

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Senate Paper

Regulatory Issues about the New Curriculum

Introduction

1. The Senate at its meeting on 8 December 2010 approved the new four-year curriculum for implementation in 2012. The version of the curriculum has been made public on the web at

<http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/334/english/index.html>

since 25 January 2011. But it is also expected that there will inevitably be further revisions (a) of a minor nature, (b) as a result of any decisions to adopt broad-based admission leading to adjustments in the first-year curriculum, (c) as a result of feedback from the Light Programme Reviews which have just commenced, and (d) in the light of UGC feedback to the ADP, expected in June 2011.

2. The preparation of the curriculum proposals present a rare opportunity for the University to review its entire undergraduate curriculum afresh, and to bring to curriculum design and its presentation a level of quality and consistency that would have been impossible in the past. This paper makes a number of general observations and proposed guidelines for Senate approval, in order to improve the presentation of the curriculum, including many aspects of descriptions at course (rather than programme) level which were not considered by the Senate.

Outcomes-Based Approach

OBA and alignment

3. It is gratifying to note that all programmes have very clearly adopted an OBA to teaching and learning, with a broad set of outcomes that cascade from the expected graduate attributes defined in the University Strategic Plan (2006). Moreover, the designs show conscious effort to align teaching and learning activities as well as assessment strategies with the desired outcomes. These features must be considered a major success of the planning effort and the OBA initiatives over the past few years, and will contribute to quality education that is fit-for-purpose.

Statements of outcomes

4. However, the drafts show a variety of disparate tones in the expression of the desired outcomes. In general, these statements should not be expressed in *aspirational* tones ('It is hoped that students will achieve ...'), in *prospective* language ('Students will learn ...'), in terms of *intention* ('This programme is designed so that students will ...'), or in *process* language ('Through lectures and tutorials, students will ...'). Rather, the language should be one of *outcomes* at the end of the programme ('Graduate from this programme will have acquired the ability to ...'). Programmes are requested to revise the tone of the outcome statements as appropriate.

5. Realistically, some students may *not* acquire or demonstrate the abilities stated. Given the concept of alignment, assessment should be designed such that students who do *not* demonstrate the abilities (to a minimum desired level) should not pass, and only by commitment to this philosophy would the outcomes be more than empty words. This is the reason why outcome statements should be couched in forceful and explicit terms such as 'Graduates will have ...'.

Regulatory Issues

6. The curriculum document, apart from introductory statements and parts clearly labeled as recommendations, must be seen as a set of regulations. Especially as the University becomes larger and more complex, and there is increasing flexibility for students to choose courses, change Majors, elect Double Majors etc., it is important that these regulations are clear and consistent across departments and programmes. In order to avoid confusion and controversy, and to minimize the need to revert to the Senate for interpretation or exceptional approval in particular cases, the regulations must be unambiguous, and must cater for various hypothetical (if rare) situations that may occur. Ideally, the regulations should also be simple, so that they can be implemented by information systems such as CUSIS.

7. With this in mind, recommendations are presented below on the treatment of a number of issues. Examples cited are mostly hypothetical.

Courses taken more than once

8. The draft proposals contain examples of courses which can be taken for credit more than once. A typical example might be CHLL2010 Tang Poetry, which in different offerings would deal with different poets, e.g. Li Bai in one year, and Du Fu in another.

- (a) Programmes should propose for Faculty Board approval if two offerings of the same course are to be regarded as distinct; ‘distinct’ should mean a different student learning experience because the desired learning outcomes, content, learning activities and assessment fit together in an arguably different fashion. (If the goal is to learn about Tang poetry as a genre, then whether Li Bai or Du Fu is used as the example, the learning outcomes would largely overlap, and it may not be appropriate to regard the two offerings as distinct.)
- (b) The distinction will be labeled via a subtitle, e.g. CHLL2010 Tang Poetry (Li Bai) or CHLL 2010 Tang Poetry (Du Fu), shown in the timetable and on the transcript.
- (c) Courses with different subtitles can be taken more than once for credit, unless declared to be mutually exclusive (see Paragraphs 17-22).
- (d) But even so, there should be a limit of taking the same course (with the same course code) at most twice, unless explicit approval is given by the Senate to the contrary.

9. In contrast, a long sequence of similar-sounding courses (in one case as many as 8, each of one unit) can be taken for credit, provided these are given different codes in the normal way, and also different titles, e.g. MUSC1011 String Instruments I to MUSC1018 String Instruments VIII. This would not fall under the rule of taking the *same* course many times.

