Higher Education Ambitions
and Societal Expectations

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In 2004, i.e. seven years after the retrocession of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC), the then Chief Executive aimed to promote the former British colony as 'Asia's world city'. The same year, the University Grants Committee echoed this ambition by envisaging the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) as becoming an 'education hub' in the region with the main objective of attracting international students for study and work. A few years later, education services were designed as one of the six industries able to propel Hong Kong towards a knowledge-based economy. This paper aims to illustrate the challenges of the former British colony to acquire a strong local academic identity and profile to answer the needs of a knowledge-based society driven by globalisation. These challenges will be scrutinised in the interlinked perspectives of the concepts of higher education (HE) hub and internationalisation of the HE sector in Hong Kong, illuminating local, regional and global concerns. The main conclusion is that one of the biggest challenges is to strike a balance between forces of globalisation and their consequences upon the Hong Kong community's needs and enhancing ties with the PRC as stated in the HKSAR policy. So the balance is to be found between (national) convergence and (international/global) engagement. This profile has repercussions for implementing a HE internationalisation policy anywhere in the world.

Introduction

After Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea, Hong Kong wants to assert itself as a higher education hub in Asia, with the main objective of attracting international students for study and work (Shive, 2010). This follows the global trend of internationalising higher education (HE). At the same time, HE in Hong Kong is in the midst of reforms to enable mass access to post-secondary education, enhance quality assurance and diversify funding sources. While far-reaching reforms are not restricted to the HE sector and answer societal concerns, Hong Kong's HE policy and strategy can also be envisaged within the context of Hong Kong's reunification to the People's Republic of China

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(PRC) seventeen years ago. This paper aims to illustrate the challenges of the former British colony to acquire a strong local academic identity and profile to answer the needs of a knowledge-based society driven by globalisation. These challenges will be scrutinised in the interlinked perspective of the concepts of HE hub and internationalisation of the HE sector in Hong Kong, illuminating local, regional and global concerns.

Globalisation, Knowledge-based Economy, Internationalisation, and Education Hub

For several years now, the process of globalisation and internationalisation, together with the concept of knowledge-based economy, have been recurrently used and analysed in the context of HE worldwide. In this context, globalisation was defined as typically making reference to *'the broad economic, technological, and scientific trends that directly affect higher education and are largely inevitable in the contemporary world'* (Altbach et al, 2009: 23). Knowledge-based economy can be defined as focusing on the heightened role of knowledge in economic practices, with the state investing strategically in value-creating activities characterizing the knowledge economy (Glyn, 2010).

As a response to the consequences of globalisation, internationalisation of HE is related to the '*specific policies and programs undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, and even individual departments to deal with globalization*' (Altbach, 2006: 123). Internationalisation may be seen as increasing the process of globalisation by forging a common platform for intercultural exchange without little room for cultural diversity (De Wit, 2002) and by relying upon the use of English as academic lingua franca. Nevertheless, some don't consider globalisation as a monolithic phenomenon, since '*it is nuanced according to locality (local area, nation, world region), language(s) of use, and academic cultures*' (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007: 4). National and institutional contexts as well as the overall aims of the universities and where they want to position themselves nationally, regionally and internationally play here a major role. Bartell (2003) and Davis (1995) pointed out the importance of these contexts as for the internationalisation policy of universities. Hence, various factors such as the country's system of values, its social and economic environment, its historical development, etc. together with the education system as a whole, have to be considered when elaborating and implementing a HE policy.

The Globalization Index 2010 shows that Hong Kong embraces the highest level of globalization among the sixty largest economies in the world (Ernst & Young, 2011). In fact, the term 'globalisation', together with 'knowledge-based economy', is recurrently found in the Chief Executive's annual policy addresses. Hence, the drastic increase in HE for the masses was undoubtedly meant to enhance Hong Kong's global competitive performance. It was accompanied by the objective of building an education hub, i.e. '*a planned*

effort to build a critical mass of local and international actors strategically engaged in education, training, knowledge production, and innovation initiatives.' (Knight, 2011: 233) This objective, together with the internationalisation of HE, was driven by different motives, among which economic competiveness, the building of a regional profile and the desire to move to a knowledge-based economy played a major role (Knight, 2011: 222).

Education Policy and Reforms

On 1 July 1997, Hong Kong was reunited with the PRC to become the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The former British colony is ruled under the 'one country, two systems' principle, and education is granted autonomy and academic freedom by the Basic Law (Hong Kong's mini-constitution).

