

## **What's special about SOSC, HKUST, and Hong Kong academia**

(10 Nov. 2006, 8 Sept. 08, June 09)

As at other universities, professors at HKUST teach / do research / provide “service” (and disagree at times). But HKUST / Hong Kong, and specifically SOSC -- the Social Science Division, a department of the School of Humanities and Social Science -- come with a few peculiarities that do not match standard university patterns in the U.S. and that are not obvious to the uninitiated.

### (1) Tenure

It's called ‘substantiation’ in Hong Kong, and for all practical purposes, such as in the requests sent to outsiders for an evaluation of the candidate, it's the same as tenure. The small print is that substantiation means one can be fired at four months' notice, at any point in time, no reason given. (The small print is not pointed out to the external reviewers.)

The small print matters, for example, when the university wants to rewrite faculty contracts to the faculty's detriment, as happened with the three salary cuts between 2002 and 2005. Division head and personnel office staff (via telephone) issued veiled threats that one would be fired if one didn't sign.

The internal review procedures involve a complex 6-stage process. In SOSC, if you are lucky, the committee at the first stage will contain one or two persons who may understand your research. Beyond that, it's likely you'll be all in the hands of people who don't. For how an actual review works, see the separate entry on academic review.

Tenure typically means promotion to Associate Professor. The promotion from Associate Professor to Full Professor follows a similar process.

### (2) Salary promotion

Theoretically, it can happen every year in the annual merit review. For some indication of how the annual merit review works, see the separate entry on annual “merit” review.

We have no information on who gets what in this annual exercise. As far as I recall, the VPAA at one point wanted only the very best to get a salary increase each year (was that 10% or 20% of the faculty?), while a senior colleague in the division may have mentioned something around 1/3 in a particular year.

The rumor is that the B-School regularly increases faculty salaries on a much broader scale.

SOSC sits on a large pot of money from self-financing programs but, unlike the B-School (?), is not allowed to use it for salary increases. At the time when we were pressured by the admin to set up a self-financing program, we were told this was needed to keep the division running and to pay our salaries. Once we had significant money from the self-financing program, the SOSC faculty members in a division meeting voted clear guidelines on how much money to use for salary increases (this was probably spring 07) but the money wasn't released and

nobody ever got an explanation. (This is also generally representative of the relevance of division faculty decisions.)

Salaries now go up and down, at the whim of the administration. Some years ago we followed the government's civil service pay scale and pay changes. Then it was semi-announced that we decoupled --- explicit statements by the administration, in writing, on non-trivialities are rare, the preference is for kafkaesk administration with no transparency and an expectation of faculty IQs in the range around 50. Contracts were rewritten: all the regular pay promotion on the promise of which we were hired was removed and a clause was added that salaries can go down. In 2009, salaries are likely to be cut again, giving (supposedly decoupled) civil service pay cuts as justification...

### (3) Full professorship / post-tenure promotion

I have experienced the process as contradictory (different levels of the university setting unpublished, contradictory requirements), violating or bypassing university rules, fundamentally unprofessional, and, in terms of logical reasoning, bizarre. See the separate entry on academic review.

Funny little things can make one stop and wonder: why has every single associate professor in the division who has reached his sixth year after substantiation not applied for full professorship in this sixth year (or anytime soon after, let alone anytime before)?

### (4) The trap

Suppose you are a China economist. You join SOSC and teach an econ grad course; the number of SOSC students who can follow your course will tend towards zero. You may have a couple of customers from the B-School. If enrolment is below 25% of the quota, your course will be cancelled and you'll have to teach an extra course next year. Unlikely that the division head ever approves that course again – you may not even get a first go. I.e., you can't teach any grad course that involves grad level econ theories or tools.

In addition, you may have very few people to talk econ, and there are no seminars in your field. The miniature-sized econ dept. in the B-School is little comfort because it seems to be focusing on macro, metrics, and neuroeconomics.

