

Assessing Hong Kong's blueprint for internationalising higher education¹

David Skidmore
Drake University

This paper provides a critical assessment of the key recommendations for internationalising higher education in Hong Kong issued by the University Grants Committee in December 2010. Key topics include the rationale for internationalisation, the process by which internationalisation will be carried out, the proposal that Hong Kong aspire to become a regional "education hub," the roles of English, Cantonese and Putongua in instruction and the impact of internationalisation on curriculum reform and student learning. In general, the report represents a missed opportunity to provide clear and compelling guidance to the university sector in Hong Kong regarding internationalisation.

[Key words: internationalisation, globalisation, curriculum, Hong Kong]

The internationalisation of higher education in Hong Kong has been quietly building steam at some institutions for more than a decade but has recently received new impetus and high-level attention. Internationalisation was the central focus of the report *Aspirations for the higher education system in Hong Kong* issued by the University Grants Committee (UGC) in December 2010 (UGC, 2010). The report recommended actions by the Hong Kong government and UGC-supported institutions of higher education in support of internationalisation.

This article provides a critical assessment of relevant sections of the UGC report and its recommendations. While the spotlight that the UGC places on internationalisation is laudable, the approach suggested by its report is flawed. In particular, the UGC envisions a relatively top-down internationalisation process that threatens to stifle bottom-up innovation and choke off diversity at the level of individual institutions. More troubling, the report fails to define internationalisation or to place it within some broader normative and conceptual framework. This is accompanied by the UGC's relative inattention to the role of internationalisation with respect to curricular reform and student learning. In the end, the UGC report's overly technocratic approach to

1 This paper was completed while I served as a Fulbright Scholar in the 2010–2011 academic year, hosted by the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong America Center. The views expressed here are my own and should not be attributed to the U.S. government, the University of Hong Kong or the Hong Kong America Center.

internationalisation represents a missed opportunity to provide the kind of broad vision that might spur creative innovation at the university level.

I will divide my discussion into five parts, each corresponding to a major area of emphasis in the UGC report, accompanied by relevant UGC recommendations.

1. Rationale.
2. Process (institutional arrangements for planning, implementing and assessing internationalisation).
3. International Student Recruitment and Study Abroad.
4. Languages.
5. Curriculum.

RATIONALE

The University Grants Committee (UGC) is a multi-stakeholder, semi-official planning body that provides oversight and assessment services to the public higher education sector and serves as a conduit for public funding to Hong Kong's eight public universities.² The UGC also prepares or commissions occasional reports to the city's government on the current state and strategic direction of higher education in Hong Kong. *Aspirations for the higher education system in Hong Kong* is the UGC's latest effort to set strategic priorities and define a future path for Hong Kong's university system.

Although the report addresses a variety of significant issues, the authors clearly place internationalisation at the center of their vision for continued educational reform in Hong Kong. The report calls upon all UGC institutions to develop and implement comprehensive strategies for internationalisation "as a matter of urgency" (UGC, 2010, p. 52). The report devotes 18 pages to internationalisation and offers 11 recommendations. By contrast, a separate section of the report focusing on relations with Mainland China takes up only 6 pages and includes only 2 recommendations. As the authors note: "We consider our institutions' relationship with the Mainland not to be a part of internationalisation" (UGC, 2010, p. 51).

The report takes a dim view of existing planning for internationalisation on the part of the eight public universities:

We do not think that these strategic plans provide a sufficient strategy for the UGC sector in a matter as central as internationalisation is to the future of Hong Kong and its universities ... This raises a concern about whether every institution is devoting adequate energy to internationalisation. (UGC, 2010, pp. 50–51)

² These are the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong, Lingnan University, Hong Kong Baptist University, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

The urgency of the UGC report is driven by perceived competitive pressures. The report asserts that Hong Kong's "international character is fundamental to its future success" (UGC, 2010, p. 50). The report cites Hong Kong's strategic position at the "interface between Asia (and more especially, China) and the rest of the world" (UGC, 2010, p. 13). To serve this role as an "international intermediary" between East and West: "our institutions must leverage Hong Kong's unique character of having both Chinese and Western elements in its culture" (UGC, 2010, p. 50).