The politicization of curriculum content was observed from the late 1980s, and education policy documents stressed the need for citizens to acquire a new national identity and develop patriotic spirit by enhancing the understanding of Chinese culture and history. After the retrocession, a new national discourse replaced colonial legacy, mainly rejecting Western values and views and enhancing traditional Chinese values. At the end of the 1990s, the then Chief Executive exalted the sense of patriotism among the Hong Kong people. In one instance, he addressed a youth group, warning them '*against the perils of the West, of too much individualism, of too much emphasis on rights* […]*, materialism, and associated rapid assimilation of Western values with the economic crisis in Asia*' (DeGolyer, 1999: 301). If his successor adopted a less aggressive tone against the West, he clearly stated the will to enhance young people's understanding of their '*motherland*' to create '*a strong sense of national identity in the era of globalization*'. The HKSAR Government's policy was to promote national education by '*helping students better understand the history and development of our country through curriculum planning; providing students with opportunities to join study and exchange programmes to heighten their sense of national identity; and, encouraging students to contribute to our country's development.*' (Tsang, 2008: 27).

The pressures of globalization and the return to the PRC prompted the Hong Kong government to initiate in 1999 an '*unprecedented holistic education reform*' pertaining to '*academic structure, admissions system, curriculum, assessment methods, medium of instruction, and teacher certification and training*' (Poon, 2008: 47-48). Hong Kong's education system moved from seven to six years of secondary education, a move envisaged as '*a key milestone*' in Hong Kong educational development. The curriculum and assessment changes aim to promote whole-person development and life-long learning among students (Tsang, 2008: 10).

Higher Education: In Search of a New Profile

Until a few years back, the number of Hong Kong students going overseas was high for three major reasons: limited educational places in the territory, job discrimination against graduates of local as well as other commonwealth institutions, and political uncertainty (Chan & Drover, 1997: 47). In the beginning of the 1980s, only 2% of the 17-20 age group were admitted in HE programmes. Twenty years later, the figure was almost 18% (University Grants Committee, 2002: 1). In 2000, the Chief Executive launched a policy to raise the participation rate in post-secondary education from 33% to 60% in ten years' time (Tung, 2001). The goal was reached mainly by introducing associate degree programmes. In 2011/12, almost 300,000 students were enrolled in post-secondary education against 223,000 in 2006/07 (Education Bureau, 2012). Nowadays, Hong Kong's HE system comprises eight public and two private universities. In 2012, it moved from three to four years and will be aligned with the PRC and US education systems. This extra year is not meant to increase specialized knowledge and skills, but expand students' experiences.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the Chief Executive emphasized the need to make '*significant investments in education to prepare each one of us for the advent of the knowledge-based economy*' (Tung, 2001: 9). The use of 'investment' rather than 'cost' mirrors the significance of education for the knowledge economy (University Grants Committee, 2002: 25), since HE institutions (HEIs) were considered as having an essential role in fulfilling the creation of wealth and economic growth. Nevertheless, the need for Hong Kong to build a strong economy was to be accompanied by a '*strong cultural identity*' (University Grants Committee, 2002: 3), echoing the present-day education policy previously mentioned.

In 2002, the University Grants Committee (UGC) stressed the importance of HEIs for the future of the HKSAR as follows:

'*In all developed communities the shape of the future will significantly determine the future shape of universities. Equally, the shape of its universities will partly determine the community's future. The indisputable reason for this is that in all developed societies the future depends upon harnessing knowledge and understanding to define the cultural vision and create and respond to economic opportunity*'. (UGC, 2002: 1)

The strong investment in HE was illustrated by The Times Higher Education World University Rankings for 2011-2012: Hong Kong was placed best in the world in university performance relative to gross domestic product, which tries to normalise the rankings for country size and wealth (*The Times Higher Education*, 2012). In 2009, the Task Force on Economic Challenges recommended developing six industries where Hong Kong enjoys clear advantages, among which are education services. Developing this industry was meant to propel Hong Kong towards a knowledge-based economy (Tsang,

2009: 9). Research expenditure funded by the Government has grown from $4.7 billion in 2002 (when the last Higher Education Review was conducted) to $6.2 billion in 2009 to fulfil the objective of asserting Hong Kong as a knowledge-based economy (Legislative Council, 2011).