If you join SOSC and give in to the teaching pressures (can't teach a serious course in the Chinese economy, or in economics) and go by the types of seminars we have (typically general sociology level, sometime poli sci), you can figure out for yourself how you will look on the econ job market. You are trapped here. And if you can't leave, why should your salary rise?

Unless you are a sociologist, the strategy for survival in SOSC is to rigorously focus on research, in your discipline, head over to the other universities for seminars/ communication, ignore this division as much as possible, keep your eyes open for jobs, and leave when a good offer comes along. --- It's hard to focus on research and remain enthusiastic in a, in comparison to good universities in North America, unprofessional environment. There may also exist an anti-Hong Kong hurdle when trying to get back to a North American university.

(5) Appointment “with duties as assigned by the Head of Division of Social Science”

That’s what my contract says. There is no further clarification.

Section 10a of the Terms of Service says “The University may at any time terminate the appointment of an appointee...”

For the meaning of “University,” the Terms of Service refer to the HKUST Ordinance, which says: "University [Chinese name omitted] means The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology established by section 3;" And section 3 says:

"3. Establishment and incorporation of the University

There is hereby established a body corporate with perpetual succession to be known in English as The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and in Chinese as [Chinese name omitted], which in its name either in English or Chinese may sue and be sued." --- (Whatever logical lapse there may be, it’s not mine.)

The annex to the contract, the “Terms of Service for Academic and Equivalent Administrative Staff (II),” lists four duties and zero rights --- Perform the duties prescribed in Letter of Appointment; appointee’s services shall be exclusively at the disposal of the University; it is within the discretion of the University to require the attendance of the appointee; appointee shall not be absent from duty without obtaining leave from the University.

A HKUST faculty member has none of the rights a faculty member at a decent U.S. university has, from joint decisions on the promotion of a colleague, the selection of a department head, traveling to another university to give a presentation of one's research, to going away during non-teaching periods.

A series of brief items:

We don’t elect the division head: s/he is selected by a top-down appointed committee and then appointed by the Vice-President for Academic Affairs (VPAA).

The Senate is majority-appointed by the VPAA. (See the separate entry on the Senate.)

When you apply for a grant from the HK government, the division head/ dean/ VPAA has to sign your application. When you hand in some annual report or completion report for the grant, the division head/ dean/ VPAA has to sign it. Depending on how you spend the money, the division head may have to sign.

The faculty members have no codified rights at the division meeting or at the school board meeting.

Faculty members may receive an email from the dean saying "If I don't hear from you otherwise, it is assumed that you agree to... [the dean's appointment of some school level committee, for example]." If you think you’ll dare to object, take a look at the entry on academic review.

There is one piece of protection for faculty members: “The University shall not invoke Clause 10(a) above to terminate the employment of an appointee by reason only of anything done or omitted by the appointee pursuant to his freedom in the classroom to discuss his disciplines, in the conduct of research in his fields of special competence and in the publication of the results of his research except where the Senate is of the opinion that what the appointee has done or omitted amounts to a failure to meet the standards required by the

University.” (Terms of Service, Art. 10d) --- The university has the right to fire with no reason given; the only thing it can't do is say it's firing you because it doesn't like your research findings.

#### (6) UG students

We teach three courses a year, of which usually no more than one should be at PG level, and at least one should be at first-year UG level.

SOSC doesn't have any undergraduate program besides a “minor program.” It's not a program in the sense of a consistent set of courses. It's simply a title. A minor is achieved by taking a certain number of SOSC courses.

The school is about to start an "elite" UG major program with on the order of 20 (or 40?) students who have to take courses across all social sciences and all humanities.

UG students from the other three schools (Science, Engineering, Business) have to take some courses in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. That's our customers.

There is no possibility to cross-list courses with another department (at UG or PG level). I tried.

My understanding is that we are supposed to have an interdisciplinary program. Nobody has ever defined "interdisciplinary." It has not been OK to teach a pure econ course, except perhaps Econ 101. You might try and bargain. Also see the separate entry on the great interdisciplinary fudge.

