

*First (and perhaps only) draft*

In support of the

proposal that HKUST department heads be elected by faculty

I make two arguments in support of my proposal.

1. The first argument is that department heads elected by department faculty is “standard practice” at universities.

I e-mailed the proposal to all 16 faculty-elected Senators. One Senator explained that in his experience the standard practice is to have department heads appointed top down. As it turned out, this Senator’s experience was solely (or near-solely?) based on medical schools. HKUST is not a medical school.

My experience, with economics departments (and I think similarly in other social science disciplines) is that department heads are elected by faculty.

If across the disciplines represented at HKUST the standard practice is for faculty to elect their department head, then the argument can end here. The standard is a historically grown practice that emerged as a winner on a market for models of university administration. No single person, and no collective of persons may be able to grasp the rationale of why this standard is the survivor/winner, nor is there any need to try to understand.

This does not rule out the possibility to deviate from the standard, but any deviation should be explicitly justified. If across the disciplines represented at HKUST the standard practice is for faculty to elect their department head, then HKUST should revert to the standard without question asked. Anybody who does not want to automatically revert to the standard should have to make an argument for not reverting.

Personally, I can see the plausibility for centralization at a newly established university with only few experienced faculty and otherwise predominantly Assistant Professors fresh out of grad school. If this were the original rationale for our current system, then this argument no longer holds today.

I do not accept a special “Hong Kong” argument along the lines that Hong Kong is, politically, a dictatorship, and therefore the university needs to be organized along similar lines. Our faculty in their research and teaching are measured not against the Hong Kong political system but against academics at universities around the world. Unless there are specific government-imposed constraints on the organizational structure, including the explicit constraint that department heads be appointed top down, any “Hong Kong” argument carries no water.

2. If across the disciplines represented at HKUST the standard practice were for department heads to be appointed top down (which I know is not so for economics and probably similarly for the other social sciences), then I need to make an argument *in favor of deviating* from the top down appointment standard.

I make that argument along two lines: on administrative / management efficiency grounds and on faculty performance / participation grounds.

Administrative / management efficiency:

While the military top-down structure is efficient in transmitting central commands to the local executioners of these commands, it is inefficient in responding to local idiosyncrasies. De facto, it appears local issues need to be passed on to the center for ultimate decision, or local “leaders” suppress the upward information flow and leave issues unresolved.

Second, there is, de facto, a tendency among local “leaders” to sniff the wind from above and to play along with whatever they think that the person who appointed them may possibly prefer. --- Even in (our) department faculty meetings, a lot of time is spent second-guessing what the dean or VPAA may want, instead of figuring out what we think is optimal.

Third, the center in the past has frequently been incapable, causing great suffering locally. One example is the TLQPR, which took months of faculty time in every department to correct what I regard as a failure of the center to put into place a university-wide, efficient, teaching quality control structure. Another example are the self-financing programs, where the center failed to establish procedures and left each department to grope around in the dark, and again to spend months of faculty time in different departments trying to figure out what can be done and what can't be done.

It would seem more efficient for the center to focus on that which is best done university-wide, and to devolve what is better done at the grassroots levels to the grassroots. A military command structure, de facto, always means centralization.

Faculty performance / participation:

As far as I know faculty at HKUST enjoy exactly one right in writing: the right to exit at four months' notice. The department head decides on what days and what times I teach (this I have in writing). I am not allowed to table a motion at a department meeting. Decisions taken at department faculty meetings have no binding power on anyone. Department committees are appointed by department heads, to his/her liking, but except for the academic review committee, have no real say. Trivialities such as the offers to postgraduate students have to be vetted and signed by the department head. The department head privately and without any need for explanation determines changes to my salary. (The salary review process by committee is 100% fake.) I cannot take vacation without the department head's signature. The “Senate” is fake in that it is not a faculty Senate (a Senate that represents faculty) but predominantly reflects administrative appointments. When my salary is cut, the department head issues threats (or passes them on from above) without specifying the consequences. There is no university ombuds(wo/)man. A few years ago a common saying among faculty was “meiyou fayanquan” 没有发言权 (no right to speak up) when it came to department matters. I think these practices more resemble a Shenzhen sweatshop than an academic environment, and I don't think I am the only one who is critical of the current practices, and possibly uncomfortable working in such an environment. My impression is that by now many faculty may not care any more about the department and withdraw as much as possible. The department head becomes a bit of a joke (albeit a powerful one).

The current system is marked by the total absence of checks and balances. This is made worse by the total absence of any supervision mechanism for the local arms of the center.

If department heads are elected by faculty, the faculty become the department head's Constituency. This creates a momentum for decisions and initiatives from the bottom up. The bottom-up momentum and the top-down momentum come together between Dean and department head. The potential friction at this point serves as a check and balance.

The election of department heads by faculty may not always be optimal. My feeling is that, on average, it's significantly better than what we currently have. Also, a number of checks and balances can be imposed on the election mechanism, with veto rights and rules on how to overrule vetos.