

Internationalisation of higher education in Hong Kong

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With a view that internationalisation is an interactive response to globalisation, this paper examines the internationalising activities in the higher education sector, and in particular, the Hong Kong higher education sector. Four main areas are covered: (a) internationalising staff and students, (b) building an international network, (c) internationalising the curriculum, and (d) entering the Mainland market. The article compares the Hong Kong's response to the threat of globalisation with that of the other places and concludes that the nature of competitiveness is being particularly highlighted in its internationalisation of higher education. Its response is in resonance to the city's culture, which stresses market competition and survival of the fittest, and can be seen as being manipulated by the government and business sector in maintaining their dominance and power.

Globalisation, internationalisation, international education, higher education, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

Despite considerable variation and disagreement over the meanings of the terms 'internationalisation' and 'globalisation' (Knight, 1997; Gunn, 2005), they have appeared, and are continuing to appear, in discourses of all levels—at least in Hong Kong. Be it the taxi driver complaining about the rise in oil price due to market monopoly, the teenager arguing with his parents over their decision to send him to study overseas, or the Government Financial Head expressing the need to expand the tax base and introduce sales and service tax, phrases like “to keep in line with international trends” or “to remain competitive in the globalising world” do manage to slip in nicely. It is as if everything happening now is partially related to, if not a direct result of the two aforementioned processes. “It can be called in justification of political action and inaction and it can appear to explain everything yet nothing.” (Langhorne, 2001, p.xi) This is especially so in the Hong Kong education sector, in the midst of numerous reforms, that justifications under the name of internationalisation and globalisation are commonplace.

This paper aims to analyse the recent changes in Hong Kong universities, that fall under the banner of internationalising higher education in Hong Kong. Their practices, goals, conflicts and underlying forces are examined. It is the contention of this article that while the needs to internationalise are there, the term is manipulated to suit some otherwise political purposes.

This article first looks at the meanings and implications of internationalisation and globalisation and then narrows the discussion to the realm of higher education. A working definition on each term is offered before the article moves on to describe some of the activities Hong Kong universities have undertaken or are undertaking in their internationalisation. Since it is unrealistic for a paper of this size to look at every single venture related to the internationalisation of universities, the scope of this paper is set on the following four areas: attempts made on a) internationalising staff and students, b) building an international network, c) university curriculum internationalisation, and d) entering the Mainland market. While the paper concerns the higher education system in Hong Kong as a whole, some sections focus primarily on The University of Hong Kong (HKU) as a case study. It is the wish that HKU's background as a

colonial university and its reputation as a world-class university, can highlight the opportunities and challenges faced by some very well established universities in the region. This is followed by a discussion of the Hong Kong's characteristics in the internationalising exercise of its universities. The paper ends by re-examining the meaning of internationalisation of higher education in the contemporary Hong Kong situation. It also attempts to reconstruct the meaning of the terms 'internationalisation' and 'globalisation' by integrating the different perspectives discussed in the paper.

INTERNATIONALISATION, GLOBALISATION AND EDUCATION

Internationalisation and Globalisation

Internationalisation and globalisation, together with other terms like modernisation, westernisation and capitalisation, are some very popular topics in not only everyday but also academic discourses. While most scholars (for example, Altbach, 2002; Waters, 2001; Yang, 2000a, b) maintain the differentiation of these concepts, there are considerable overlaps in their historical development (Robertson, 1992) and real-life representations, which blur the distinctions. The fact that the terms are used in many different domains, each with its own focus and associated values and connotations, makes it impossible to agree on their exact meanings.

Different scholars now still hold very divergent views on this matter. Scott (1998), for example, refers internationalisation and globalisation to two "radically different processes dialectically linked" (p.108). To him, internationalisation is about how nation-states dominate the world whereas globalisation is the new world order formed by the breaking of national boundaries made available by advance in technology and the emergence of a world culture. Yang (2000a) likewise sees the two terms as two countervailing processes. However, he believes that internationalisation, which has an Eastern origin (the Sophists in Ancient Greece and the Confucianists in Ancient China), is driven by the "advancement of human knowledge based on realisation of the bond of humanity" and is primarily about "cooperation, collaboration, caring, sharing and altruism" (p.83). By contrast, globalisation stemmed from the rise of Western imperialism and modernisation in the nineteenth century and is driven by the belief in a single global market. It is a concept mainly concerned with gaining one-sided economic benefits through "competition, combat, confrontation, exploitation, and the survival of the fittest" (p.83).

