

Hong Kong Higher Education: A Turning Point?

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The past year has been one of unprecedented crises for Hong Kong. Protracted and sometimes violent protests, with active student participation, concerning the extradition bill, the future of democracy, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the central government's new national security law have created concern and uncertainty about the future of higher education. After months of disruption on several university campuses, many in the academic community, both in Hong Kong and around the world, have questions. The population is suffering yet another wave of COVID-19 and is apprehensive about the implementation of the new security law, which for some is an ominous sign of things to come. It is, of course, too early to accurately assess what it will mean in practice, but it may be worthwhile to place higher education in context—and to consider the potential risks.

Hong Kong's Traditional Higher Education Strengths

In 2012, we wrote an article entitled "Hong Kong's Academic Advantage" (*International Higher Education*, #66, Winter 2012). The article was translated into Chinese and also published in a prominent Mainland China education journal. We reflected on reasons why Hong Kong, despite its small size, has a very high proportion of universities included in the global rankings (three in the top 100; five in the top 200), and overall a high-quality postsecondary system.

We pointed to several key factors. Among these are academic freedom for faculty and students and the ability to speak out on public affairs. Scientists, scholars, and students have unfettered access to information and can report the results of scientific research without restriction. There is a combination of strong government support and overall guidance for higher education policy, and at the same time, a high degree of institutional autonomy and self-governance. English is the predominant language of teaching and research in most universities. Hong Kong selects its university presidents on the basis of their prominence as internationally renowned scientists and scholars, and its universities have been uniquely internationalized with recruitment of top notch academic staff from all over the world. Students come from all continents, and there are strong links with universities worldwide. Not only are Hong Kong's academics international, they are highly productive, publishing prominent research and obtaining major research grants from local, national, and international sources. They contribute to global science as well as to the territory's vibrant economy and civil society. Hong Kong's academic success is quite remarkable: A population of 7 million compares favorably with Mainland China's 1.4 billion population in the number of globally ranked universities.

In our 2012 article, we pointed out some of the reasons why we thought that Hong Kong's academic arrangements give it a unique edge over those of Mainland China. Since then, the progress made by universities in the Chinese mainland has been impressive,

Abstract

Hong Kong's universities have faced unprecedented challenges in the past year. Continuing social unrest concerning Hong Kong's future culminated in the imposition by Mainland China of a security law curtailing much of the territory's autonomy, profoundly shaking the universities as well as society. While it is too early to fully analyze the implications, Hong Kong's universities might lose some of their international attractiveness and internal autonomy. Academic freedom is also called into question.

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especially the top tier institutions. But the realities of entrenched bureaucracy with an overlay of political control, low average salaries, limited academic freedom and restricted access to information in some areas, and a certain insularity have somewhat limited progress. In the past few years, there have been, without doubt, increased restrictions and more politicization.

An Inflection Point for Hong Kong

The imposition of the new security law by the authorities has created a new sense of reality—for society and for higher education. How this affects Hong Kong's attractiveness to international students is as yet unclear. From a policy and security perspective, many students from the Chinese mainland who had planned to study in the United States now see Europe, Hong Kong, and Singapore as preferable. On the other hand, if Hong Kong becomes "just another large Chinese city," it would lose its distinctiveness in higher education. Until stability became an issue, the central government's plan was for Hong Kong's universities to be pivotal in the new Greater Bay Area Initiative (Hong Kong, Macao, and seven cities in Guangdong Province), which aims to build a Chinese-style Silicon Valley. The situation may lead to a substantial investment by the central government in creating more top tier universities in adjacent Guangdong, including the special economic zones of Shenzhen and Zhuhai.

Possible Higher Education Implications of the New Law

It is too early to fully assess the implications of the new law for Hong Kong's universities, but there are a few ambiguous signs. Five of eight public university presidents issued a statement supporting the national security legislation, while also stating that their universities will continue to stand fast in upholding the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Will there be new complications in adhering to these commitments in practice?

The academic senate of a premier university decided to retain an academic who was jailed for his role in a protest event that turned disorderly. The government has removed several books from public libraries for investigation to see if they are in breach of the new security law, but if pulled, they would remain available on the World Wide Web—unless there was an unprecedented action by the government to block internet sites. After the promulgation of the new security law, a half million Hong Kong residents registered to vote in the primary election of the opposition political party, which the authorities say is in breach of the new law. Liberal studies is a required subject in secondary school aiming to foster critical thinking, and is aligned with what universities do in their common core curricula: The government will announce this year how to handle this controversial subject, which critics blame for contributing to Hong Kong's months-long social unrest.

The new law does not include travel restrictions in either direction for students or academics. Yet after it was promulgated, one prominent international scholar issued a warning to "be very careful collaborating with Chinese colleagues or Hong Kong academic colleagues now," and a major international academic association sent a statement to its members noting that the new "legislation's vague working and expansive categories of offense make it impossible to know what speech and actions will result in severe legal consequences."

These contradictions do not yet confirm a significant change to academic life, but they may give pause to scientists and scholars from the global academic community who are considering an academic career in Hong Kong or academic collaboration with Hong Kong's universities.

Conclusion

Hong Kong's essential attraction in higher education, and for its broader society and economy as well, has traditionally been its openness, internationalization, and cosmopolitanism. "One country, two systems" has served Hong Kong's higher education well. If it loses what made that possible, then its distinctiveness in higher education may be lost and its advantages and international prestige could disappear. ▲

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