The report cites two key advantages enjoyed by Hong Kong:

First, history has given it a deeply embedded character as an international centre, a meeting place, a market place of exchange, a point of encounter between different cultures and influences and ways of thought. Second, it is adjacent to Mainland China and has long been a principal point of entry, exchange, interpretation and fusion – a privileged place of observation in both directions. Hong Kong's universities have a remarkable opportunity to become principal locations for understanding modern China. (UGC, 2010, pp. 67–68)

This enviable position is threatened in two ways. First, higher education institutions in Hong Kong face intensifying competition from "better established and mature systems" in Europe and North America and from fast growing and rapidly improving universities in Mainland China (UGC, 2010, p. ii). Second, the opening of China and the improvements to its higher education sector threaten Hong Kong's historic role as an intermediary between China and the outside world and as an intellectual platform for observing and interpreting developments in the Mainland. The report emphasises that "Decisive action is required if Hong Kong is not to be by-passed" as foreign institutions move directly to set up their own units in Mainland China (UGC, 2010, p. 68).

Hong Kong's position in the global economy also provides an important context for any discussion of internationalisation in the higher education sector. From an economic and social perspective, Hong Kong is among the most globalized places in the world. Given its historic role as an entrepot, this is nothing new. Although not an independent country, Hong Kong was included alongside the nations of the world in *Foreign Policy* magazine's Globalization Index. Hong Kong ranked number 2 overall and number 1 with respect to economic measures (The Globalization Index, 2007). If the movement of goods and services to and from China is treated as an aspect of international trade, then the combined value of Hong Kong's overall imports and exports exceeds its GDP. The value of Hong Kong's outward foreign direct investment approaches three times its internal GDP. Hong Kong ranks fourth in the world, behind New York, London and Singapore, in Yendle, Horne, Danev and Knapp's (2009) comparison of major financial centers. Hong Kong ranks number 5 in the world for the size of its maritime fleet, number 8 in the world as a port in cargo volume and number 3 in the world in container traffic (*C.I.A. World Factbook*, 2011; Rosenberg, 2011).

The UGC explicitly alludes to Hong Kong's global and regional economic ties as a rationale for internationalizing higher education: "one consequence of economic

globalisation is that Hong Kong needs an adequate supply of citizens capable of working productively in non-local environments” (UGC, 2010, p. 14). However, the UGC report suggests that this need is not being met, as:

Hong Kong students and new graduates are too inward looking. There is a view (articulated quite often by employers) that new graduates in Hong Kong know too little about the outside world (and indeed show insufficient curiosity about it) to be ready to contribute in the kind of globalising economy in which Hong Kong must find its place. (UGC: 2010, p. 57)³

Despite its cosmopolitan reputation as Asia's ‘world city’, Hong Kong is in fact far less ethnically diverse than many other societies. Ethnic Chinese make up 95% of the population, with small minorities of Filipinos, Indonesians and other groups. This homogeneity is accompanied by cultural intolerance among some residents. A government survey in 2009 found that:

almost one in four local respondents, almost all Chinese, said offering a job to qualified applicants of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent was unacceptable. Nearly half do not think it acceptable to send their children to a school where the majority of students are South Asian, Middle Eastern or African. (Lam, 2011, np)

One solution suggested by the UGC report is for Hong Kong universities to recruit larger numbers of non-local students, whose presence is presumed to provide “a multicultural learning and social environment for Hong Kong students” (UGC, 2010, p. 57).

In short, the rationale for giving urgent priority to internationalisation in Hong Kong's higher education sector rests upon:

1. The opportunities presented by Hong Kong's unique historical, cultural and geographic positioning as a “bridge between East and West” (Tsui, 2010);
2. The challenges represented by globalisation and Hong Kong's heavy dependence upon international economic ties;
3. The perceived shortcomings of the existing education system in preparing students to deal with Hong Kong's international interests and responsibilities.⁴

While the UGC report provides extensive discussion of the rationales for internationalisation, the term itself is never defined. This is significant because ‘internationalisation’ is a contested concept: often invoked, but with widely varying

3 Note that these perceived shortcomings in student attitudes and knowledge, which are pervasive in many countries, provide a strong rationale for explicitly including global perspectives and multicultural diversity in general education, something that is only inconsistently addressed in many of the emerging general education programs in Hong Kong.

4 The strategic vision articulated in the UGC report approximates Scenario 1 outlined by Yin Y.C. Cheng (2010) in his typology of internationalisation strategies in higher education.

and sometimes conflicting meanings.⁵ Without thoughtful discussion of what internationalisation might or should mean in a Hong Kong context, the report misses an opportunity to educate and guide those who will be responsible for implementing its recommendations.

