A BRIEF HISTORY OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

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As early as 1863 vocational training in carpentry, tailoring, shoemaking, printing, bookbinding and gardening was provided for twelve boys. Numbers later reached thirty. Classes were held in a Chinese building, under a Father Raimondi, not far from the Mission House in Wellington Street.

Also, in the late 1870s, up to 100 boys, in addition to their native language, were taught carpentry, shoemaking and printing by brothers at the Roman Catholic reformatory at West Point. The destitute children, some of whom were Portuguese and came from Macau, learned gardening and played games after school.

The first annual prize distribution of the Li Shing Scientific and Industrial College ($ft-f§S^$) was held in January 1905. Over seventy students had enrolled but by examination time only thirty-five remained. The founders felt the purpose of the establishment was to help raise China from her 'low industrial condition' and to educate her sons in modern science and industry and train them to use their hands as well as their brains.

'We hope to train dependent workers and not mere "hands" to be always under the direction of foreigners.'

The aim of most schools in Hong Kong was to train clerks and compradores.

During the Governorship of Sir Matthew Nathan (1904 to 1907) the Government began to show interest in elementary technical education. This culminated in the founding of the Technical Institute in 1907. This establishment was different to the eight technical institutes run by the Vocational Training Council we know today. The Technical Institute which was established in 1907 formed a sub-department under the Director of Education. It had no building of its own but was housed at
Queen's College (then in Hollywood Road), the Government secondary school which is still situated on Hong Kong Island. In 1913, the Technical Institute entered 161 candidates for local examinations of whom 116 passed. Subjects included shorthand, sanitation, building construction and field surveying.  

The development of technical education was slow. However in 1926 the Salesian Fathers commenced classes in shoemaking, carpentry, tailoring and printing; at about the same time Taikoo Dockyard, situated at Quarry Bay, opened evening classes for their apprentices.  

In 1903, a positive step was taken by the Government towards the development of technical education when a committee was formed to report on the possibility of introducing a system of practical education. This Committee, under the chairmanship of Sir William Hornell, made three main recommendations. These were the establishment of a junior technical school; the provision of evening classes for apprentices; and the commencement of full-time courses at a later date.  

As a result, in 1932 the Junior Technical School was established which was Government's first venture into full-time technical education. This secondary school provided a comparatively narrow four-year course designed mainly as pre-apprentice training for the engineering trades. In 1957 "JTS", as it was usually known, moved from its accommodation in Queen's Road East (from 1974 to the time of writing this has been occupied by the Technical Teachers College) to the three-storey building in Wood Road vacated by the then Technical College. At the same time the name (JTS) was changed to Victoria Technical School (VTS) and a phased conversion from a trade to a secondary school — albeit with some emphasis on non-vocational technical subjects — took place.  

Further progress was made in 1935 when the Catholic Salesian Society founded the Aberdeen Trade School. This provided a general education, together with training considered comparable to an apprenticeship within an institution. The School was converted into a secondary technical school in the late 1950s. The author first visited this establishment in January 1955 and recalls the high standard of projects on display.
Meanwhile the Far East Flying Training School (the original name) commenced training pilots and engineers for civil aviation in 1934. The Far East Flying and Technical School Limited, as it was later named, was a private institution. It closed in 1983.

The first Government, post-secondary technical institution was the Trade School which opened in Wood Road, on Hong Kong Island, in 1937, on a site adjacent to that on which Morrison Hill Technical Institute now stands. At the time of opening, under Principal George White, it ran courses in building, mechanical engineering, and marine-wireless operating. The college also took over the evening practice courses previously run by Taikoo Dockyard. The new, then two-storey (an additional floor was completed in 1953), Trade School building in Wanchai, was well constructed and was one of the few examples of good face-brick-work in the Colony. (It was demolished in 1988, seven years after becoming an annexe of the Morrison Hill Technical Institute.)*

Thus, when the Pacific War broke out in 1941, technical education was being provided at secondary, trade-school, and post-secondary levels, but not on a large scale. For example, there were about 200 full-time students attending post-secondary courses at the Trade School. This did not receive a great deal of support from employers except from the dockyards and the members of the Building Contractors' Association.

