quality education.

The British Open University played a big part during the early years through the provision of courses, consultants and some senior staff.

The institute looked to the comparable British Open University system for a starting point, although its indirect influence decreased as the institution matured.

Robertshaw said that the institute has 60 full-time academicians who are helped by 750 part-time tutors. Each tutor supports between 30 and 35 students through tutorials, assignments and telephone contact. "The first 161 students graduated in 1993 and more than 1,000 graduated in 1995. In the future, we hope to produce at least 2,000 graduates every year."

Robertshaw also said that the perception of quality often depends upon the person being asked.

"For example, institutions might think that quality graduates were being produced but often the employers feel that students had not been trained for the job they were supposed to do."

Robertshaw said that the institute established a quality improvement team to review quality across the institute and to foster a quality culture in which people took responsibility for quality rather than relied on formal systems and procedures.

He said one could argue that the institute's management should have proceeded slowly to allow time to train staff, evolve quality systems and encourage a culture of "getting it right the first time".

"However, a slower pace would have required 'quality' time - something that none of the customers would allow or could afford," he said.

"The Government wanted an expansion in adult education quickly and at minimal cost.

Students wanted to graduate quickly, external reviewers wanted quality systems in place immediately and competitors were always ready to take over the market." Robertshaw said the institute's solution to the questions of quality during the first few years might not have been the best, but they ensured that students were provided with a high quality education of international standing.

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