One approach to defining internationalisation is offered by the Shared Futures project sponsored by the American Association of College and Universities (AAC&U). Seven guiding principles for global learning are identified (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2012):

- Gain a deep, comparative knowledge of the world's people and problems;
- Explore the historical legacies that have created the dynamics and tensions of the world;
- Develop intercultural competencies so [students] can move across boundaries and unfamiliar territory and see the world from multiple perspectives;
- Sustain difficult conversations in the face of high emotional and perhaps uncongenial differences;
- Understand – and perhaps redefine – democratic principles and practices within a global context;
- Gain opportunities to engage in practical work with fundamental issues that affect communities not yet well served by their societies;
- Believe that their actions and ideas will influence the world in which they live.

The AAC&U guidelines place the internationalisation process within a set of intellectual, normative and historical contexts that serve to infuse campus strategies with meaning and direction. The UGC report, by contrast, treats the discussion of internationalisation mostly as a matter of strategic positioning to better allow Hong Kong and its higher education sector to compete under conditions of intensifying globalisation. Nowhere does the report offer a normative rationale for why students should be concerned with the cultures, material conditions and life challenges of people outside of Hong Kong and China. Nor is attention given to the need for people of different societies to accept mutual responsibility for the ways in which their own actions affect the welfare of others through ties of interdependence. This is the essential meaning of the concept of global citizenship, which has informed internationalisation efforts in many higher education institutions around the world (Bosenquet, 2010). Yet such considerations are virtually absent from the UGC report. In short, the UGC's rationale for internationalisation is undercut by its failure to define the meaning, scope and ethical stakes of internationalisation itself.

5 For an overview of various efforts to define internationalisation, see Knight (2004).

PROCESS

Recommendation 9: UGC-funded institutions should review, develop where necessary and implement internationalisation strategies as a matter of urgency. The UGC should monitor agreed Key Performance Indicators in each institution. The Government should adopt a strategy for internationalisation that includes collaboration with universities. Both should make long-term and sustained commitments to these strategies. (UGC, 2010, p. 52)

Although the UGC explicitly rejects the idea that “actions should be prescribed to universities” (UGC, 2010, p. 52), the report’s recommendations suggest a relatively top down, centralised approach to internationalising the higher education sector in Hong Kong. Internationalisation is described as in the ‘general interest’ of Hong Kong as a whole and as a goal toward which each university should make a ‘responsible contribution’. Yet the report expresses skepticism that the eight UGC institutions will respond to this imperative in the absence of centralised guidance and monitoring: “there is too great a risk of uneven commitment, energy and ultimately failure to produce collective benefit. Universities will be tempted to be concerned essentially with their individual competitive positioning” (UGC, 2010, p. 51).

The UGC report calls upon each university to submit a strategic plan for internationalisation to the UGC. The UGC must “agree” to each university’s strategic plan and work with each to develop a set of “Key Performance Indicators” (UGC, 2010, p. 52). The report concludes: “The UGC should monitor their performance” (UGC, 2010, p. 51). As a carrot to the universities and a means of leverage over them, the UGC is to be provided with “an additional funding stream” (UGC, 2010, p. 54) to guide and support internationalisation. Moreover, the report recommends the establishment of “a forum” (UGC, 2010, p. 54) that would include representatives from the government, the UGC and the universities. It would be responsible for “identifying and implementing effective policies and initiatives, and for spreading best practices regarding internationalisation” (UGC, 2010, p. 54). The UGC and the new forum in which the UGC would participate would thus serve as two levels of guidance, oversight and monitoring as regards internationalisation throughout the higher education sector.

In any process of institutional reform, there is always a balance to be struck between top-down dictate and bottom-up initiative. The rationale for strong centralised control is that agents will otherwise be tempted to place particular interests ahead of general interests and to seek independence from the control of principals – a concern clearly highlighted by the UGC report. The result can be insufficient coordination, mutually conflicting efforts and general lack of compliance. But there also exist dangers in over-centralisation. The impulse to standardize may undercut the benefits to be gained from greater diversity and specialisation across institutions. Top down planners may lack the local knowledge that is necessary to breath life into generalised or abstract goals at the local level.