During the Japanese occupation (December 1941 to August 1945) oral history has it that the equipment was moved away and the Trade School building was used for a period as an opium factory.

In 1947, after World War II the Trade School (renamed Technical College in 1947), the Junior Technical School, the Aberdeen Trade School, and a number of centres running evening classes in technical subjects, reopened and were soon working at pre-war capacity. To this group was added the Tang King-po Secondary School, in Kowloon, in 1953. For many years this had a trade school section which organised classes in printing, shoemaking and tailoring. This section was phased out in the late 1970s.

* Please see Plate 1.
An increasing population and rising standards of prosperity gave impetus to the growth of technical education. In 1953, the Technical Education Investigating Committee (the Burt Report) concluded that a technical college in Kowloon was essential. The Chinese Manufacturers' Association offered to donate one million dollars towards a new college if Government would provide a similar sum and a site. The Administration accepted the offer and the College commenced classes on its Hung Hom campus in November 1957.

In the 1947/48 academic year there were 25 full-time and 599 part-time students on the roll of the Technical College. By the time the College moved to Kowloon in November 1957, these figures had increased to 345 full-time and 5,532 part-time students. With the help of donations the Technical College expanded rapidly. New buildings were added which included an all-purpose hall, a dyeing and finishing block, a new electrical laboratory, another workshop block (for construction as well as electrical and mechanical trades), and a heavy-current workshop as well as a library, a textile workshop block, and a new classroom wing. It was estimated in 1967 that, of the total building costs of approximately $7.5 million, some $4.8 million (64 per cent) had been donated. Similarly $2.4 million (40 per cent) had been given towards the cost, or was the estimated value, of the donated equipment out of a total value of $6 million.

During the 1960s the Technical College was mainly preoccupied with technician level work, but it also ran courses for technologists (professional) and a limited number at craft level. Most of this development took place under the direction of S.J.G. Burt, who had joined the Trade School in 1938 and was Principal of the College from 1951 to 1963 when he became a full-time technical education adviser to the World Bank. The late Sydney Burt has frequently been regarded as the 'grandfather' of technical education in Hong Kong.

The Principal and staff of the College had long felt an institution was required which would concentrate on craft and technician courses. This is the main reason why the first technical institute (of which the author was the first principal) came into being in 1969. It occupied borrowed premises for one year, at the Technical College at Hung Hom, and moved to its new building, at Morrison Hill, in 1970.
In the middle of the 1960s it was apparent that facilities at the Technical College were not going to be sufficient to provide technical education for the manpower needs of industry. It was decided therefore not only to build a technical institute, but also to upgrade the Technical College. By a process of ‘academic drift’, the Hong Kong Polytechnic was formally established on August 1st, 1972.
NOTES

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2 Hong Kong Daily Press, 20 July 1876; and Hong Kong Catholic Register, Vol. II, No. 39, 29 June 1879; and South China Morning Post, 16 November 1936.

3 Hong Kong Telegraph, 30 January 1905; and Hong Kong Telegraph, 17 September 1901; and Daily Press, 25 January 1906; and Hong Kong Telegraph, 17 June 1914.


5 ‘Imperial Education Conference Papers, Education Systems of the Chief Colonies not possessing responsible Governments’ (Hong Kong, 1914), p. 5.

6 Ibid, pp. 27 and 28.


8 ‘Opening Ceremony New Technical College’ (booklet), (2 December 1957), p. 3.


10 ‘Far East Flying and Technical School Ltd’ (prospectus) (undated).


13 Information given verbally by pre-war Trade School student.


17 ‘Opening Ceremony of the New Technical College’ (2 December 1957), last page.


19 ‘Opening Ceremony of the Polytechnic’s First New Building’, loc. cit.