

What Matters in Becoming a Leading International University? The Case of the University of Hong Kong

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History matters

When one examines the leading universities in the world, it becomes clear that history matters. Most leading research institutions have a history of over a hundred, and in some cases, several hundred years. Over such a long history, each developed networks of research and scholarship, as well as a unique campus culture that helped to sustain their greatness. The University of Hong Kong transversed several major stages in its 100 plus years of development (Cunich, 2012). In the 21st Century the University plays a key role in helping Hong Kong anchor globalisation to ensure its long term competitiveness as a major global city and special region of China.

As the University of Hong Kong entered its second century, it reframed its role as the nation's most international university with the grand challenge to advance knowledge in China's "one county - two systems" framework. This has meant increased collaboration with other national universities, and a deeper engagement with its historical role to support the modernisation of the rest of the country. This also means addressing the most relevant problems facing the nation.

While sustaining its western academic heritage, the University has recalibrated the balance in its global emphasis. It continues to interpret western knowledge traditions for China's development, while bringing more of Chinese intellectual heritage into the international community. The University's position as a leading research university has come to rest more upon the integration of innovative teaching and research productivity through both cross-system and international collaboration.

The interdisciplinary curriculum and institutional arrangements of the University must be able to support knowledge networks, and a pattern of brain circulation that ensures the recruitment and retention of internationally recognised scholars and scientists from China and around the world.

The University was ranked first in Hong Kong, second in Asia, and 26th in the world by QS in 2013. Also that year, it was ranked first in Hong Kong, third in Asia, and 43rd in the world by the Times Higher Education World University Ranking (HKU, 2014a). The University is advantaged by its geographic position in a highly networked global city (Armour, 2013). By the turn of the 21st Century, its development hinged increasingly up on how it could drive innovation and provide a competitive edge for the nation and surrounding region (Dill & van Vught, 2010).

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Historical transition matters

While Hong Kong's geographic position and strategic management of knowledge networks contribute to its having a high proportion of globally ranked research universities in one city, this was not the case 30 years ago when it was a low to mid-level income economy, with only two universities that focused largely on undergraduate teaching.

In 1980, Hong Kong was ensconced within a region surrounded by a great deal of poverty. Only Japan had managed to upscale its economy to compete internationally. In Japan's wake, four smaller economies (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan) began to forge ahead based on export trade and semi-skill based manufacturing. With only a pair of universities, Hong Kong prospered through trade, re-export, small manufacturing enterprises, and financial services backed up by an independent legal system (Youngson, 1982). Its economy remained relatively unencumbered by government bureaucracy, and its civil service earned a reputation for having the highest level of integrity in the region (Burns, 2004).

As Hong Kong's economy continued to grow in the 1990s, it began to diverge from the other Asian tigers. Learning from Japan's success, the governments of the other three tigers (Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) ratcheted up their high-tech industries, but Hong Kong continued to march to its governmental non-interventionist drummer and the invisible hand of the marketplace.

Known for its entrepreneurial prowess, global trade, and competitive business practices, Hong Kong evolved to become a centre for the reception, translation and diffusion of knowledge. Under the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, the region is distinct from the Chinese mainland in many of its social, political, and educational practices. Its universities remain deeply integrated into the global academy, while benefitting from the continued rise of the nation, including its economy and its research universities. Hong Kong's educational and academic exchange and mobility, official language policy of Chinese (Cantonese and Putonghua) and English, and communication infrastructure contribute to the international reception and dissemination of new scientific knowledge.



An enabling environment matters

When the Chinese mainland initiated its policy of economic reform and opening to the outside world in December of 1978, degree places in Hong Kong higher education only amounted to between one and two percent of the relevant age group. Throughout the 1980s Hong Kong shared similarities with systems like Singapore in having an elite system of higher education with limited access to degree places.

Since universities need a critical mass of undergraduates to establish viable graduate schools, the University did not gain traction as a research university until after 1989, when government decided to double university enrolments in the wake of a large outflow of talent abroad. Soon after, the University of Hong Kong provided a greater range of graduate school qualifications.