The division head may try to talk you into teaching non-standard non-textbook courses (which are somehow more “interdisciplinary?”). They require a lot of preparation compared to standard textbook courses.

There is pressure to teach everything at the first-year level to meet student quotas (number of students that have to be taught). There is no sequencing of courses, anyway. As one colleague put it, the course he is teaching, as is, could be given a 1XX or 3XX or 5XX number (the latter is postgraduate).

First-year courses come with a 120 student quota, but some of us volunteer for 200 or 400 because otherwise the division can't meet the overall quota. There may be incentives to teach a large class.

There is no teaching standard --- a faculty meeting approved one back in 1998 but nobody remembers, least of all the division head (who has changed half a dozen times since then). You need good student evaluations on the two questions "Overall (the course provided a good opportunity to learn)" and "Overall (the instructor provided a good opportunity to learn)." These two evaluations turn up in every kind of review and determine how you are viewed as a teacher. What kind of course you are teaching doesn't matter, and it doesn't matter that your course is different from all other courses. (Compare to an econ dept. at a U.S. university where student evaluations matter only in a comparison across the same intermediate micro courses taught by different instructors; similarly intermediate macro

courses, etc.) You are free to dumb down your course as much as you like. Four textbook chapters for a semester is good enough. More than 10 pages of reading per week in a first year course is dangerous (students might all drop the course, or give you a bad evaluation). High school level teaching appears welcome.

The Business School twice approached the dean (two subsequent deans) of the School of Humanities and Social Science about a joint program. As far as I understand, the first time our dean declined. The second time I don't know why nothing came out of it (there was a committee but I was excluded, and there is no accountability of committee or dean).

Students here are extraordinarily shy / brainwashed / civilized in comparison to North American students. Don't expect to be challenged in class.

### (7) PG students

We have a PG "program" in "Social Science" that admits one to two dozen MPhil students every year and the occasional PhD. (MPhil = 5 courses + thesis, in 2 years; PhD = 10 courses + dissertation, roughly)

These students get a fellowship as "teaching assistants." But they do not work as teaching assistants (hold tutorials). Presumably that's because we don't do what these students study with us, social science. These students don't know any discipline – let alone non-standard courses – well enough to hold tutorials. You can ask them to grade but they may not know anything about the subject of the course.

There is also a self-financing (course-only) Master's degree program and I think a School-run Master's degree program in China studies.

The PG students come with any UG background, from chemistry to history, and then (supposedly) learn "social science" from us. (We are a "Division of Social Science," not a "Division of Social Sciences.")

According to an earlier division head, "we normally teach PG courses in the evenings or on Saturday, so that students can attend to their TA duties during the daytime." If you don't like teaching 7-10pm, you can try Saturday afternoon. In fall 08, for the first time, I managed to get my PG course officially scheduled with two 80-min slots Wed and Fri morning. In my experience, the quality of classes held in the evening is abysmal. It's just fulfilling a chore.

SOSC PG students are in a very, very different league from the PG students I see in Econ(!) PhD programs at Cornell or Stanford, or from the PG students I see in the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. Third-year UG students tend to be better.

### (8) Sabbatical leave

We have one year of sabbatical leave for every six years of regular duty, with full salary. We must come back to HKUST for two years after the sabbatical leave year or repay the sabbatical leave year salary (proportionally). Sabbatical leave is not a right. The division head has to approve. There is no check on the division head. And obviously, sabbatical leave is not

something that the division meeting discusses and decides. One good thing about SOSOC is that what courses you teach (or don't teach when you are on sabbatical leave) is irrelevant, so when you take sabbatical leave no course is being missed by students.

The university has a rule that maximally 5% of faculty can be on sabbatical leave at any point of time. If you do the math, this implies a sabbatical year about every twentieth year, not every seventh year. If you consider turnover with people leaving (or being ground up and forced to leave) without being able to make use of their sabbatical leave claim, the time span between sabbaticals may get a bit shorter than twenty years. --- I had a sabbatical year in my eighth year at HKUST.

