The quest for world class status and university responses in Asia's World Cities: an introduction by the Guest Editors

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The quest for world class status and university responses in Asia’s World Cities: an introduction by the Guest Editors

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This introduction sets out the context and major issues for this special issue with a focus on critical reflections upon how academics and administrators are increasingly affected by the changing social, economic and political environments. With particular reference to global cities or world cities, this article examines how major Asian societies have responded to the growing challenges of globalisation to enhance their higher education systems. More specifically, this introduction critically reflects upon how globalisation has fostered student mobility and raised expectations for university performance in this regional context.

Keywords: academic profession; Asian’s world cities; network society; world class status

Introduction

With higher education recognised as a vital tool to stimulate economic growth in the [ASEAN] region, efforts to raise standards and encourage collaboration are gaining pace . . . . Raising standards at higher education institutions across ASEAN . . . is considered a key aspect of the effort to train the skilled workforce necessary for economic development . . . A recent World Bank report found that while higher education participation in less prosperous Southeast Asian countries has increased sharply in recent decades, the number of graduates is still too low for countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam . . . [which] are neither delivering graduates with the skills nor producing the research required to address labour market and innovation needs (Gooch, 2012, p. 7).

Changes in the global economy observed over the past several decades have made it increasingly clear that the quality of higher education represents a cornerstone in any strategy for national development (Bajunid, 2011; Carnoy, 2003; Gopinathan & Lee, 2011; Hallinger, 2011; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2007; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2002; Tjeldvoll, 2011). The past decade, in particular, has witnessed the rapid emergence of East Asian universities, both as domestic and as regional centres of knowledge consolidation and production (Bajunid, 2011; Gopinathan & Lee, 2011; Mok & Cheung, 2011). As a consequence, regional policymakers are focusing increasingly on higher education strategies that will ensure levels of knowledge production and capacity development capable of sustaining future social and economic growth.

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It is against this changing global context that this special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* sets out to examine how higher education institutions in East Asia have responded to the challenges of globalisation through strategies aimed at achieving world-class performance. The volume includes contributions on higher education from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and mainland China.

**The quest for ‘world-class’ status**

With strong intentions to enhance their competitiveness, governments and universities in Asia have taken world university ranking seriously. Recent studies have repeatedly shown that universities in East Asia are increasingly under pressure to compete internationally. Interest in university league tables has become the norm, not only in the United Kingdom and Canada, but also in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan and Mainland China (Altbach, 2010; Chan, 2013; Liu & Cheng, 2005; Mok & Hawkins, 2010).

Take the case of Malaysia. It was almost a decade ago that government policymakers in Malaysia first took note of the world university rankings, with some degree of shock and dismay. In the words of an influential Senator, Lim Kit Siang:

> In its 2004 ranking of world’s top 500 universities, the Shanghai Jiao Tong University listed 66 universities from Asia-Pacific . . . but not a single one from Malaysia. Malaysia’s omission from the *The Times Higher Education Supplement* ranking of the world’s top 50 universities and total absence from the Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s World’s Top 500 Universities annual ranking should be the focus of serious parliamentary debate and concern. (Lim, 2004)

Subsequent parliamentary debate gave tangible evidence that Senator Lim’s concern was shared by others. The Parliament went on to set a national goal for Malaysia to have at least three universities in the top 100 and at least one in the top 50 by the year 2020. Eight years later, the commentary in Malaysia has shifted from goal setting to strategies for goal attainment:

> The Higher Education Ministry will recruit more international students and aggressively promote the country as an education hub. This is part of its efforts to have a local university ranked among the world’s top 50 universities by 2020. Deputy Higher Education Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah said in order to raise the rankings in QS WUR, there should be an increase in research and development, international collaboration network and high-impact publications. (*New Straits Times*, 2012)

Similar trends are apparent elsewhere in the region. Positioning itself as a regional hub of higher education, Hong Kong’s system leaders have placed an emphasis on research performance. This has been reflected in the research-led funding formula adopted by the government (Mok & Cheung, 2011). Since the 1990s, Hong Kong higher education has gone through several ‘research assessment exercises’ modelled on the UK approach to monitoring research performance. Universities in Hong Kong have been asked to differentiate themselves in terms of role and mission, identifying specific strengths and developing centres of research excellence. Academics currently working in Hong Kong are confronted with increasing pressures from the government to engage in international research, provide high quality teaching and contribute to professional and community services.

