

higher education. For those who graduate from secondary schooling, there is a gap of at least one year for graduates who seek admission to tertiary education overseas, even when they have achieved sufficient language competence. Bridging or foundation studies courses are minimal and many who apply falsify their qualifications with the assistance of local teachers.

TERTIARY EDUCATION AND ENGLISH-LANGUAGE TRAINING

Burma has about 30 universities and another 35 institutions listed as colleges. Tertiary education is mostly under the control of the Ministry of Education, and access is free. Nominal salaries for tertiary teachers are pitifully low, with university lecturers being paid around US\$50 per month; it should be noted, however, that most of those working in these institutions receive considerable benefits such as heavily subsidized housing, food, preferred treatment of their families by the government, and other fringe benefits that account for why these positions are prized. This situation is similar for people who currently work in higher education or the public sector in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, where “position” and “status” within society are highly valued. However, moonlighting by academics is common, and there is a proliferation of private colleges offering marginally better quality than public institutions and offering some diversification of curriculum.

The most well known tertiary institution (Yangon University) now only offers courses in arts, sciences, and law, with an estimated enrollment of 14,500 students. Previously, only medicine, economics, education, and other fields were taught, but now new separate and single-disciplined universities have been established under separate ministries to teach in these areas. The campus has been split into one focusing on

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undergraduate studies and the other on postgraduate studies. This division has been undertaken to reduce the possibility of social unrest. (It should be noted that the university was closed during periods in the 1990s.) There is little concern for the quality of teaching or education outcomes. Staff are monitored to ensure that they do not encourage students to become politically active, and foreigners cannot gain access without formal government permission. Inadequate infrastructure, outdated teaching equipment, and poorly qualified teachers are major problems. According to a recent UNESCO report, higher education institutions in Burma are increasing in numbers but decreasing in quality. Graduates who earn qualifications over-

seas tend not to return, thus leaving the country even poorer.

English-language training to assist students wishing to study higher education abroad is offered generously by the British Council. Open access to offices of the British Council is available in Yangon and Mandalay, and many young Burmese seek information on overseas study. The American Center, which is separate physically from the US Embassy in Yangon, has a comprehensive library and provides good access to education materials and resources for students.

CONCLUSION

Clearly it is now time to reassess the situation for higher education in Burma. Small but significant opportunities exist for overseas universities or philanthropic organizations to engage in distance education, particularly tourism training, information technology training, and foundation courses for students who have completed their high school education. Linking with work of the British Council and possibly initiating discussions with small private colleges could provide other pathways for development and support. If this proves successful, then possibly the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank might be encouraged to reengage and provide limited technical assistance. Developments of these kinds will have to be done carefully, but it seems likely that the Burmese government would not oppose such gentle approaches to reform. ■

“Meddling” or “Steering”: The Politics of Academic Decision Making in Hong Kong

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The latest flap in Hong Kong's contentious world of higher education concerns the unwillingness of the government-appointed council of the Hong Kong Institute of Education to reappoint Paul Morris as president. The Hong Kong academic community sees this action as a severe violation of academic freedom—the latest in a number of high profile cases over the last decade where government authority has tried to limit academic freedom by putting pressure on the universities and their top leaders to silence or remove professors who were perceived as disconcerting or obstreperous. But is this case a mat-

ter of academic freedom? However loyal to President Morris the academic community may be—and however unwelcome the nonreappointment may be—it is nonetheless important to provide an accurate analysis.

Academic freedom, after all, relates to guarantees of free expression for professors and students. The original 19th century German definition of academic freedom was limited to such protection within the classroom and laboratory in fields of the expertise of the professor. It did not protect expression on other topics. In the early 20th century, Americans expanded the idea of academic freedom to guarantee expression on any topic and in any context. Academic freedom protected the jobs of professors. They could not be fired or disciplined because of their writings or expression, on campus or off. This expanded definition of academic freedom is by and large accepted everywhere—everywhere, that is, where academic freedom is respected. Academic freedom does not assure that professors will control the university, nor does it protect institutional autonomy. Academic freedom does not insulate either professors or institutions from accountability accessible to those who provide funding and who, through legal arrangements, control institutional decisions.

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Thus, the charge of restricting academic freedom may not be justified. Morris has pointed out that he had to protect the autonomy of academic staff to express their views publicly. This differs from a Hong Kong University case in 2000 when an institutional head succumbed to government pressure and unsuccessfully (as alleged) set a process in motion to silence a professor.

The Morris crisis relates to the alleged desire of the government to merge the Hong Kong Institute of Education with the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Morris supporters attribute the nonrenewal of his contract to resisting a merger. The academic freedom of staff was not limited by government, and no member of the Hong Kong Institute of Education staff was fired or disciplined for expression of views.

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The government provides most of the funding for higher education in Hong Kong and has the legal power to determine broad policy directions. In Europe, such power is called “steering” and is subject to considerable debate. As European academic systems expanded, governments, which fund higher education, took increasing control over how these growing systems are organized. Internal academic management remains mainly in the hands of the academics, but demands for accountability for academic performance are slowly changing

the equation. The United Kingdom is a good example of how a state has exercised increased authority—measuring academic performance, imposing increasing fees on students, and the like. The academic community has had little impact on these policies, often unsuccessfully opposing them.

In the United States, colleges and universities have always been subject to the control of boards of trustees or regents. In

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general these boards have no academics on them, which is why they are called “lay boards.” These boards appoint presidents and other top administrators and determine institutional policy. Presidents serve, as the saying goes, “at the pleasure of the board.” A year ago, Harvard’s board, called the Corporation, lost confidence in President Lawrence Summers. He quickly resigned. This same group just appointed Harvard’s first female president, Drew Gilpin Faust. The faculty did not remove Summers nor did they elect the new president. Most American universities have a system of shared responsibility for policy. Academics determine key internal matters, including having a voice in the appointment of top administrators. Lay boards, which in the public universities are generally appointed by government authorities, are the main arbiters of the direction of the institution.

Many in the academic community worldwide argue that academic staff should have a large measure of control over their universities. Academic institutions, before the age of mass higher education, did have a significant measure of institutional autonomy. But since massification, the power of the academic community to shape the destiny of their own universities and of higher education in general has been diminished. The impact of marketization, the expansion of universities into giant bureaucracies, demands for accountability, and related forces have revolutionized the internal management of universities and how decisions concerning the direction of academic systems are made.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM OR NOT?

Definitions make a difference. If this latest crisis in Hong Kong’s academic life is in fact a matter of governance and control rather than academic freedom, the attention should be placed on what is the proper role of the Hong Kong government in “steering” the academic system. Should the academic community and the leaders of the institutions have a significant role in shaping academic policy? If so, how should a shared governance arrangement be organized? Alternatively, should universities and their academic staff be treated like the employees of any company or government? We are convinced that the pendulum has swung much too far in the direction of government authority and managerial power, to the long-term detriment of the strength of the system. ■