#### (9) Vacation

We have 42 days of annual leave plus 12 days of short (daily) leave per year. We are employed 12 months per year. The salary is paid 12 months a year.

New hires may only get something like 22 days of annual leave. They may or may not get short leave at all (I don't know).

We need to formally apply to be allowed to take leave. The division head has to approve. You can't leave Hong Kong without having taken (approved) leave.

With approval of the division head, you can have special leave for research / business purposes (that includes presenting at a conference). At one point, there was a 30- or 35-day limit per year on special leave. Now it's maximum one week per semester and can't miss two consecutive classes.

#### (10) Housing allowance

I am not sure how this works for you. Much of this is person-specific. If you get it, then, in one version, you get it for ten years, and that's it. In that version, you can use it to rent on campus or to rent or buy off-campus. If you rent off-campus, you lock in for 12-14 months, pay yourself, and then get reimbursed by the university; the university can still fire you at four months' notice. My housing allowance, on its own, pays about half of a small apartment downtown or half of a normal apartment two hours away from the university.

Possibly, you will be assigned an on-campus apartment and will be deducted 7.5% of your salary (which means you are probably paying only 10-20% of the market rental value of the apt.). On-campus housing comes with an elaborate point/seniority system to determine allocation.

You can probably view an apartment when you visit the campus. These tend to be big and bright apartments. The one thing to be aware of is that walls and floors are thin.

#### (11) Office

The division provides you either with a storage room (four walls, no window), or a room with one sealed window facing the Jockey Club Atrium. The walls are thin enough to allow you to follow your neighbor's phone conversations (good entertainment at times, annoying at others). In order for you not to hear your neighbor's music, s/he would probably have to turn their music down to zero. The corridor that runs through SOSC is a main traffic artery to classrooms, and not built for rush hours. The sea view side of the building is mostly taken up by concrete and elevators (which I think appropriately reflects the consideration given by the architects to the well-being of the faculty and students who live and work in this building).

If your office faces the Jockey Club Atrium: this atrium is Hong Kong's prime daytime entertainment avenue, with everything from rock concerts to fashion shows at mid-day. (This seems concentrated at the beginning and end of semesters.) When student union elections approach, students stand in formation in the Jockey Club Atrium and shout slogans in unison. Some faculty like the atrium activity, others complain bitterly about the noise.

It's quieter at night but you have to put in a request to have the air conditioning of your office not shut off at night or you quickly run out of air. (The window doesn't open.)

When an office becomes vacant, it's usually redistributed according to seniority.

All offices are different, except those facing the Jockey Club Atrium, which come in two types: one with a 5-foot diameter pillar, and one without.

Food: if you'll be eating on campus later, make sure you try the various cafeterias/canteens during your campus visit.

#### (12) The best department general office in the world

We have the best department general office in the world. If you need some cheering up, that's a great place to go. There's usually some chocolate, too, that faculty brought back from an overseas trip. These ladies get about five times more work done than any secretary you have ever seen at any other university, and still manage to joke with you.

#### (13) Seminars

We have division seminars roughly once every two weeks. Mostly in the field of China sociology. Sometimes a political scientist, or an anthropologist. In the odd case of a China economist, every few years, s/he is admonished to not talk any economics. Also see the separate entry on are we really a research university.

#### (14) Academic environment -- shorter points

(a) The School of Humanities and Social Sciences, of which SOSC is one part, is marginal within this university. The Dept. of Computer Science & Engineering, one dept. out of seven departments in the School of Engineering, has more faculty than our whole School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

(b) Grant availability: a decent start-up grant for newcomers; a university-internal annual round of applications for small grants; and an annual round of applications for big government grants (USD 12,500+). Plus a range of non-university non-government grants that the grants office of HKUST points out to us. The potential availability of grant money is very good. There is a heavy bureaucracy and heavy restrictions on how and when to spend the money.