In Taiwan, the government has realised that globalisation has accelerated competition among higher education institutions globally. With intentions to improve the global competitiveness of Taiwan’s higher education sector, the Executive Yuan set out two key policy
targets. At least one Taiwanese university should be ranked in the top 100 universities in the world and at least 15 key departments or cross-university research centres should be ranked among the top in Asia within the next 5 years (Lu, 2004). With these policy objectives, the Ministry of Education and the National Science Council jointly launched the ‘Programme for Promoting Academic Excellence of Universities’. This initiative was aimed primarily at improving universities’ infrastructure and invigorating research (MOE, 2000). These efforts have been accompanied by normative changes in the perspective of Taiwan’s higher education system leaders. University league tables have been produced and subsequent reports have aroused lively debates in Taiwan (Lo & Chan, 2006; Lo & Weng, 2005; Research Institute of Higher Education and University Evaluation, 2005).

In the context of increasing pressures for research competitiveness, Taiwan established the Taiwan Social Science Citation Index (TSSCI). Nonetheless, Taiwan’s academics continue to confront the reality that greater weight is still accorded to international publication venues when it comes to promotion and research evaluations (Chen & Lo, 2007). There is evidence that Taiwan’s academics believe that this undermines their academic freedom. At the same time, systems put in place to provide special funding support for research risk further stratification of universities as a few selected universities benefit from this emphasis on strategic development (Chou, 2012).

To enhance the international competitiveness of mainland China’s universities, the government has implemented major projects such as the ‘211 Project’ and the ‘985 Scheme’. These represent strategic initiatives designed to enable selected higher education institutions to become ‘world class universities’. In the ‘211 Project’, the government has attempted to develop 100 key universities and disciplines through targeted supplementary funding aimed at improving the quality of teaching and research facilities. The ‘985 Scheme’ seeks to transform China’s most elite universities (i.e. Beijing University (Peking University) and Tsinghua University) so they can join the super-elite of the world-class universities.

Awareness of global ranking exercises has led Japan’s system leaders to launch a ‘Flagship Universities Project’ aimed at developing a few major Japanese universities into ‘world class universities’. According to Yonezawa (2006), consistent and protracted development of Japan’s higher education system has long been driven by strong national initiatives since the late nineteenth century. Heavily invested in its university systems, Japanese universities long dominated the top echelons in *Asia Week’s* annual ‘Asian University Rankings’.

Nonetheless, Japanese universities have recently found their position declining in both the regional and the global university league tables. After benchmarking with the world university rankings, the Japanese government has made it a priority to reposition Japanese universities in the rapidly changing global environment. Consequently, the government has allocated additional resources to promote internationalisation. This had led to new initiatives to support international collaboration and student exchange (Furushiro, 2006; Yonezawa, 2006). As in other Asian societies, however, scholars have expressed fears that these policies will intensify differentiation among Japan’s universities.

Universities in Singapore are becoming increasingly aware of their international standing (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011). To strengthen Singapore as a regional hub of higher education, the government strategically identified major global universities and invited them to set up their branch campuses in the city-state. In addition, the government has attempted to attract leading academics to collaborate with local scholars (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011; Mok & Tan, 2004). Similar situations can be found in other Southeast Asian
societies like Malaysia, especially when the university system there has been going through restructuring along the lines of ‘neo-liberalism’ and the present government is very keen to make Malaysia a regional hub of higher education. More overseas academics will be appointed to the system and international collaborations with overseas institutions in terms of research and teaching has received strong support from the state (Mok, 2007a).

The results of these efforts to quest for world-class status are clearly evident by in recent international university benchmarking exercises. According to the Times Higher Education University Rankings, nine out of the top 10 universities in Asia ranked among the top 100 universities in the world. Four of them featured among the top 50 in the world – University of Tokyo (30), University of Hong Kong (34), National University of Singapore (40) and Peking University (49).

