

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Staff Association

Annual Report 2013

At the beginning of 2013, media attention still included negative coverage of the few high-profile incidents at PolyU that had made the front pages of newspapers the year before. However, coverage petered out as the spotlight shifted back to political issues and events plaguing Hong Kong. This was not to last long. On the morning of 6 December, the day of PolyU's annual Christmas concert, staff and students were stunned to learn of the apparent suicide on campus by a senior CPA colleague. He had been working at PolyU for more than 20 years, had been a member of PUSA for as long, and was a great friend. Media widely reported that the cause was excessive work pressure and that he had left a note saying he hoped his death would remind employers to pay attention to the work-life balance of their employees.

We are all shocked and saddened at what happened. We send our deepest sympathy and condolences to our friend's family and sincerely hope their faith will help them through this difficult time. We also realize that many staff members are affected and distressed by the tragedy. PUSA will follow up with the PolyU Council and Senior Management on the implications of his death to the University community with the aim of preventing such tragedies in the future.

For many PUSA members, the remainder of the year was dominated by the double whammy of having to undergo the first-ever round of appraisals this summer under the modified staff appraisal system with multiple performance rating levels and knowing that their rating would very likely determine their new salary level retroactively under a proposed but as yet non-finalized salary review and reward system. PUSA had collected, summarised and submitted staff views this June and July on the proposed salary review and reward system as part of the University Management's consultation process, and recommended changes to the proposed system that were somewhat shaped by the Hobson's choice presented to us by Senior Management in PUSA Consultative Group meetings. Among the submitted staff views were those that preferred to use the money proposed by PolyU for rewarding a small number of staff to be used to alleviate the heavy workload of a relatively larger number of staff instead to improve work-life balance.

Moreover, this year sees the first batch of colleagues on the academic track on contract terms under the 2010 Compensation and Benefit Model who face their final chance for promotion under the 'up-or-out' mechanism of the 2011 Framework for Appointment, Promotion and Retention of Academic Staff. Thus, tensions have been building up greatly in some departments as a result, and they are particularly apparent in the latter part of this year.

Work-wise, the impact of the double cohort of students has started to stabilize. However, the impact of the new 4-year (and in some cases 5-year) curriculum has yet to reveal itself fully, especially in terms of workload for PUSA members involved with new subjects, new initiatives and new arrangements that are direct consequences of the design of the new curriculum.

Research-wise, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and related work for it are hanging over PolyU and all other UGC-funded tertiary education institutions like an unwelcome spectre. The introduction of a new marking scheme in the upcoming round of RAE to differentiate academic achievements of individuals into different levels is an evil in disguise and eats away at any positive feelings left. It is even more unfortunate that there will be an increase in weighting for the upcoming RAE and GRF results in determining UGC funding. We anticipate that PolyU will not emerge unscathed, given the way that the research goalposts have been deliberately moved even farther away from less favoured institutions. The pressure on academic staff is alarmingly high.

As for the forthcoming round of UGC 'top-slicing' of FYFD student places for institutions to bid back, the University's Management has decided to first conduct a self-evaluation exercise to come up with proposals for top-slicing among PolyU's own departments and programmes. Though we understand Management's stated rationale for it, we are unsure whether stirring up worry if not panic among PolyU staff first before facing the music of the UGC together is the right approach. To date, we don't know what the impact will be in terms of proposed staffing of individual departments.

We have been keeping a very close eye on all these developments while also keeping an active and open dialogue with the University's Management to convey our concerns. In this regard, the President's bi-annual luncheons with PUSA Exco and the PUSA Consultative Group meetings hosted by Senior Management have again been functioning well as channels of communication. It was through these channels that PUSA was able to persuade Senior Management to consider and approve the counting of temporary contracts as part of 10 years' continuous service at PolyU for eligibility for extra annual leave entitlement by staff who are now on non-temporary contracts. However, approval by Senior Management to extend PolyU's retirement age beyond 60 years old is still proving to be elusive, despite our repeated requests over the years.

Our Vice-Chairman Dr. Justin Law secured another term on the PolyU Council after being elected from and by full-time staff members in a landslide victory in the Council election on 18 July against three other candidates. The number of votes Justin received was more than the total of all the other candidates' combined. He commenced his new term of office — of 2 years this time — in August. We would like to thank all staff members who supported PUSA and voted for Justin in the election. Justin and current Council member Dr. Rodney Chu, who is the other Vice-Chairman of PUSA, will continue to voice out staff views and reflect our concerns in Council. In addition, both Justin and Rodney have been serving on Council's various subcommittees, i.e., the Finance Committee, Trustee of Retirement Funds, and Campus Development Committee, while PUSA's Chairman, Dr. Joseph Lee, continued to serve on the Knowledge Transfer Committee. PUSA's relationship with Council this year has again been very good and the Council Chairman has continued to listen to our views. So far, we have full confidence in her chairmanship.

As always, various PUSA officers and other Exco members have been diligently serving on other PolyU committees, e.g., the Grievance and Appeal Committee, Catering Committee, etc. PUSA's Chairman has also been invited to join different PolyU working groups, e.g., for designing future teaching appraisals, improving internal communications, and so on. In addition, PUSA officers have continued to be actively involved in CFM matters, negotiating and mediating between CFM's Management and our CFM PUSA associate members.

In October, PUSA collected and submitted staff views on the current medical insurance scheme upon a request from HRO for its consideration and preparation of its next tender exercise.

And, as in past years, we helped the Community Recycling Coop to arrange a two-day on-campus campaign this November to collect secondhand usable items from PolyU staff for their sale at very cheap prices to low-income residents in Sham Shui Po.

Externally, no current PUSA officer ran for any of the officer positions of the Hong Kong Federation of Higher Education Staff Associations (UFed) at the election held during its 2013 AGM. Joseph, who was also UFed's Vice-Chairman, gradually ceased his involvement with UFed after the AGM. It will be up to the new PUSA leadership to decide on its future level of involvement in UFed, of which PUSA is a founding member.

Last but not least, some parting words from Joseph as PUSA's outgoing Chairman:

With your kindest blessings, it has been my greatest honour to serve PUSA as Chairman for the maximum of four consecutive years and in other officer positions for several more. It has been my greatest privilege to have worked with a team of highly capable colleagues from across PolyU who make up PUSA Exco as officers and departmental representatives. Without their hard work and input, nothing could have been done. I sincerely thank all of the current and past Exco members for putting up with me for so many years. They are the unsung heroes behind PUSA.

I would also like to share a few words with the good ladies and gentlemen in the new team of PUSA leaders to whom I shall be passing the baton. I would like to start with a quote by the late Chinese dissident Li Wangyang (李旺陽), a true hero who had become deaf and blind because of torture and who died in suspicious circumstances in June 2012. He said, “砍頭也不回頭,” which roughly translates as ‘giving up oneself for others’. It is this noble spirit that Exco members embody as they sacrifice their time and energy on top of doing their full-time jobs to help PUSA members and the staff body as a whole. It is this noble spirit that also helps to keep minds thinking clearly amid the murky and tricky waters of challenges that come their way. It also leads the silent to become vocal advocates. And it turns spells of self-doubt into acts of courage. Empty your cup and wisdom will pour itself in. Give your all to the Association to lead and help your fellow staff members, like past generations of ladies and gentlemen have done so selflessly.

Good luck, and Godspeed!

Prepared by Joseph Lee and Cham Mee-ling

For and on behalf of the Executive Council,
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University Staff Association (PUSA)

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