Instead of seeing internationalisation and globalisation as two opposing forces, some scholars assess the terms from another perspective and focus on their interaction. Knight (1997) believes that their relationship can be best captured as a catalyst and a pro-active response:

Globalisation is the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, ideas ... across borders. Globalisation affects each country in a different way to a nation's individual history, traditions, culture and priorities.

Internationalisation ... is one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalisation yet, at the same time respects the individuality of the nation. (p.6)

This view of internationalisation and globalisation is accepted by many scholars who research on the internationalisation of higher education (for example, Altbach, 2002; Biddle, 2002; de Wit, 1999). By regarding internationalisation as a response to globalisation, it is possible to explain the great diversity in the approaches taken by universities of different sizes, countries and cultures because it depends on individual views of the world. Under this framework, Scott's and Yang's interpretations of the internationalisation might be seen as a conservative nationalist's response and a traditional Eastern or Asian response respectively to certain selected trends associated with what people term as globalisation. While Knight's definitions are not incontestable and may have many limitations (for example, the loose control on what can be accepted as internationalisation due to its high flexibility may well exclude nothing but include everything), this has provided a

clear direction in the analysis on the many activities and measures on internationalisation of higher education. A similar but more refined definition from de Wit (1999) is adopted in this paper as internationalisation of higher education:

Internationalisation of higher education is the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution. This definition understands internationalisation as a process, as a response to globalisation (not to be confused with the globalisation process itself), and as including both international and local elements. (de Wit, 1999, p.2)

Internationalisation of Higher Education

“Most publications on the internationalisation of higher education refer back to the days of the Middle Ages and up to the end of the eighteenth century” (de Wit, 2002, p.5) when academic pilgrims had to travel to the few university cities in Europe from their home towns. Medieval universities then all received these migrant students, followed the same systems of examinations and program structure, used Latin as the official language and were recognised throughout Christendom (de Ridder-Symoens, 1992). In fact, the word ‘university’ can be traced back to *ūniversitās* in Medieval Latin (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2002), which referred to “a range of corporate entities, including the guilds” (King, 2004, p.1). However, some scholars are sceptical about the medieval universities being international because nation-states did not even exist in those days (Scott, 1998). Besides, most contemporary universities are “not medieval creations but were established in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their histories reflect the concerns of industrialisation, nation-state formation and democratisation” (King, 2004, p.1) and are “instruments for the consolidation of territorial nation states” (p.1). This is why internationalisation of higher education, despite the claim to its origin in Medieval Europe, is a recent concept and “prior to the twentieth century, was more incidental than organised.” (de Wit, 2002, p.xvi).

‘International education’, oftentimes used as a synonym to ‘internationalisation of education’ especially in the American literature, was largely a product of foreign policy and national security in the United States between World War II and the Cold War (de Wit, 2002). It was a response to the new role of the United States in the new world order, which brought about the growing interchange between Americans and people of other countries. Area studies (for example, European studies or Japanese studies) and foreign language training, study abroad programs, and the intake of overseas students were heavily focused on and still remain some core components of present day internationalisation of higher education.

In Europe, before the Council of the European Communities’ adoption of an action program for education to advocate further European political integration in 1976, there was little talk and action on internationalisation of higher education, perhaps with the exception of occasional unregulated foreign student flow and the Swedish program on internationalisation to promote international understanding, cooperation and peace (Field, 1998). As mentioned earlier, the establishment of universities, especially those in Europe, was a result of industrialisation and nation building in the late nineteenth and twentieth century and this has given rise to the great diversity in the university systems in Europe. There are differences in degree structures, languages, traditions, and even public perceptions and functions of the universities. One main area in the discourse of internationalisation of higher education in Europe is the harmonisation of systems, as a response to the growing political and economic interdependence among European countries. Various programs like the European R&D policy, which tries to moderate and enhance the technological research in Europe to compete with the United States and Japan (Preston, 1991), the 1976 Joint Study Programs and its predecessor of the famous ERASMUS established in 1987, which aims at stimulating academic mobility within the EU for enhancing the quality and reinforcing the European dimension of higher education (EUROPA, 2005), or LINGUA, which

promotes the learning of European languages and raises its citizens' "awareness of the Union's multilingual wealth" (EUROPA, 2004, line 7), were set up to this end.