Although the Asian universities are late-comers in the quest for running world-class universities, global ranking exercises clearly demonstrate how fast they are catching up. Indeed, American scholars are issuing warnings about the waning global competitiveness of American universities as a result of significant budget cuts. In contrast, Asian scholars are more optimistic about the prospects for the Asia’s higher education sector. For instance, in The New Asian Hemisphere, Singaporean scholar and former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani (2008) argues that one of the factors contributing to the shift of global power from the West to the East is the dramatic improvement of education in Asia. In the next section, we focus on how the papers comprising this special issue illuminate these trends in several specific East Asian societies.

**Promoting internationalisation**

Historically, China has been a huge ‘exporter’ of international students to other countries. However, in recent years, it has become a popular ‘importer’ of and competitor for international students. Pan Suyan of the Hong Kong Institute of Education provides an analysis of this trend reversal. As Pan argues, the reversal ‘is the result of state-directed efforts to increase China’s favourable international political and academic relations, rather than the result of the neo-liberal ideology or the pursuit of economic gain’. To substantiate her argument, Pan identifies and elaborates on a range of strategies adopted by the Chinese government to increase the country’s international influence, comply with international conventions and gain recognition of academic quality. Ultimately, Pan tries to demonstrate that China is a counter example to the claim that the international competition for students is mainly driven by economic neo-liberalism under in which the state has a small role.

In another article describing China’s emerging influence in the global higher education arena, Wang Li of Zhejiang University raises a different question. Instead of asking how China could attract international students, she asks, ‘How does China use education to expand its cultural influence internationally?’ As Wang points out, China’s higher education reforms such as marketisation, privatisation and decentralisation were traditionally aimed at enhancing the efficiency and competitiveness of China’s higher education sector domestically. It was not until the last decade that China has recognised a need for increasing its ‘soft power’.

Wang discusses how the global dissemination of Confucius Institutes, whose mission is to promote Chinese language, and provision of education aid to Africa represent two key tools in China’s cultural diplomacy strategy. Wang, however, is doubtful about the uniqueness of the Chinese model and argues that the Confucius Institutes are actually a product of policy learning from developed Western countries (e.g. United Kingdom’s British Council,
France’s Alliance Française and Germany’s Goethe Institute). In this regard, the Chinese model cannot be argued as innovative and entirely different from its Western counterparts.

Moving beyond China, Chan Sheng-Ju from Chung Cheng University in Taiwan offers a comparative analysis of the international strategies adopted by four East Asian societies: Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. In his analysis, Japan mainly concentrates on supportive measures to induce foreign students to come to Japan and to facilitate their learning processes after they have come to Japan. In a similar vein, Taiwan is focused on enhancing the international competitiveness of its local higher education institutions to attract more international students, especially those from Southeast Asia.

In contrast to this ‘independent’ approach which is inward-looking, Singapore and Malaysia have adopted a more ‘cooperative’ approach by forming partnership with foreign higher educational institutions. Both countries have attempted to make use of transnational higher education to appeal to international students. The Singaporean government has paid much effort to attracting prestigious foreign higher educational institutions to extend their operations to Singapore (such as through joint programmes or branch campuses). The Malaysian government, apart from bringing in more foreign partners, also aims to capitalise on its vibrant private higher education to increase educational opportunities to international students.

Despite the varieties of the strategies adopted, Chan contends that what is common among the four societies is that these Asian governments have all played an important role in devising, facilitating and driving the internationalisation of the higher education sectors. As Chan puts it, ‘the role of the state force is not shrinking; in fact, states even use this international political–economic dynamics to strengthen their control and steer higher education sector in the name of internationalisation’.

Ng Pak Tee from National Institute of Education of Nanyang Technological University focuses on the case of Singapore with particular reference to examine how the city state entices top universities, academics and students. Singapore provides generous research grants and attractive remunerations to attract the best universities in the world to set up campuses in Singapore. Despite Singapore’s apparent success in bringing in top universities and academics, Ng identifies a variety of limitations difficulties that have accrued from this strategy.