The University of Hong Kong's transition from an elite undergraduate institution to a world class research university was set by 1990. Stakeholders in government, business, and higher education decided to support the rapid expansion of higher education. This acted as a confidence building measure as Hong Kong's capitalist system prepared to cross the river of post-colonialism under the umbrella of a socialist market economy of China. Other reasons played an equally important role, including rising aspirations for global excellence in higher education at a time when international development agencies such as the UNESCO and the World Bank asserted that national development would increasingly hinge upon the capacity of universities to drive a knowledge economy.

As Hong Kong's rise was accompanied by the expansion of higher education, its research universities were expected to help drive the economy and engage in knowledge exchange with the surrounding society. Significant for the University is its portal known as the Scholar Hub. This portal gives the community direct access to the work of academic staff and encourages partnership in knowledge exchange. It also serves as a portal linking the University to the national and global community (HKU, 2014b).

Other elements in the University's enabling environment are a high degree of internationalism, a highly valued but self-defined Chinese cultural heritage, multilingual adaptability, capacity to attract talented scientists from around the world, communications technology that permits a close integration with the global academy, stern protection of academic freedom, a lively intellectual climate, its long-standing mission to promote the modernisation of China, and the adjacent mainland of China with its policy of economic reforms and opening to the outside world (Altbach & Postiglione, 2012; Postiglione, 2006, 2007).

Institutional autonomy matters

Through the University Grants Committee (UGC) the government has leverage to steer the direction of the University of Hong Kong through prioritised funding and performance guidelines (UGC, 2004). Yet, the University is autonomous under Hong Kong law. The University controls its curricula and standards, staff and student recruitment, research, and internal allocation of resources. The UGC, as a non-statutory body, can mediate between the University and government.

The decision to establish a Research Grants Council (RGC) was pivotal for the transition to a leading research University (University Grants Committee, 2000). The RGC provided a template for large scale research funding and further refined the global network of advisory services that steer the format for the management of the knowledge networks. As the primary source of research funds, RGC helped support the University of Hong Kong's definition of its strategic research themes (HKU, 2014c). The international composition of its professoriate, governance committees, and members of the RGC are indicative of the commitment to building international knowledge networks.

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Student enrolment, promoting leadership, and graduates employment matter

Due in part to its long history and reputation in Asia, the University manages to attract the best students in the region. Of the nearly 71,000 undergraduate applications received in 2012, more than 23,800 came from outside of the Hong Kong school system. One in nine applications received an offer of admission.

The University received around 12,000 undergraduate applications in 2011-12 and 2012-13 from the Chinese mainland each year for a government-determined quota of only 300 places (HKU, 2014a; Spinks & Wong, 2014). In recent years, students enrolling in the University from the Chinese mainland were the top-scorers in their province and the country in the National College and University Entrance Examination. For this reason, the University has been referred to in the popular Western media as the Harvard of Asia and Oxbridge of East Asia (HKU, 2014d).

Employment levels are perhaps the highest in the world -- graduates of the University have had a near 100 percent employment rate every year for the last seven consecutive years. In the QS Asian University Rankings 2013, HKU achieved a score of 99.8 in the QS 'Employer Reputation' survey (HKU, 2014a).

In short, the University must work to sustain Hong Kong as a viable global city. The University reflects this in the number of nationalities, approaching 100, represented on campus (86 nationalities in full-time programmes, and 92 nationalities if exchange and visiting students are included). These students are provided with an undergraduate curriculum and pedagogy that represent an integration of Western and Chinese academic traditions, paralleling the "east meets west" character of the city.

Hong Kong's conversion from a three- to a four-year university system is unprecedented and has been surprisingly smooth. The relatively non-interventionist approach of the government, coupled with lively debate within the academy, have been essential aids to the process.

We need home-grown graduates who have a strong sense of belonging, and a strong sense of identity as being a part of Hong Kong. At the same time it is also important to nurture a core of local faculty who give stability, local character, and cultural and intellectual rootedness to local universities, and engage themselves heavily with the local community.

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The professoriate matters

More than half of the professoriate come from outside of Hong Kong, and most are recruited with advanced degrees from overseas universities in Europe, Australia, and North America. This has helped ensure that knowledge networks remain unencumbered (Saxenian, 2005). The regular full-time professoriate, numbering 1,052, (94 percent with doctorates), ensure the University's position as Hong Kong's leading institution (UGC, 2014). They have the highest number of winning research proposals, and the largest amount of research funding. The University has the highest number of refereed publications, highest number of refereed publications per academic, the highest number of refereed journal articles published in journals tracked by Thomson Reuters, and the highest number of citations tracked by Thomson Reuters.

