

## Hong Kong's Academic Advantage

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Why is it that Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China, with a population of 7 million, has more highly ranked research universities than mainland China—with its population of 1 billion and unprecedented expenditures for establishing world-class research universities? The answers may yield important insights for the improvement of research universities everywhere.

### **HONG KONG'S ACADEMIC REALITIES**

Hong Kong has three universities that score well in the global rankings, and all eight of its public universities are academically respectable institutions. The three top schools—the University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, score respectively at 34, 61, and 151 in the *Times Higher Education* 2011 rankings. The two top mainland Chinese universities, Peking University and Tsinghua University, rank at 49 and 71. The new greater China rankings, prepared by the Academic Rankings of World Universities (“Shanghai rankings”), place the three Hong Kong institutions at 3, 5, and 6; only Tsinghua University and National Taiwan

University score better. The three Hong Kong institutions are medium sized by global standards—with between 10,000 and 20,000 students each. Two are comprehensive universities with medical schools, and one is a science and technology university. All were established in the 20th century—the University of Hong Kong in 1911, Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1964, and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 1991. All of Hong Kong's universities are public institutions, with good financial support from the government; and all charge students a relatively modest tuition.

### **THE CONTEXT OF SUCCESS**

There are a variety of ingredients that have contributed to the success of Hong Kong's big three. It is useful to note that none of the three schools were academic powerhouses until the 1990s. The two older institutions were respectable second-tier institutions, and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology was not established until 1991. Hong Kong decided to invest significantly in higher education in the 1990s, as the territory anticipated the transition from British colonial rule to its current status as a Special Administrative Region of China—with considerable institutional autonomy and academic freedom of action. Flush economic times permitted government investment. Hong Kong began to emphasize research universities, for several reasons. First—as one of the four tigers with Singapore, Korea, and Taiwan—Hong Kong had to keep up; and even though the government left investment in high tech to the private sector, it was willing to establish a science and technology university. Second, this was the beginning of the age of massification. As Hong Kong's postsecondary colleges and polytechnics moved toward university status, its three universities could

take the step toward becoming research universities, as Hong Kong moved toward developing a diversified academic system.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESS**

A brief overview of some of the key factors that have contributed to Hong Kong's academic success may yield some useful explanations.

*“Steering” and autonomy.* Hong Kong's government, through the Research Grants Council and the University Grants Committee, provides overall direction to the higher education sector; prioritized funding, combined with performance guidelines, shape university policy. At the same time, the universities have almost complete internal autonomy and self-management.

*Effective governance.* The University of Hong Kong stems from the British academic tradition and the Chinese University, though established by the consolidation of American missionary colleges in 1963, brought American missionary and Chinese traditions into Hong Kong's colonial framework for higher education. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology added the American research university model and academic governance to the mix, without assaulting the status quo. All three have strong international governance arrangements that emphasize control by the academics, while at the same time strong administrative leadership. Shared governance seems to work well in Hong Kong, although all three of the universities have somewhat different approaches to it. The universities do not seem to get bogged down in endless academic bickering, nor are they ruled by autocratic administrators. There are some interesting variations between the British-influenced University of Hong Kong and the more American-oriented arrangement at the Hong Kong

University of Science and Technology, though in recent years the two arrangements have begun to merge.

*English dominates.* English is the medium of instruction in all the universities, although both English and Chinese (the Cantonese dialect but also Mandarin) are used at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, to reflect its name. This means that Hong Kong's universities are immediately in the mainstream of global science and scholarship. Though academics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong may use Chinese as a medium of instruction, they are as capable as any to fully participate in the global scientific community through the medium of English. There is a strong orientation toward the key international academic journals; and most publications produced are in English, although in recent years Chinese publications have increased as Hong Kong academics have begun to take advantage of the impact won by publishing in the massive academic landscape on the Chinese mainland.