However, the increasing mobility of students, the dominance of market economy and the growing importance of English in the world, have given new meanings to the notion of internationalisation of higher education. Since the introduction of full-cost overseas student fees in the United Kingdom and in Australia in 1979 (de Wit, 2002; Smart and Ang, 1996), higher education has been increasingly seen as an export commodity. Now even universities in continental Europe (National Agency of Higher Education, Sweden, 1997) and in other non-English speaking countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, and even China are joining the battle in attracting foreign students. Furthermore, this talk of internationalisation of higher education has evolved into a strategic process, which involves not only activities or strategies in isolation, but also strategic university alliance, national review of higher education to enhance international competitiveness, redefinition of goals in higher education and the offering of offshore distance-learning programs (Altbach, 1999; de Wit, 2002). This is much the same as what Altbach (1999) notices: "the current wave of internationalism ... is motivated by profits.... The goals are to meet market demand and to create a market niche for an 'educational product'" (p.4).

The above brief discussion on the internationalisation of higher education is, if anything, merely an overview. There are many other perspectives not yet explored. It only serves to exemplify one point: that while the term may mean different things to different countries and at different times, its different interpretations are always purpose-driven—there are always external demands that the higher education sector has to fulfil. They may be the provision of knowledge and skills in working internationally (as it is in America's international education), the need for international recognition and harmonisation of university structures (similar to the case of Europeanisation in EU countries), the preparation of competitive graduates for the work place and the need to finance the universities by attracting foreign students and offering offshore programs (as it is in the contemporary marketisation and exportation of education), and many more. Given our working definition that internationalisation is a response to globalisation, an ambition of this paper is to examine which aspects of globalisation Hong Kong universities focus on and how this can be reflected in their internationalising acts.

INTERNATIONALISING HONG KONG HIGHER EDUCATION

Internationalisation is hardly new to the Hong Kong education system. Back in the dates when the British government won the Opium Wars and took over Hong Kong, there were already internationalisation initiatives undertaken by church bodies. They set up schools, introduced Western curricula and hired teachers from overseas—and they founded most of Hong Kong's highly prestigious schools: St. Paul's, Maryknoll Convent, and Diocesan. To become international, for nearly two centuries, meant to be modernised, to be westernised, and in many cases, to become British.

The University of Hong Kong (HKU), the oldest university in the region, was founded in 1910 by the Hong Kong Government to provide tertiary education for the expatriates, mainly Britons, and for a selected few Chinese elites living there. Similar to other colonial universities established in the British Empire, it was well networked to other commonwealth universities and proclaimed itself **THE** international university in the region. The scene changed after the establishment of Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 1963, which took on the four-year university system from the United States and started the 30-year-long rivalry between the two universities. HKU took pride in its British tradition, its international reputation, and its adoption of English as the medium of instruction—viewing itself as the only rightful international university in Hong Kong, whereas CUHK boasted its positioning as the bridge between East and West, its mother-tongue education policy, its credit-based curricula offering wider choice and whole-person

development, and most importantly, its being different from HKU—believing internationality does not exist without locality.

However, until 1990s, in the 80 years of development of university education in Hong Kong, internationality, or internationalisation, is taken for granted. In fact, internationalisation was not an issue in Hong Kong higher education system before the expansion of university places in the 1990s. However, following the establishment of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) in 1991, and the subsequent upgrade of several polytechnics, colleges and institutes, internationalisation has come into being: first in the newer universities when they were seeking prestige and recognition as equals to the two well-established universities, then in even HKU and CUHK when they sensed the danger and competition from these new universities. In less than a decade, internationalisation has become a buzzword that can be found in every university's developmental plan posted on their websites. The next section illustrates some activities of Hong Kong universities, which fall under this big banner of internationalisation.

Internationalising Staff and Students

One key indication of internationalisation is the proportion of international staff and students in the universities. While Hong Kong has long attracted many overseas faculty members—for example, as many as 45 per cent of HKU academic staff were drawn from overseas (The University of Hong Kong, 2004), the non-local student population was only four per cent in 2004, of which 88 per cent were from mainland China (University Grant Committee, 2005a). Dr Lam (2004a), Chairman of University Grant Committee, therefore urged universities to conduct more outreaching and promotional activities, especially in South-east Asia and offer scholarships to attract foreign students, to achieve the government's vision of Hong Kong as “the education hub of the region” (University Grant Committee, 2005b, para.2) and the Asia's world city. Pledged to turn HKU “from a ‘good’ to a ‘great’ institution and turn it into a world-class research-led university” (Yeung, 2005, para.3) in ten years, Professor Tusi, Vice Chancellor of HKU included the doubling of the number of international students as a main area of development.