(c) Library: extremely professional and innovative. Understandably on the weak side for social sciences given that social sciences play no role in this university. For China-related materials, you can't beat the Universities Service Center at Chinese University, 30-60min from HKUST (taxi – public transport), the world's #1 contemporary China library.

(d) Turnover. People seem to tend to leave as soon as they can get a job in their discipline in a good department elsewhere. Some senior people seem happy to make good use of the Hong Kong hub, for ex., for consulting, and traveling into China, and stay around longer. Once you have substantiation, the incentives are unambiguously to go into money-making. (Also see the separate entry on creating incentives for faculty to retire on the job.)

(e) Publication process: I have the impression that if I submit an article with my HKUST address, I'm being discounted by many econ journal editors. (It's better with the China journals.) If I send my paper to a journal while I am visiting a good U.S. university, my chances of acceptance, in my subjective judgment, are significantly higher. (I have one experience where I can almost... pin it down.)

(f) The university administration comes around about once a month either asking for your latest publications and achievements, or to tell you that HKUST was recently ranked no. 1 or so in one ranking or another, and beats all other Hong Kong universities by leagues. You don't hear about slipping in some ranking. When you go to the webpages of the other local universities, you'll find similar hype --- about them, and they obviously beat HKUST by leagues.

(g) Those who make the final decision on every step of your career at HKUST in all likelihood have full access to your medical records (not acceptable in the U.S.). See the separate entry on privacy rights.

The health insurance coverage is minimal. It's good enough to see a doctor in the on-campus clinic and I found the clinic good. To see a doctor downtown costs four times more than what gets reimbursed.

(h) As a measure of how HKUST feels to its faculty members: the insurance company covering HKUST health insurance some years ago complained about running a *deficit* with HKUST, i.e., reimbursements exceeded the university's premium. Since a large insurance company presumably has ample statistical data to price its services in the first place, this suggests above-average (or in comparison with other universities above-average) rates of illnesses at HKUST. After two lung cancer deaths the university commissioned an outside report to find that it's all within the range of what is statistically normal.

### Concluding comments

As a social scientist, I am interested in patterns, and in the systematic explanation of



phenomena.

One pattern is that good faculty tend to leave, and those who remain have been screwed to an extent that doesn't help enthusiasm and productivity. There are faculty members who talk of racism (hard to pin down and confounded by such factors as some ethnicities tending to be more outspoken than others), who use expressions such as "if you haven't been fxxed repeatedly at HKUST, you don't belong here" (which seems empty, but may capture the feelings of some people about HKUST), and who feel that HKUST as an academic environment is simply not "stimulating."

HKUST fits with a Confucian-imperial model as well as with a military model: no checks on the "leadership;" no balance of power; no rights for shop floor workers (professors); discretionary decisions by VPAA-appointed agents not bound by the law/rules of the university; top executives shirking responsibilities (unable or unwilling to carry their responsibility); the expectation that faculty members follow orders and play along; the importance of 'face' (in seminars, courses, programs, communications). The unspoken keyword may be "subservience."

In the end, do you trust (a) that there exists a system of fair and professional rules that determine the conduct of administrators and colleagues? (b) Do you trust the individuals who you will be dealing with?

My own answer to the first question is 'no,' and I have documented it in the various separate entries. Parts of such a system may exist in writing but those parts are quickly set aside by the university when inconvenient, and are easily supplemented by a wide range of undocumented rules and practices. Employment contracts are easily and repeatedly broken by the university. The appeal procedures are fake.

My answer to the second question is frequently 'no,' and only some of this is documented as it tends to get very personal. What I have documented, embedded in separate entries, is two instances of the president going back on his words, of illogical argumentation by the vice-president, of the dean asking me not to make use of the rights bestowed to me by Hong Kong Privacy Law (and of a colleague berating me in most inappropriate fashion for making use of my right to appeal), and of another dean violating appointment rules under the eyes of president and vice-president. – At least on this second question, you can form your own opinion during your campus visit and job talk. See what the people feel like.

Carsten A. Holz