

The Growth and Diversification of Higher Education in Macau

Mark Bray

Mark Bray is director of the Comparative Education Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, China. E-mail: <mbray@hku.hk>.

Macau gained wide international attention in December 1999 when responsibility for administration of the territory reverted from Portugal to China. This followed the model for Hong Kong, where China had resumed sovereignty from the United Kingdom in 1997. Both Macau and Hong Kong are governed under the formula of "One Country, Two Systems." This means that they have strong autonomy in internal affairs, including education. Macau was the last European colony in Asia.

Macau's area is just 24 square kilometers, and its population is only 450,000. The territory had been under Portuguese administration since 1557; but for four centuries the government severely neglected both education and other social sectors. Macau was small and distant from Portugal and, especially after Hong Kong from 1842 onwards provided a far superior port, had little strategic significance. Portuguese attitudes changed only toward the end of the 20th century, influenced by two factors. First, Portugal no longer had any other colonies and so could devote more attention to Macau; and second, Macau was in an economically vigorous part of the world where investments could yield significant future dividends.

Before 1981, Macau had no higher education institutions, and all citizens wishing to pursue tertiary studies had to go outside the territory. Twenty years later, Macau had 11 institutions. The factors underlying this growth were in some respects peculiar to Macau; but they also deserve examination from a comparative perspective. The strongest pressures for change arose from political forces, but developments were also shaped by the market for education.

Private Beginnings and Government Initiative: The 1980s

The lack of higher education institutions before 1981 was partly caused by the small population of the territory. The government failed to take any initiative to provide higher education, and the private sector did not bridge the gap because the market was considered too small.

However, in 1981 a private body did commence operation. It sought to overcome the constraints of population size by recruiting throughout the region, and particularly from Hong Kong. The institution was known as the University of East Asia (UEA). Because it recruited students from around the region, it operated in English, even though most people in Macau speak Chinese (Cantonese) and the colonial government operated in Portuguese.

The year 1987 brought a significant political event, namely the Sino-Portuguese Agreement that China would resume administration of Macau in 1999. This event stimulated the Portuguese authorities to take a much more active interest in the territory. Recognizing the need for stronger government leadership in education and other sectors, in 1988 the government purchased the main campus of the UEA. Suddenly the higher education sector (if that is an appropriate descriptor, given that it had only one institution) switched from being entirely private to becoming entirely public. The UEA remained quite small, however, and even in 2000 had only 3,100 students.

Also in 1988, the government established the Macau Security Force Superior School. This institution was also linked to the political transition. Its major goals were to upgrade the skills and qualifications of security force personnel and thereby permit localization. Because it was a specialized body, this institution was even smaller than the UEA. Enrollments never exceeded a few hundred, and by 2000 it had fewer than 20 students.

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Multiplication and Diversification of Institutions: The 1990s

The year 1991 brought three major developments in higher education. First, the UEA was renamed the University of Macau (UM) and was restructured. Second, the UEA's Polytechnic College was separated, to become the free-standing Macau Polytechnic Institute (MPI); and third, the United Nations University International Institute for Software Technology (UNU/IIST) was created. The UNU is an international body headquartered in Tokyo. The UNU/IIST is a research institute with a mandate to assist poor countries. With the creation of these bodies, Macau had three public institutions and one private one.

The following year brought another private institution, the Asia International Open University (AIOU). This body resulted from collaboration between what had been the Open College of the UEA and the Open University of Portugal. Like the UEA in the early 1980s, the AIOU sought economies of scale by recruiting outside the territory, particularly from mainland China.

By this stage, it seemed that Macau was gaining new institutions with considerable frequency. The pace was

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maintained by the formation, in 1995, of the Institute of European Studies of Macau and the Institute for Tourism Studies and, in 1996, by the Inter-University Institute of Macau. The first of these was a private body with public partners including the Macau government, the UM, and the MPI. The Institute for Tourism Studies was a public body; and the Inter-University Institute was a joint initiative by the Catholic University of Portugal and the Diocese of Macau. These three bodies again emphasized external connections in order to address the constraints of Macau's small population.

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The last institution of higher education to gain formal approval during the decade was the Kiang Wu Nursing College of Macau. This private institution dates back to 1923, when the Kiang Wu Nursing School was established within the Kiang Wu Hospital. In 1999, the college was recognized by the government as a private institution of higher education that offered degree programs in conjunction with the Peking Union Medical College.

Reversion to Chinese Administration: The New Era

The process of opening institutions of higher education did not pause with the handover to Chinese administration. During the first year, two private bodies were established. First was the Macau Institute of Management (MIM), which sought to upgrade skills and qualifications in the business sector. The MIM evolved from a postsecondary body established in 1984. Like the other institutions, however, it was small. In 2000 it had only 92 students, all part time.

The second body was the Macau University of Science & Technology (MUST) and was a more ambitious undertaking. MUST has powerful backers and bold plans for partnerships of various kinds, particularly with mainland China. The government granted the institution a substantial piece of land, and even in its first year it recruited 650 students.

With the creation of these two bodies, Macau had moved to 11 institutions, of which 4 were public and 7 were private. This was a dramatic change from the situation 20 years previously.

Political Transitions and Small Size

Two major themes underlying the changes in Macau's

higher education were political transitions and small size. The 1987 Sino-Portuguese Agreement provided the initial stimulus for government intervention and set a timetable for reversion to Chinese administration in 1999. Ironically, one effect during this twilight of the colonial regime was to strengthen links with Portugal. The Portuguese language was given emphasis, especially in the public institutions, and professional links were built and funded by bodies in Portugal. At the same time, the government was tolerant of private initiatives, not least because they enlarged the higher education sector and supported efforts to strengthen Macau's sense of identity.

The 1999 resumption of Chinese sovereignty necessarily brought a new direction. Past developments had been largely ad hoc and increasingly focused on the near term as 1999 approached. One major step for longer-term planning was the commissioning in 2000 of an external review of the whole sector. Among the recommendations of this review was the creation of a body to improve coordination of the institutions of higher education.

The authors of the external review were also very conscious of the implications of Macau's small size. Like other small territories, Macau will never be able to provide all specializations domestically, and at least some students will need to go outside the territory (e.g., for dentistry and specialized forms of medicine). Within the new political framework, domestic institutions will also face increasing competition from universities in other parts of China. However, the review argued that Macau could continue to recruit students from outside the territory. This could partly be done through Chinese-medium courses, but should also be done through English-medium programs. Macau's Portuguese heritage could also be seen as a distinctive asset, but Portuguese-language courses are unlikely to be sustained at pre-1999 levels.

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As previous issues of this newsletter have shown, shifts in balance between public and private are not unusual. The reason why they have been particularly dramatic in Macau is again partly linked to small size. Also, because of political forces, developments in Macau have occurred in a much more compressed timescale than has been normal elsewhere. From a comparative perspective, Macau may appear idiosyncratic. However, it is worth examining precisely because of that fact. Analysis of patterns in Macau assists broader understanding of the forces of change simply because these patterns are unusual.