*Internationalism.* Hong Kong as a place is highly internationalized. This has always meant North America, England, and Australia but has gradually come to include more academics from the Chinese mainland and a small but increasing number of top academics, from every continent. Hong Kong is the Asian headquarters for many multinational companies, and is one of the top-three (after New York and London) international banking centers. Although its population is 95 percent Chinese, an international cosmopolitan spirit pervades. Most of the top academics at research universities have doctorates earned overseas, and many go on to academic and administrative posts in overseas universities. The universities have always seen themselves as international institutions. No other regions in Asian higher education have better access to

international scholarly books and publications. There is no censorship of the Internet, and academic books that may be restricted elsewhere in Asia are all available in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's research universities hold international academic events—forums, seminars, and conferences, on a caliber of anywhere in the world.

*The academic profession.* Clearly the most important aspects of Hong Kong's success in higher education, academics there are relatively well treated. While they are no longer the highest-paid academics in the world, salaries compete globally, and Hong Kong is able to recruit some of the best academic minds. The universities also ensure that top scholars and scientists, including Nobel laureates, are invited to lecture; and their own academics have ample opportunities to attend international conferences. Terms and conditions of academic work—including teaching loads, administrative support, and the availability of research funding, on a competitive basis from local sources—are all globally competitive. Leaders in academic fields also play a role in external assessment of research grant applications and teaching programs. Hiring, promotion, and tenure are performance based and quite competitive, contributing to academic productivity. Hong Kong is not only able to hire talented academics globally but has a special attraction for some overseas and mainland Chinese academics, who can live in a Chinese environment, while at the same time enjoying good salaries and working conditions—superior to what is offered to most academics on the Chinese mainland. Just as important, Hong Kong offers mainland returnees an atmosphere that is not stifled by bureaucracy, where decision making is more participative and transparent and in which academic freedom and information access are unfettered. What mainly

distinguishes the academic profession in Hong Kong from elsewhere is its view that personnel matters and resource allocations are largely perceived by academic staff to be made on the basis of performance measures. This was not always the case. For example, a few decades ago, the University of Hong Kong resembled a provincial British university in its academic culture. A remarkable transformation has taken place.

*University leadership.* The faith of the academic profession in the research universities of Hong Kong has hinged on the academic caliber of its institutional leaders. Each of the three research universities has ensured that only outstanding academics would be at the helm of their institutions. This has undoubtedly had a great deal to do with the rise of Hong Kong's universities in the international rankings. For example, the last president of the University of Hong Kong is a world-renowned geneticist, and the president of the Chinese University of Hong Kong was awarded a Nobel Prize for his work in fiber optics, named an "Asian Hero: by *Time* magazine for his work on SARS. The current president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology distinguished himself as a key assistant director of the US National Science Foundation, in charge of the Mathematical and Physical Sciences Directorate. There may be other considerations in the selection of university leaders. However, to sustain its rise in the global rankings, Hong Kong must ensure that the most significant aspects are that the most-respected global scholars and scientists are the ones that are in positions of authority at their universities.

## HONG KONG AND CHINA: USEFUL COMPARISONS

The Hong Kong case has special relevance for mainland China and indicates some of the factors that may inhibit China's rise to top-academic status. While the investment in the facilities of its top research universities has been impressive in recent years, the "soft elements" of the Chinese academic system may well inhibit the system from achieving the top levels. Among these, the most prominent are governance and academic culture. China still places an inordinate emphasis on the political skill of its academic leaders—something that is understandable, given the context in which academic leaders operate on the Chinese mainland. Nevertheless, the new education blueprint for 2020 has made the "de-administration of universities" a major objective in raising the academic quality of its universities. Thus, government would take more of a steering role than a direct interventionist role in the academic life of universities, although the recent case of the South China University of Science and Technology has demonstrated the difficulty of this process. There has been a steady and unmistakable rise in the internationalism of China's research universities. The surge in the amount of Sino-foreign cooperation in higher education, including overseas campuses on Chinese soil, is an indication of progress. More presidents of top research universities have a doctorate from overseas or have spent a good deal of time there.

A key factor in the continued rise of mainland research universities relates to low academic salaries. Low-base salaries mean that academics must search for additional income through research grants, consulting, and extra teaching and, thus, pay less attention to their core academic responsibilities. A related problem

is the development of a mature academic culture. Mainland China will benefit by looking at Hong Kong's recipe for academic success.