An important trend is that education is now envisaged under the combined heading of teaching and learning. The adjunction of the learning perspective is explained by '*the changing face of the demography of education; the increasing focus upon the implications for the economy of particular kinds of educational outcomes; the impact of technological development on teaching and learning and the changing nature of the development of knowledge*'. (UGC, 2002: 23) The learning perspective is even more crucial when considering employers' complaints about graduates' lack of some generic and transferable skills (not the least, language skills), skills of communication, team work and group participation (UGC, 2002: 25). This recognizes the strong role of interaction and teamwork within the knowledge economy (Glyn, 2010:16).

In 2004, the then Chief Executive aimed at '*promoting Hong Kong as Asia's world city on par with the role that New York plays in North America and London in Europe*'. (Tung, 2004: 2) The same year, the UGC envisaged Hong Kong as becoming an '*education hub*' in the region (UGC, 2004: 1), echoing the Chief Executive's aim of developing Hong Kong into a regional centre of excellence for HE. The strive to become '*a global metropolis*' and to strengthen Hong Kong's status as the regional education hub was to be underpinned by a '*vibrant international school sector*'. The HE sector was to attract more '*outstanding students* […] (to) *enlarge our pool of talent and enhance the quality of our population*'. (Tsang, 2007: 39-40) The objective of a better-qualified labour force was to be sustained by striving for excellence in teaching, which was meant as equivalent to '*internationally competitive*' (UGC, 2004: 9).

These educational services are expected to enhance the quality of HE in Hong Kong by attracting external recognition and commitment. It is not equivalent to an internationalisation strategy but is an important component of this strategy. In 2007, the Quality Assurance Council was established under the aegis of UGC to ensure quality of its publicly-funded HEIs. It was also obviously meant to secure a quality assurance framework at an internationally recognized level, hence enhancing the competitiveness of Hong Kong HEIs. It echoes the government impetus to establish Hong Kong as the education hub in the region.

Internationalisation of Higher Education

In recent years, the Hong Kong Government has introduced a series of measures to internationalise schools and institutions, by allowing Mainland students to pursue studies in non-local programmes in Hong Kong and by

encouraging HEIs to step up exchange and promotion in Asia (Tsang, 2009: 11). Four years ago, the eight public HEIs created an internationalisation committee to discover ways to raise their numbers of foreign students. The aim is to internationalise and diversify the HE sector by attracting more overseas students to Hong Kong (Tsang, 2011: 46). HEIs have expanded their international student numbers significantly in the past decade. They are engaged in competition to attract the best students and are encouraged to use financial incentives for this purpose.

The UGC report *Aspirations for the higher education system in Hong Kong* (2010) reflects on the purposes of HE, perceived world trends, vision and strategies for Hong Kong's HE system. In this review, internationalisation is a central theme. The UGC is fully aware that the SAR falls far behind other Asia-Pacific countries, such as Australia or Singapore, in terms of international students, general reputation and attractiveness, and insertion into a wide education market. This is the reason why it advocates a more comprehensive strategy and policy for HE internationalisation, predicting that in fifteen years' time Asia will constitute about 70% of the global demand for HE. The Government endorsed the overall strategies and directions recommended in the report. The Education Bureau will set up an internationalisation forum (comprised of various stakeholders) '*to consider strategy, foster collaboration and share best practices in this area*'. (Legislative Council, 2011: 1)

One point remains (politically) sensitive, i.e. the biased use of the term 'international' education environment, which was denounced in 2006 when a steering committee for promoting Hong Kong as a regional education hub was created (Chong, 2006). At that time, 94% of non-local students were Mainland students and figures remained similar five years later (UGC, 2010: 53). In 2010/11, there were 10,074 non-local students, among which 8,724 came from the PRC, 950 from other places in Asia, and 400 from the rest of the world (UGC, 2011). Here, the UGC makes its point clear: even if Hong Kong HEIs should encourage Mainland students' admission,

'*We consider our institutions' relationship with the Mainland not to be a part of internationalisation. […] The building of strong academic relationships with Mainland China is an expression of Hong Kong's Chinese identity and a positive response to changing conditions. The development of a strong international character for Hong Kong's higher education will draw on and elaborate Hong Kong's inherent and historic strengths*.' (UGC 2010, 51-52)