Courses for Major students only

10. The draft curricula show many instances of courses labeled as ‘For Major students only’. Such a restriction may be inappropriate in many circumstances, if only because the overall curriculum should be open, inviting students to explore; thus restrictions should be avoided unless there are strong reasons for doing so. More seriously, restrictions worded in this way would be technically problematic in various circumstances.

- (a) If a faculty adopts broad-based admission, it may not be clear whether a first-year student is or is not a Major.
- (b) The interpretation is ambiguous when a student changes Major after (or worse yet, during) the course.
- (c) The new curriculum encourages students to take Double Majors. As an example, a student whose Major is English may *intend* to study for a

second Major in Translation. Thus s/he will take many ‘Major only’ courses in Translation – even before s/he formally declares the second Major (usually in the final year). The restriction would create difficulties.

11. Thus, the following guidelines are proposed.

- (a) Some programmes (e.g. MBChB, Nursing) have good reasons to restrict their courses to Major students, and should continue to impose such restrictions, but preferably in the preamble to the Major Programme (e.g. ‘Nursing courses other than NURS1001 are only open to Major students, unless approved by the School’) rather than in the description of individual courses.
- (b) Courses that relate to professional internship can likewise be restricted to Major students.
- (c) In cases where the restriction stems from the level of the course (which a non-Major is likely to find difficult), the condition should be stated in terms of a (long) list of prerequisite courses, which would avoid the problem of changing Major identity and second Major. In any event, if a non-Major student has taken as many prerequisite courses as a Major student, there is no academic reason to exclude the student – even for a capstone course as the culmination of the Major.
- (d) In other cases, the condition should be stated as an advisory condition (see Paragraph 29) rather than as a regulation (which, once approved by the Senate, would require a high level of approval for exceptions). However, certain conditions can be enforced administratively at department level: the permission of the offering department will usually be needed for courses that carry such an advisory condition; and non-Majors will have low priority in enrolment when there are capacity constraints.

Courses not for Major students

12. In other cases, there is the opposite restriction: some courses are labeled as *not* for Major students. There is again the problem of change of Majors or intending second Majors.

13. One reason for exclusion is illustrated by the following example. The Physics Department offers PHYS1020 as a required course for its Majors, and a slightly easier course PHYS1010 intended for non-Majors, with almost the same content; the latter

may then be labeled as ‘not for Major students’. In such cases, the condition of ‘not for Major students’ should be replaced by mutual or one-way exclusion with a Major required course.

14. This recommended formulation, in avoiding reference to the status of the student, has the advantage in scenarios such as the following. (a) A Physics student takes PHYS1020, then in the next year changes Major to Chemistry. S/he then takes PHYS1010. (b) A non-science student takes both PHYS1010 and PHYS1020. Both of these are undesirable, but would not have been prohibited in the original formulation.

15. General Education (GE) courses will be exempted from this guideline of not referring to the Major status. Thus, GE courses can continue to refer to ‘Not for X Majors’ as a regulatory statement. This condition will be enforced at the time of enrolment, but a subsequent change of Major may require students to take another GE course in course fulfillment, in cases where the course exclusion rule applies.

16. Some Faculties may also wish to exercise restrictions for Faculty Package courses based on Major status (or intending Major status). The relevant Faculty Boards should ensure that the rules are unambiguous, and report the rules to the Registry for record.

Mutual / One-way exclusions

17. In many cases, a course A is labeled as ‘Not for students who have taken course B’; referring to the example in Paragraph 14, one might state in the description of PHYS1010 ‘Not for students who have taken PHYS1020’. Other examples of this proposed restriction might be: a Business Economics course is not open to students who have taken a similar Economics course; a Quantitative Finance course teaching statistical tools is not open to students who have taken a similar Statistics course; a General Education course offered by the Department of Sociology is not open to students who have taken certain Sociology courses. In many of these cases, the taking of the two courses in a reverse sequence may be allowed.

18. In general, such exclusions should also prohibit students from taking the two courses *simultaneously*. Thus the primary condition is *one-way exclusion*, to be stated in the course description of course A as ‘Not for students who have taken or are simultaneously taking Course B’, where Course B is usually the more advanced course.

19. It is up to the Department/ offering unit of course A to decide on imposing such an exclusion condition in the description of course A. In cases where the two offering units are different, then as a matter of courtesy, it should inform and discuss

with the Department/ offering unit for course B whether (a) the reverse exclusion should apply (see Paragraph 20), and (b) whether there should be mutual recognition and the possibility of course substitution (see Paragraph 23).

