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Reflection Report 07

# When the Standard Model Doesn't Fit: Reflections on HKBU





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# When the Standard Model Doesn't Fit: Reflections on HKBU

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## CASE SUMMARY

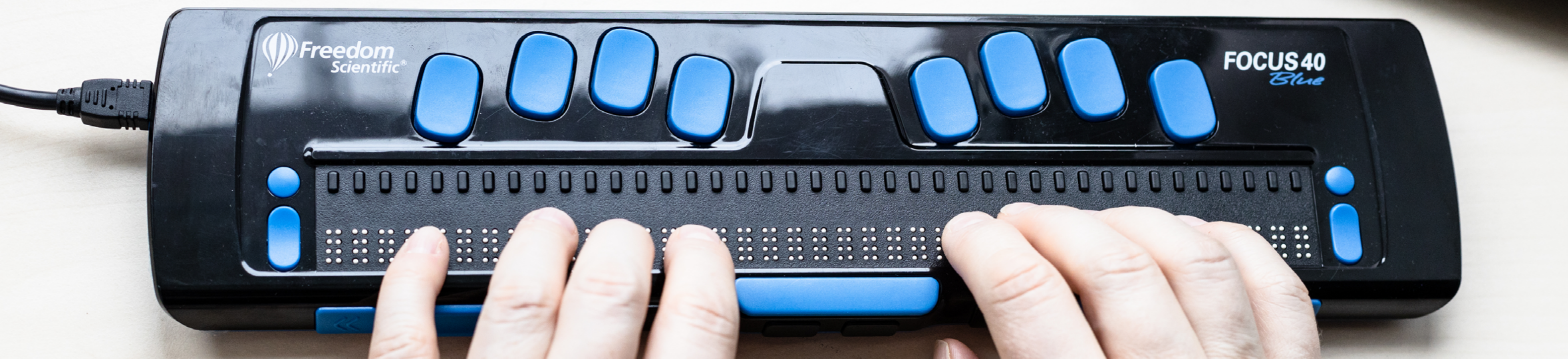
The Hong Kong Blind Union (HKBU), set up in 1964, was the first self-help organisation for visually impaired people in Hong Kong. With around 1,300 members, the largest membership among the city's self-help organisations of its kind, it was organised and managed by visually impaired people themselves, with a mission to pursue the rights of people with visual impairment, encourage their independence, and promote their social integration. Its highest governance body was named the Executive Committee (EC) rather than the Board of Directors, with members referred to as "executive committee members" rather than "directors." According to the case, the titles reflected the orientation of this governance body.

HKBU operated within the Hong Kong government's Lump Sum Grant subvention system, introduced in 2000. The government intended to gradually tighten expectations on NGO corporate governance through guidance issued in 2002 and 2010, with a 2012 consultation paper proposing mandatory requirements. The advocated model mirrored private-sector practice: independent boards focused on legal compliance, financial control, performance monitoring, and risk management, with members standing apart from operations. For 2011–2012, HKBU's expenditure of HK\$8.9 million was funded 57% by government subvention and grants, 24% by public donations, and 19% by programme income.

Although HKBU adopted the same 16 Service Quality Standards across all its service units (not only the subvented ones) and issued a full set of policies and codes of conduct in line with government recommendations, it diverged in one respect: EC members "rolled up their sleeves" and worked hand-in-hand with the operation team on advocacy, fundraising, the WAFA (Web Access For All) social enterprise, and digital inclusion projects. CEO Stella Ho described working with the EC during a grant interview as "playing tennis (doubles) with the directors"; EC member Chow Kin Chun described the same engagement as "playing a game of soccer... I was a striker and Stella was a defender."

This hands-on approach coincided with income growth over FY2009–2010 to FY2013–2014: HKBU's income rose 170%, from HK\$6 million to a projected HK\$16.2 million. Outcomes in this period included several digital inclusion projects, including the Accessible E-Learning Support Project (launched May 2011; awarded the Best Digital Inclusion Silver Award at the 2013 Hong Kong ICT Awards), and the WAFA (Web Access For All) social enterprise launched in June 2013. The case asks why HKBU adopted a governance practice so at odds with the official best-practice guidance, and why the approach yielded the results described.





## FUNDAMENTAL LEARNINGS

### **HKBU's Governance Practice Differs from the Government's Standard Model**

The Hong Kong government's guidance, published in 2002, reinforced in 2010, with a 2012 consultation paper proposing partial mandatory conversion, advocated a board model based on independence, oversight, and clear separation between governance and operations. HKBU adopted the structural elements (formal policies, codes of conduct, the 16 SQSs across all service units, periodic SWD assessments) but not the separation. EC members worked alongside the operation team, with each unit head paired with one to two EC members for ongoing input and support.

### **Self-Help Nature and Direct Member Election Make Governance and Operations Inseparable**

EC members at HKBU are simultaneously service providers and service users: any shortfall in advocacy or service delivery affects them directly as visually impaired members of the community the Union serves. EC members are elected biennially by the full membership at the AGM (quorum 100, typically attended by 200–300), with only visually impaired people eligible to stand. The case identifies this dual position, together with direct accountability to a member base that “shrewdly observes” performance, as the fundamental reason EC members involve themselves in execution.

### **EC–Operation Team Cooperation Across Fundraising, Digital Inclusion, and Wafa**

Between fiscal years 2009–2010 and 2013–2014, HKBU's income grew 170%, from HK\$6 million to a projected HK\$16.2 million. The case records this close cooperation across several examples from this period: the iterative “tennis-game” drafting of grant proposals such as the Quality Education Fund application for Accessible E-Learning Support; digital inclusion projects that drew on EC members' IT expertise and end-user knowledge alongside the operation team's project management; and the Wafa social enterprise, where EC members helped develop testing standards aligned with international web accessibility benchmarks while the CEO supplied management and quality assurance.