Hence, '*true internationalisation requires a much greater diversity of nationalities and cultural backgrounds*' (UGC, 2011, 56). This will be even more necessary when the Hong Kong tertiary sector aligns with that of the PRC, making Hong Kong HE programmes more attractive and accessible to Mainland students. But at the same time, PRC top students are attracted by the international profile of Hong Kong HEIs, hence the need to increase the pattern of diversity in teaching environment as for cultural backgrounds of students

and academics. Even before retrocession to the PRC, Hong Kong HEIs hired top international scholars - many of ethnic Chinese origin - to compete with the best institutions in the world by offering high salaries and, in many cases, housing. The vice-chancellor of the Chinese University pointed out the traditional international profile of the academic faculty in Hong Kong as follows:

'*We are steeped in two cultures. Whether we like it or not, our thoughts dart back and forth. We cannot help but look at knowledge on a bicultural basis.*' (Webster, 1994)

This profile is to be preserved and enhanced, since it is viewed as an important asset in terms of internationalisation. The benefits are three-fold: first, assuring '*realistic comparisons with international benchmarks and constructive criticism of local received wisdom*' (UGC 2010, 61); second, including local universities into international networks; third, immediately illustrating internationalisation for local students. But whereas diversity of cultural background among academics engenders an internationalised learning environment, a declining percentage of non-Chinese academics seems to be on its way (UGC, 2010: 61).

The international profile of Hong Kong's student population is viewed as a tool to '*create a diversified cultural and learning environment, and broaden the horizons of our students*'. (Tsang, 2007: 39-40) Through exposure to foreignness in education, local students gain insight about other value systems and become competent communicators with non-local interlocutors. Including non-locals in the student body is expected to improve by emulation the general academic performance, as well as increase the reputation of the host university. The second positive impact of the presence of non-local students is their contribution to creating a multicultural learning and social environment for Hong Kong students. This seems even more important when considering the general assertion that Hong Kong students and new graduates are '*too inward looking*, […] *know too little about the outside world (and indeed show insufficient curiosity about it) to be ready to contribute in the kind of globalising economy in which Hong Kong must find its place.*' (UGC, 2020: 57)

The UGC stresses the long term and far-reaching perspective of the presence of non-local students: '*It would be short-sighted to envisage non-local students simply as income generators rather than as an investment in Hong Kong's quality and value.*' (UGC, 2010: 56) They are positive additions to Hong Kong in that as students enrolled in foreign universities, they take initiative and show ambition. The increased pattern of internationalisation could also be the opportunity for HEIs to revisit their undergraduate curricula to enhance Asian materials and themes, by combining '*Western and Asian problems and responses, experience, sources and cultural roots*'. (UGC, 2010: 60)

Challenges

The most recurrent factors cited for Hong Kong HE's attractiveness are: its geo-political position as a gateway to China and the place where East and West meet; its international/global profile; its safety and political stability; its respect for the rule of law and freedom of speech; the use of English as the medium of instruction at HEIs; the relatively low daily living costs and fee levels; its academic freedom; its international faculty (Cheng *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless, while the Legislative Council recognised the '*tremendous benefits of internationalization*' (Legislative Council, 2011), some concerns emerge regarding successful implementation and hence for building an education hub.

First of all, the UGC refers to the blurred definition of '*education hub*' which '*offers little guide to serious action*', interpreting this term as follows:

> '*In the most direct sense, the term means a policy of investment in the competitive knowledge economy by providing educational services to a population that is non-local with a strong emphasis on inward pull. It also implies that these services are competitive because they are of comparative front-rank quality and delivered in an environment of high-level educational attainment and reputation.*' (UGC 2010, 54)

It looks obvious that the lack of definition makes it difficult to define indicators determining potential for success or sustainability (Knight, 2011: 222). The ill-definition of education hub by the Hong Kong government may be due to its approach of *laissez-faire* or *positive non-intervention* with the idea that the policy implied no public resources or funding (Cribbin, 2010). Nevertheless, the government is expected to clarify the aims of developing Hong Kong as an education hub (Cheng *et al.*, 2009).

Another concern is the visibility of Hong Kong HEIs. Three of Hong Kong's public HEIs are ranked in the top 100 worldwide by reputation in 2012 (*The Times Higher Education*, 2012). Nevertheless, some academics complain that the promotion of Hong Kong universities lacks a coordinated government programme, despite the fact that they remain relatively unknown outside the region (Cheng *et al.*, 2009). There is limited coordination among HEIs while abroad, mainly because they are projecting their competition among them outside the SAR (Shive, 2010).