20. If the Department/ offering unit for course B decides on imposing the reverse exclusion, then the two courses become *mutually exclusive*.

21. Thus, in cases where the exclusion is only one-way, students can still take the two courses, but only in one order.

22. One-way or mutual exclusion is *not transitive*: if courses A and B are exclusive, and B and C are also exclusive, it does not necessarily follow that A and C are exclusive; a separate determination has to be made. For example, if A and B have 60% overlap, and B and C have 60% overlap, theoretically it is possible for A and C to have only 20% overlap.

Course substitutions in fulfillment of requirements

23. Students having taken course A (or a cluster of courses A1, A2, ...) may apply to substitute this for a similar course B that is stated as required for fulfillment of graduation requirements.

- (a) Where one single course (e.g. A) is used to substitute for another course (e.g. B), this should be allowed only if an exclusion condition has been declared: students who have taken course A cannot take course B. More flexibility is allowed when a cluster of courses is involved.
- (b) Since substitutes are closely related to exclusion (both reflecting a large overlap), any Department/ offering unit that declares an exclusion has the obligation to seriously consider allowing substitutions. In fact, any offering Department/ unit will have to present academic arguments to justify exclusion without recognition for substitution.
- (c) Substitution should be considered and handled by the Programme that requires course B, and its supervising Faculty Board. The Programme that offers course A (if it is different) and its supervising Faculty will have no say in this regard.
- (d) The course substitution may be only one way. The reverse substitution will be handled by the Programme that offers/requires course A, and its supervising Faculty, which may reach a different conclusion.

- (e) In most cases, the substitution is based only on the pair of courses, and is student-independent. In these cases, the decision should be recorded as such, and future applications by another student must be approved in the same way, and therefore administratively in these cases, the information should be shown in the course descriptions for advance information by (prospective) students. In other cases where the substitution is either based on a cluster of courses or involves other factors (e.g. an ELTU course exempted not just because of another course, but in addition because of study abroad in an English-speaking country; an engineering course exempted not just because of another course but also an award in a design competition), then the decision is student-dependent and does not set a binding precedent for later cases. However, the additional considerations in granting the substitution must be documented.

24. Notwithstanding Paragraph 23(a), the offering Department/ unit can grant exceptional approval to a student to take course B.

Equivalent courses

25. Courses will be said to be *equivalent* if exemptions have been granted both ways. Where the exemption is based on the courses alone, such decisions should be shown in future course descriptions. Again, equivalence is *not transitive*.

Timing of taking a course

26. In a credit-unit system, the University and the Programme concerned only specify, as a matter of regulation, the totality of courses required for graduation, but the student is free (within reason) to determine the pace and order of taking the courses, subject only to prerequisite requirements in each case. Thus a statement such as ‘This course should be taken in Year 2’ or ‘For final year students only’ must be regarded only as a *recommendation*, not a *regulation*. An exception is the first College General Education course required in the first year of study.

27. The difference is that departure from a regulation requires approval by the Senate or a body to which the authority is explicitly delegated, whereas departure from a recommendation requires no such approval – the student is only expected to seek academic advice, and more importantly to assume responsibility for any consequences. These include the possibility (e.g. because of a cascading sequence of prerequisite requirements) that the student may not be able to graduate in time, and a possibly lower priority in registering for a course when it is selected in a year/term other than the one recommended. The Registry will ensure that the students’

responsibility in this regard, which comes with the right to choose their own pace, is written into Regulations.

28. In terms of the programme description, this means that
- (a) in general, the pattern of course selection should be placed in a separate section clearly labeled with the word ‘recommended’ (see Paragraph 35), and
 - (b) if similar information is conveyed within the description for an individual course, it should be labeled as ‘advisory’ or ‘recommended’.

Advisory statements

29. Many of the features mentioned above should therefore be contained under the heading of ‘Advisory’.

Sample

30. The attachment shows a sample course description that illustrates some of these situations.

Using a course for two purposes

31. Some programme proposals stipulate that a course cannot be used for two purposes. As an example, a few Statistics courses can be counted towards the Economics Major requirement, but it is stated that these courses then cannot count towards the Minor Programme in Statistics. Such a stipulation requires agreement from the other programme – in this example Statistics; it would then call for time and effort spent on negotiations, and the Registry would have the burden of checking that any such stipulations are stated consistently in the two places. Without such an agreement, it would amount to one Programme intruding into the conditions of another Minor Programme. More importantly, such a stipulation goes against academic fairness: of two students who have completed the same Statistics courses, one will qualify for a Minor whereas the other (being an Economics student) will not. Such stipulations also go against the spirit of encouraging Double Majors, which are possible precisely because some courses can serve two purposes.