Unlike the talk of attracting foreign students for financial gain in the United Kingdom and Australia, Hong Kong universities focus on recruiting elite students. Instead of financial gains, more resources are needed for scholarships and subsidies are set up to attract these students to come and study in this relatively expensive city. What is there to be gained? While explanations like “overseas students can bring different cultural backgrounds to the university” offered by Victor Fung, the HKU Council Chairperson (Yeung and Chan, 2004, para.4) or Edward Chen, Lingnan University president's “giving our students cross-cultural exposure” (para.7) are offered, Dr. Lam's speech on internationalising student body in Hong Kong (2004) offers a deeper explanation as to what these cultural backgrounds and cross-cultural exposure may mean:

The cultural diversity of the student body is an important foundation for a truly excellent education because it stimulates “out of the box thinking”. Having more non-local students in Hong Kong will assist tremendously in the cultivation of long-term interpersonal contacts and friendships with potential future business and opinion formers of other countries. Non-local students also help Hong Kong's international image and stimulate healthy competition. (para.4)

In the end, such an active expansion of non-local student body is all about business: increasing competitiveness (both of local students and of universities) and enhancing international image, which, in turn, will further increase competitiveness.

Building an International Network

Another apparent internationalisation activity is the setting up of joint university agreements. While most universities in Hong Kong have good networks and even partnerships with many

overseas and mainland universities, the first strategic international alliance was HKU's participation as a founding member of Universitas 21, a network of international research-led universities in 1997 (The University of Hong Kong, 2004), which operates on three levels of international activities:

The first level encourages traditional collegial activities such as academic exchanges. The second level facilitates greater international collaboration between members. The third level focuses on opportunities for entrepreneurial activities" (Universitas 21, 2005, para. 1).

Universitas 21 promotes itself as an international network of the world's finest research-led and comprehensive universities and encourages internationalisation among its members. There are exchange programs for both staff and students and some projects on international e-learning platforms. HKU, as its founding member, is viewed as an anchor university in the region and this recognition means more than the actual programs Universitas 21 provides. Through joining this strategic network, HKU proves itself to be **THE** international university. The combined goodwill of these universities also brings about added prestige and therefore, more bargaining power to the university. In this regards, internationalisation has more to do with competition through the image gained by joining the alliance.

Internationalising the Curriculum

Another aspect of internationalisation of higher education is the internationalisation of the university curriculum. Two attempts to change the university curriculum structures are examined in this section: the introduction of the credit-based system at HKU in 1998 and the introduction of the new four-year university system to be implemented in 2012.

Credit-based system

Prior to 1998, most students at HKU took all their required and elective courses within their own faculties. With the exception of students under the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Social Science, students were not allowed to take courses which were outside their faculties. Different faculties adopted a different currency in calculating its students' study load: modules, units, half-units, etc. and the same term, for example, 'a unit', might be referred to two different numbers of hours of study load in two faculties. This caused a lot of problems in the university's then growing international programs as many incoming foreign students might wish to enrol into courses under several faculties. Participating universities also expressed difficulties in translating study load undertaken at HKU to the system they used. This resulted in many students' being "obliged to take an extra year of studies to pursue overseas exchange programs" (Cheung, 1996, para.5).

Under this credit-based system, a normal student takes 60 credits a year. All students, (except those in medicine, dentistry and engineering) have 20 per cent of their curriculum devoted to general education: English, Chinese, Information Technology and cross-discipline subjects and the remaining 80 per cent to their specialism. Prof. Wong Siu-lun, Pro Vice-Chancellor, remarked that the system could "prepare students for a rapidly changing environment and facilitate academic exchanges with overseas universities" (Wong, 1998, para.2).

The inclusion of general studies was justified by Prof. Chan Ting-hon, also Pro Vice-Chancellor, as a response to the change in job profiles:

In the past, 90 per cent of science graduates entered the teaching field or became research fellows. Now, 20 per cent of them will be teachers while most of the rest join the business sector. The job market is changing fast and it may now be too much to teach students eight papers on chemistry. (Ip, 1997, para.3)

However, the internationalisation of the HKU curriculum was not solely a reaction to the global and local needs. For example, the selection of European Credit Transfer System, instead of the well-known American credit system, long adopted by CUHK, showed that some further hidden competition was at play. Henry Wai, deputy academic registrar, explained that the system was chosen because it had been tested for over six years in 145 European higher institutions and was widely accepted by universities around the world (Li, 1997). Nevertheless, many people were shocked when HKU announced in March 1997 that this was the chosen credit system because they thought it was the American credit system when HKU talked about credit-based curriculum. Apparently, HKU did not like the idea of copying CUHK and strived to be different from—even better than its rival.