In 2007, the Hong Kong government announced various measures to attract foreign students: awarding Government scholarships and fellowships, relaxing employment and immigration restrictions, and raising the 2008 non-local admission ceiling to 20% (Tsang, 2007). But Shive (2010) and Cribbin (2010) hint at possible tensions which may arise between Mainland and Hong Kong people, with the latter considering that local universities should first offer education to their youth, since they have been financing HEIs as taxpayers. This is the reason why '*it is necessary to promote the local community's understanding of the rationale and potential benefits of the internationalization*

of higher education, its related policy changes and its impact on various sectors of the local community' (Cheng *et al.*, 2009:81). It would certainly be worthwhile to inform the Hong Kong community that the number of non-local students in Hong Kong is disproportionate against the number of students taking imported overseas programmes in the SAR - 50,000 in 2005 - and by the number of Hong Kong students studying overseas and in Mainland China - 66,700 the same year (Cribbin, 2010).

It is interesting to note the allusion made to tensions existing between local and non-local students, related to the scarcity of hostel accommodation. This is the reason why the UGC urges the government to tackle the provision of more hostel accommodation as a matter of urgency, without which the 20% target for a properly composed international student body cannot be reached. Other measures can also help prevent segregation between local and non-local students, namely mixing them in accommodation and running no courses or classes predominantly for non-local students (UGC, 2010, 57).

Concerns are also expressed as for the medium of instruction. Choi (2010) illustrated the antagonisms which may arise with the case of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). In 2005, students opposed CUHK directives that would result in significantly increasing the number of courses taught in English. They accused the administration of undermining teaching in the Chinese language, as Chinese was stated as the principal medium of instruction in the University Ordinance. CUHK justified its position by the risk of losing its competitiveness in favour of Mainland Chinese universities, as well as local counterparts. They argued that use of Chinese was tantamount to marginalising CUHK, i.e. not being able to answer the needs of internationalisation (Choi, 2010: 243). In other HEIs, English has been adopted as medium of instruction. Institutions are encouraged to make renewed efforts to ensure and enhance students' biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) abilities. But some non-local students find difficulties with the English-medium teaching and learning environment, while some others report its inadequacies. In fact, '*the medium of instruction (MOI) issue constitutes the major challenge at the institutional level*' (Cheng *et al.*, 2009:71).

Furthermore, Hong Kong operates within a region where there is strong competition from neighbouring countries. If the launch of four-year university education in the new academic structure attracts more Mainland students as previously mentioned, it could also make HE in Hong Kong more costly and less attractive to students (Cheng *et al*., 2009). This could constitute a financial threat to HEIs, which were offered land grants and ten-year interest free loans for developing their campuses to welcome more students. They might encounter financial difficulties if they are unable to increase their student numbers. The strong competitiveness hinders the possibility of fee rises (Cribbin, 2010: 49).

Concluding Remarks

Overall, Hong Kong remains in the early stages of taking the necessary steps and investments to position itself as an education hub (Knight, 2011). This objective is to complement future development of the Mainland (Tsang, 2009: 11). Domestic concerns, therefore, must encompass a wider perspective, with emphasis on the national dimension and traditional values. At the same time, Hong Kong would no longer be Hong Kong if it abandoned its strong international and global dimension. Hence, one of the biggest challenges is to strike a balance between forces of globalisation and their consequences upon the Hong Kong community's needs and enhancing ties with the PRC as stated in the SAR policy: on one hand, globalisation means the disengagement of the city-state, deregulating the relationship between the HKSAR and the value-adding activities in the field of HE; on the other hand, Hong Kong must inevitably nourish her intrinsic links with the PRC to avoid losing her unique profile of a cosmopolitan Chinese city. So, the balance is to be found between (national) convergence and (international/global) engagement. This profile has repercussions for implementing a HE internationalisation policy anywhere in the world. This is why much more attention is needed to the strategies to elaborate an international HE environment that would answer the multifaceted needs of a knowledge-based society (not the least the need to enhance students' interaction skills and further investigate the issue of medium of instruction). In that regard, the impact of internationalisation and intercultural related issues in the classroom requires further investigation. Hong Kong HEIs offer very fertile ground, which, adequately sustained and exploited, could easily enhance their visibility abroad.

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