32. Therefore it is recommended that all such stipulations should be removed. Nevertheless, to guard against Minors being obtained by simply assembling courses already taken for various other purposes, there should be vigilance in approving Minor programmes to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of courses from the Programme’s own list. There should also be vigilance in approving Major

programmes that may be an assembly of courses from other programmes, thus allowing easy satisfaction of several Minor requirements; the decision is ultimately academic, and should be addressed at the time of programme approval.

Presentation Issues

Style and consistency

33. The curriculum will eventually be published on the web rather than in hard copy. This has the advantage of allowing periodic updates. More importantly, this format allows more information to be made available to students before choosing a course, in line with a recommendation of the QAC:

‘The QAC recommends that CUHK considers introducing a mandatory, standard template for course outlines across the University that contains sufficient information for students to make informed decisions about course selection; and that this information is published well before the date of enrolment for a course.’ (Recommendation 2)

There is also the advantage of showcasing the rich tapestry and high quality of courses to external stakeholders, including prospective students.

34. More information is therefore made ‘public’ as part of a University-level document; for example, the field ‘long description’ in the Course Outline that will be available through CUSIS contains much information that used to be handed out in class. As a result, a higher standard is needed for the accuracy and quality of the statements therein (including accuracy of the translation across bilingual versions (bilingual versions are exempted for Chinese and English language, MBChB and LLB courses which are monolingual by the nature of their disciplines and/or professional requirements) and for the degree of consistency across courses and programmes. Programmes are urged to understand the higher expectations, and to take suitable editorial action.

Recommended course selection pattern

35. As explained above, the time when any particular course is to be taken should be regarded as a recommendation, not a regulation. Thus, such stipulations should for the most part be contained in a separate section clearly labeled as ‘recommendations’. A standard format has been provided for this extra section on PPW.

Local issues

36. Many courses especially in BA, Education and Social Science quite naturally and rightly deal with issues of local relevance. However, since (a) knowledge is universal, (b) we need to cater to the needs and interest of non-local and exchange students, (c) even our local students have interests and career aspirations beyond Hong Kong, and (d) the University has a global perspective, in most (but not all) cases it is advisable to adopt a language that cites Hong Kong not as the target of interest or enquiry *per se*, but as the source of examples that illustrate a general principle, theory or issue. For example, 'Topics include the mutual fund industry in Hong Kong' can be changed to 'Topics include the mutual fund industry, with examples drawn from Hong Kong'. The difference may appear minor, but reveals how the University and the programme are positioned. Programmes are requested to review the language used in such cases.

Approval Sought

37. The Senate is requested to approve the regulatory issues in relation to the new four-year curriculum of undergraduate programmes for implementation in 2012 as endorsed by the Sub-group on Four-year Curriculum Design.

Attachment

[Approved by the Senate at its Third Meeting (2010-11) held on 9 March 2011.]

Illustrations of Various Conditions

PHYS2020 Thermodynamics

Course Description:

This course is designed ...

Exemption can be granted for CHEM2020.

如已修讀 CHEM2020，可獲豁免修讀本科。

*Prerequisite: PHYS1020; Co-requisite: MATH2010; Mutual Exclusion: PHYS2010; Equivalence with: ELEG2111.

先修科目：PHYS1020；同修科目：MATH2010；不可共修的科目 <no existing Chinese translation since it is currently worded as 'Not for XXX Majors'>：PHYS2010;相等科目：ELEG2111

TRAN3456 Introduction to Theories of Translation

Course Description:

This course covers ...

Advisory: For Majors only; to be taken in Year 2.

參考意見：只供主修生於第二修業學年修讀。

CHLL2010 Tang Poetry

Course Description:

A different poet may be featured in each offering of the course.

Offerings with different subtitles can be taken for credit, up to a maximum of two times.

學生最多可修讀教授不同課題的相同科目及取得相關學分兩次。

ELEG4567 Electronics Project

Course Description:

This is a capstone course ...

Advisory: For final year Major students only.

參考意見：只供主修生於最後修業學年修讀。

*Prerequisites: ELEG3010, 3020, 3030, 3040 or consent of the instructor.

先修科目：ELEG3010, 3020, 3030, 3040 或經授課教師批准。

*These information will be presented as 'Enrolment Requirements' under CUSIS, hence will not be included as part of the course description.