The four-year university system

In October 2004, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) of the Hong Kong Government released its first consultation document on the new '3+3+4' academic structure, which proposed a new system of six years of secondary schooling, followed by four years of university. It stressed the benefits of having a 4-year university system on providing "balanced, all round education", "a strong initial foundation of subjects to support a later more specialised focus" (EMB, 2004, p.4) and a system which allowed better international articulation with other important international systems such as the United States and Mainland China. It is now expected that all universities in Hong Kong will receive their first batch of four-year students in 2012.

There was overwhelming support for the proposal and many expressed its potential in increasing Hong Kong's international competitiveness (EMB, 2005a). Many believe that the project can "enable students to build a broader knowledge base and a more solid foundation for whole-person development, pursuing life-long learning, and provide community with all-round leaders" (EMB, 2005b, p.98). However, not many question whether a four-year university system will necessarily bring out these benefits. There is this misguided belief that four years of university is definitely better than three, with no clear evidence to prove this proposition. Recent statistics suggests that Hong Kong people do have, if not more, at least as much confidence on the three-year university system used in Australia and the United Kingdom as on the four-year one. With 19,000 and 17,800 Hong Kong students studying in Australia and the United Kingdom, these two countries, even with their three-year university system, are more popular than the United States and Canada which are hosting 13,400 and 11,000 Hong Kong students respectively ("*Cong liuxuequxiang kan bendi gaojiao*", 2005). This also shows that the reason behind the change cannot be international articulation building because the countries with a three-year university system are even more popular among Hong Kong people.

Entering the Mainland market

The last internationalising activity explored in this paper is Hong Kong universities' active expansion in the higher education market of Mainland China. HKU, for example, currently offers three joint master programs with Fudan University in Shanghai. Its School of Professional and Continuing Education has even taken the expansion more seriously and offered courses in Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Suzhou. Similarly, the School of Continuing Education of Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) has opened an Institute for Research and Continuing Education in Shenzhen and a United International College, together with Beijing Normal University, in Zhuhai. These Mainland programs are all marketed as 'international' programs, which give students an 'internationally recognised qualification', an 'international education experience' and even an 'international outlook on life'. Hong Kong universities, through its offering programs in Mainland China, have achieved internationalisation, both geographically—going beyond Hong Kong, and ideologically—putting on a foreign image in China. As for whether these programs can offer an international education experience or an international outlook on life even when most

teachers and students are Mainland Chinese, the answer is a definite **YES**—as long as the universities say that they are international, why would students say otherwise to disadvantage themselves? This, in the end, is concerned with the notion of image building.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A HONG KONG PERSPECTIVE

This article starts off by looking at globalisation and internationalisation and how these two terms can be defined in the higher education sector. From the literature review, the article concludes that internationalisation of higher education can be regarded as a response to globalisation, “the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, ideas ... across borders” (Knight, 1997, p.6) and is about how universities incorporate an international dimension into the universities’ various functions. Examples of internationalisation of higher education in various parts of the world show that targets and rationales behind such an undertaking may well be very different: from provision of international knowledge and work skills to harmonisation of university structures, and from consolidating the country’s role in the new world order to scrambling for profits in this world market of education provision.

While examining the Hong Kong universities’ attempts in internationalising themselves, one theme keeps recurring: competition—in attracting foreign elite students, in being recognised as a world-class institution, in having the best credit-based curriculum, in developing students for work, or just in being **THE** international university. It is not surprising to have the Hong Kong internationalisation of higher education taking this direction because it closely matches the city’s economic and political characteristic as one of the world’s freest markets.

Given that internationalisation is a pro-active response to globalisation, Hong Kong universities’ response is both universal and unique. It is universal because, similar to other universities in the world, they concern issues like overseas students intake, harmonisation of degree structures, forming strategic alliances, and exportation of education service. At the same time, the focus is unique, because of Hong Kong’s competitive nature. Internationalisation of Hong Kong universities has a very strong image building element: the aim is to be called an international university. This in fact puts Hong Kong universities in a very embarrassing situation. On the one hand, they claim to have been internationalised—they are internationally recognised, have world-class fame, staff, curriculum and facilities; but on the other hand, they are yet to be internationalised—they need to keep up with world trends, to reform their curriculum structure, and to be more ‘international’. The process has already been achieved, but at the same time, is also being achieved. In the process, the concept of competitions as a fundamental driving force of Hong Kong is being further strengthened and passed on to the new generation. All can be seen as a political exercise, favoured by the government and business sectors, in maintaining their dominance and power.

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