Critical reflections

Nowadays, most literature on internationalisation and regionalisation of higher education attributes the trend to the impact of economic globalisation starting from the 1970s and 1980s. However, Adam Nelson from University of Wisconsin, USA, provides a different historical perspective on the regional collaboration of higher education in America and East Asia. Nelson’s analysis traces the history of collaboration between the USA and Asia back to the 1950s and 1960s. The push for regionalisation and internationalisation of the higher education was part of America’s ‘global development’ and cold-war ‘grand strategy’. At the same time, in the other part of the globe, universities in Asia were equally keen on forging university partnership, also for political and development purposes. In recounting an academic conference held in Hong Kong in 1966 about the regionalisation of Asian universities, Nelson notes that the core debate among the academics of that conference focused on how university partnership could help tackle regional challenges in Asia (e.g. the promotion of science and technology for national development) and help reposition Asian universities for new forms of global engagement in the context of Cold War. In contrast, today the discussions about internationalisation and regionalisation of higher education tend to
revolve around economic competition and enhancement. Nelson’s article reminds us the importance of the political dimension. As he writes, ‘University collaborations, then as now, were deeply enmeshed (or entangled) in geopolitics, and one must not overlook this part of the story. It may be the most important part of all’.

In addition to Adam Nelson’s historical and political remarks, academics and policy makers in Asia should be aware of the potential danger of ‘recolonialisation’ or another form of ‘cultural imperialism’ when Asian universities are trying hard to follow the ‘success story’ of the western universities. As Altbach (2010) argues, ‘Singapore and Hong Kong have accomplished considerable success simply by building Western universities in Asia, by hiring large numbers of nonlocal academic staff, using English, and copying Western norms of academic organisation and management’. Mohrman (2008) further argues that the emerging ‘global model of a university’ is increasingly modelled on the research-intensive universities embodied by the West’s elite universities. International benchmarking through ranking or performance comparison would inevitably reinforce the ‘standardisation’ of university performance in line with the ‘Western university model’. This in turn could potentially undermine local cultures, indigenous values and traditions (Mok, 2007b).

Similarly, neo-institutionalism believes that isomorphism or homogenisation is ‘a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 149). The three distinct mechanisms, coercive isomorphism, mimetic process and normative pressures, in the processes of imitation of the ‘Western model’ would inevitably force universities in Asia to conform to the so-called universal standard dominated by Anglo-Saxon paradigm.

Having critical reflections upon the massification, internationalisation and entrepreneurial strategies adopted by Taiwan government to transform its universities, Mok and Yu (2013) argue that the excessive expansion of higher education in Taiwan has created significant social and political problems, especially when the higher education enrolment rate has nearly reached 98 per cent. The rapid increase in private universities in Taiwan has undoubtedly created an abundant supply of education opportunities; however, people in Taiwan have begun to doubt about the quality and standard of the graduates. The Taiwanese government, making serious effort to model on the US experience when transforming its higher education sector, has now found the massified university system has created immense pressure for Taiwan’s society to absorb the ‘over supply’ of graduates to the labour market.

In their article, Mok and colleagues also examine how universities in Taiwan have made attempts to enhance their global and regional competitiveness through advancing research, development and innovation, as well as engaging in internationalisation agenda to enhance students’ global competence. This article reflects critically on how massification, internationalisation and the quest for the entrepreneurial university in Taiwan has affected social development and draws policy implications for future development.

The papers incorporated in this issue present different perspectives on how Asian universities have been transformed in coping with the growing impact of globalisation; critical analysis and reflections offered by different contributors again alert us the social, political and cultural implications of the quest for world-class university status. When questing to enhance the world-class status, we must remember that the Asian global cities/world cities are experiencing significant social and economic transformations.

As Castells (2000, p. 429) argues, the global informational economy is ‘ushering in a new urban form, the informational city’, which ‘is not a form but a process, a process characterised by the structural domination of the space of flows’. In particular, he suggests that key ‘global’ cities are increasingly prominent in this informational economy, concentrating
key industrial sectors into a small number of large metropolitan agglomerations. When Asian governments have put serious efforts in transforming their higher education systems to support the informational city or to enhance the national competitiveness in the knowledge-based economy, we should also note the same processes of transformations would widen the gap between different ‘knowledge classes’. The quest for ‘world-class’ university status would definitely intensify inequality and disparity, such a development also requires our attention and action appropriate for establishing a society which could bring people to live in harmony (Mok & Green, 2013).

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