The University's template for the exchange of ideas in research and innovation has to evolve in alignment with policies and practices in the larger global academy. The academic organisation and administration of the University are under continual review. Top-slicing of the university budget is reallocated to support initiatives and incentives that aim to strengthen research capacity.

At the same time, the level of research collaboration has significantly risen in the past two decades according to surveys of the academic profession by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Changing Academic Profession project (Boyer, Altbach, & Whitelaw, 1994; ISCAP, 2007; Postiglione, 1997; Postiglione & Wang, 2011).

By 2007 most of the professoriate was engaged in collaborative research. The productive 20 percent of academics were more even involved in internationally collaborative research. In fact, the University's professoriate remains more internationally collaborative in research than most of its Asian counterparts.

In summary, the University's professoriate has a high degree of engagement in regional and international research cooperation. Recruitment of academic staff is internationally competitive. Institutional management provides opportunity for short and long-term visits by distinguished scholars and scientists, including Nobel laureates and other highly recognised scholars and scientists. Institutional management also facilitates academic productivity by providing advantages for building international knowledge networks and for publishing research findings overseas.

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Institutional heritage within the nation matters

The University of Hong Kong continues to reconfigure its long-standing institutional heritage with its key role as a University of and for China. The process becomes pivotal as leading research universities on the Chinese mainland deepen their level of internationalisation. There is a reflective discourse about how to bring the University's Western academic model into the service of China. Research cooperation with counterparts on the Chinese mainland has risen sharply in all fields. However, this is especially true in areas related to science and technology where the conditions and environment for research collaboration have improved. Increased cooperation with scientists on the Chinese mainland also provides another major source of research funding to offset the current level of funding for R&D in Hong Kong (0.7% of GDP).

The University has signed a partnership agreement with China Bio-Med Regeneration Technology to study how stem cell can slow down the aging process (Yiu, 2013). It has established the University of Hong Kong-Zhejiang Institute of Research and Innovation, and has also partnered with Zhejiang University and Tsinghua University on research related to infectious disease treatment (HKU, 2013). It also cooperates on research outside the fields of science and technology. For example, the University has a partnership with Tsinghua University Law School to promote exchanges that foster judicial development and groom legal talents for the Chinese mainland. The Faculty of Education cooperated

with the Gansu Education Commission and Northwest Normal University in three areas: experiential learning for undergraduate students of the University in ethnic minority regions, the training of multiple cohorts of Gansu's rural school principals, and research on obstacles to university access among Gansu students from impoverished areas.

In short, the University has become locally integrated, nationally engaged, and regionally positioned for global impact in teaching and research. The focus is increasingly on fields and specialties that address national growth challenges. Governance of the University is meant to support an organisation that is innovative and unique, that promotes a sense of ownership among academic staff, that protects the academic research atmosphere, and that is international without assaulting the University's heritage. As the geneticist who led the University through its Centenary noted: "The University's tradition has been carried on for more than 100 years... there have been small changes here and there, but the overall template, like DNA, stays the same."

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An integrated process model matters

The University of Hong Kong model anchors globalisation by capitalising on its century of heritage with the Western academic model, its strategic positioning as the leading international university of China, and its ability to attract the top students and scholars from all over the world. This model is best viewed as a product of a long term process that has required the University to recognise opportunities and take calculated risks in planning and implementation at different phases of its development.

The model rests on an enabling environment of institutional arrangements, deft engagement with international brain circulation, and amphibious stakeholders in the community who have the agility to bridge academia, industry and government. Above all else, the model is one that places an emphasis on the establishment, protection, and elaboration of collaborative knowledge networks and academic freedom.

Looking ahead, the dynamic economy of East Asia will probably continue to be an asset in favour of the University of Hong Kong's long established international reputation as a leading research university in China with global outreach. That global outreach hinges on a sustained broadening of international knowledge networks. In the longer term, its future will depend on how it positions itself during its second hundred years, within a region of the world that will be the major driver of the global economy by 2050.



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