### **Conditions the Case Identifies Behind the Model's Functioning**

The case identifies several conditions behind the functioning of this arrangement: the small scale and focused mission of the Union; financial pressure that made under-utilising EC members' expertise unaffordable; consistent EC leadership over many years, with long-serving president Chong Chan Yau being a public figure who earned broad respect — though the case also notes a recognised succession risk and steps to groom future candidates; rapport that was built gradually after the current CEO came on board; and external timing, including advances in internet-connected devices and copyright law amendments allowing reproduction of printed materials for social inclusion without prior publisher consent.

### **Monitoring Happens Through the Membership**

The monitoring function sits with the membership through three channels that the case documents: a “grilling session” at each AGM where attending members question the EC and CEO on the year's performance; member input into draft annual operation plans before adoption; and an open-door practice through which any member may raise concerns directly with the CEO, operation team, or EC, with the next AGM grilling in mind if those concerns go unaddressed. The SWD itself has noted that there is “no one-size-fits-all” corporate governance model.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS



### For Government Bodies and Regulators Setting NGO Governance Standards

The board model encouraged in the SWD's guidance — drawn largely from corporate practice — sits more naturally with NGOs whose boards stand apart from the people they serve. For self-help organisations like HKBU, where the governance body and the user community substantially overlap, the fit can be less direct. The SWD's own observation that there is “no one-size-fits-all” approach to corporate governance perhaps points in a similar direction. As guidance evolves toward more prescriptive expectations, there may be value in considering how recognition of organisational differences can be carried alongside the move toward common standards.



### For Small Self-Help NGOs Reviewing Their Own Governance

For an organisation like HKBU, much of the day-to-day pull on quality may come from the members themselves — through who they elect, what they ask at the AGM, and how they engage with the operation team between meetings. The case is also open about the conditions that have helped make the hands-on approach workable: a small, focused operation; a leadership team that has held together over many years (with the succession question that comes with it); rapport that took time to build; and an external context that turned out to be supportive at the right moments. For organisations weighing whether something similar might suit them, it could be worth asking which of these conditions are present, and which are not.



### For Funders and Grant-Making Bodies Assessing NGO Governance

Standard governance criteria, often shaped by corporate templates, can sometimes pass over arrangements where monitoring is genuinely happening but takes a different form — through member voice, through transparent annual planning, through the visible track record of what the organisation actually delivers. HKBU's experience may be a useful prompt to think about how funders read these signals when the structural picture does not match the conventional one.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

HKBU is a small, member-led NGO working on advocacy and services for people with visual impairment, and it has chosen a governance practice that differs from the model encouraged in the SWD's guidance. What the case lays out is partly the practice itself, partly the results that have come with it (the income growth, the digital inclusion projects, the Wafa social enterprise), and partly the conditions that have made the practice possible — including a leadership stability that the Union itself recognises will need to evolve over time.

What HKBU may suggest is that thinking about NGO governance benefits from staying close to the particular kind of organisation in question. Standards set by regulators and used by funders shape the room within which any NGO works out its own approach; HKBU's experience hints at the value of keeping that room open enough for organisations whose form differs from the one the standard model was built around.

*To explore this case in greater depth, we encourage you to visit the [link](#) and get in touch with the team at ACRC.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We sincerely thank the HKU Asia Case Research Centre (ACRC) for providing the case study “[The Hong Kong Blind Union: A Small Self-Help NGO With Board of Directors Actively Involved in Operation](#)” (Authored by: Sammy Fung, Cindy Chan, W. H. Lo, Chong Chan Yau), that serves as the foundation for this reflection report. We deeply appreciate ACRC’s ongoing commitment to advancing knowledge in business and management through its rigorous, context-rich cases focused on Asia.

ACRC’s high-quality case materials have consistently provided essential foundations for our **NGO ESG case reflection series**. These carefully researched cases bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications, enabling deeper exploration of complex, real-world challenges across sectors and regions. We also recognize ACRC’s significant role in elevating the global visibility and pedagogical relevance of Asian perspectives within management education.

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### About HKU Jockey Club Enterprise Sustainability Global Research Institute

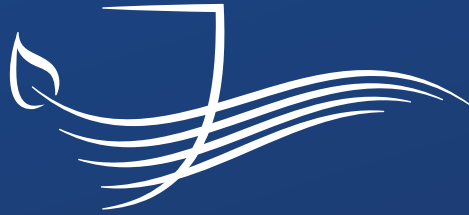
The HKU Jockey Club Enterprise Sustainability Global Research Institute is established by HKU Business School and funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, to establish a world-class hub for best practices of Sustainability in Hong Kong, Asia and beyond. Our mission is to promote excellence in the field of Sustainability by bringing together globally distinguished scholars from diverse fields, integrating knowledge and practice, inspiring innovation, fostering collaboration and conducting impactful research.

We work in partnership with academics, government departments, NGOs and corporate partners to harness the transformative power of environmental, social and corporate governance to create a sustainable and equitable future.

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The Asia Case Research Centre (ACRC) is a research centre affiliated with The University of Hong Kong, HKU Business School. Established in 1997 to address a growing demand for research and instructive materials relating to Asian business, the Centre now boasts a repository of context-rich cases drawn from a vast range of industries and disciplinary areas.

The ACRC is committed to the advancement of learning and teaching in business education and strives to promote leading management thinking through research on the latest practices in the Asian business environment. We work with scholars from universities and institutions within and outside the region, and enjoy close ties with the business community.



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