Although the UGC report calls for each institution to independently develop and submit internationalisation strategic plans for UGC approval, it is unclear how much leeway university planners will have in tailoring such plans to the roles, missions, cultures and capabilities of their particular institutions. However, the references to ‘benchmarks’ and ‘performance indicators’ to be ‘monitored’ by the UGC raises concern about whether the process of reform will tilt too far in the direction of top down control.

Considering together the UGC’s discussions of rationale and process, there is a noted failure to offer broad conceptual guidance combined with a top-down process focused upon detailed recommendations. This combination stands in sharp contrast with a second major educational reform effort currently under way in Hong Kong – the so-called 3+3+4 initiative that will standardize the secondary school system around a six (3+3) course of study, while extending bachelor degree programs at the university level from three to four years (Jaffee, 2011).

The original Education Commission report that spurred the 3+3+4 initiative urged the university sector to provide students with a broader education promoting critical thinking, whole person development and life-long learning. Institutions were asked to use the additional year to address such goals rather than to further deepen an existing curriculum that was considered too specialised and career-focused (Education Commission, 2000; for follow-up studies, also see University Grants Committee, 2002 and Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005).

Each of Hong Kong’s eight public universities have responded by introducing or beefing up general education programs, despite the fact that the Education Commission report itself contained no mention of general education. Rather, each university independently gravitated toward expanded general education as a tool for meeting the overall objectives laid out by the report. Yet each university has adopted quite distinct approaches to general education. Other responses adopted by various universities include first year seminars, community service, internships and a greater focus on active learning pedagogies. No single blueprint has guided these reforms. Rather, the 3-3-4 initiative has led to greater diversity within the higher education sector as each institution has sought a pathway that is consistent with its own distinct identity.

In other words, the Education Commission report that sparked the 3-3-4 reforms offered a compelling rationale and clear conceptual roadmap along with a major structural change, that is, the addition of a fourth year of study. But the report steered clear of detailed recommendations or top down control. Instead, the eight public universities were provided with the freedom to innovate. Since the first cohort of students to enroll at university under the new 3-3-4 system only hit campuses in the Autumn of 2012, it is premature to judge the success of the new general education programs and associated reforms. It is clear, however, that the 3-3-4 initiative has

led to a system-wide reconsideration of the purposes and delivery methods of higher education in Hong Kong.

The features of the Education Commission report that stimulated general education reform are lacking in the UGC's report on internationalisation. The latter report lacks the broad animating vision of the earlier report. It also prescribes a more centralised and interventionist approach to managing the reform process, thus possibly short-circuiting the prospects for bottom-up innovation. The approach entails a risk that institutions will go through the motions of meeting prescribed recommendations without taking genuine ownership.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND STUDY ABROAD

Recommendation 12: Universities should develop appropriate strategies for the recruitment of international students. The Government should actively support this through its official overseas offices. (UGC, 2010, p. 56)

Recommendation 13: The Government, working with the institutions, should increase hostel accommodation for local and non-local students as a matter of urgency. (UGC, 2010, p. 57)

Recommendation 14: UGC-funded institutions should increase their efforts to provide support resources and opportunities for non-local students to integrate them better with the local student body. (UGC, 2010, p. 58)

Recommendation 15: The number and variety of overseas study opportunities for local students should be increased significantly. Funding should be provided for this, and credits should be attached to these programmes. (UGC, 2010, p. 59)

Hong Kong universities have not traditionally positioned themselves as study destinations for non-local students. This has begun to change over the past decade. At the undergraduate level, the non-local student population consists of three major streams:

1. Students from Mainland China who enter Hong Kong institutions as first year students with the intention of completing their degree program at the host institution;
2. Students from countries other than China who enter Hong Kong institutions as first year students with the intention of completing their degree program at the host institution;
3. Students from countries other than China who spend a semester or two at Hong Kong institutions through exchange programs with partner institutions in other countries which, in return, accept Hong Kong students for semester or year-long study abroad.

Mainland students currently far outnumber non-local students from other countries. Hong Kong universities began to open their doors to Mainland Chinese students in

the late 1990s. The University of Hong Kong (HKU), for example, accepted its first cohort of Mainland students in 1999. The 30 Mainland students entering the university that year were selected from among 100 applicants. By 2007, the number of Mainland applicants to HKU had swollen to 12,000, of whom 250 were admitted (Spinks, 2011). Overall, the number of Mainland students pursuing undergraduate degrees at UGC institutions reached 4,562 in 2009–2010, or 8.1% of the overall undergraduate population and over 11% at HKU (UGC, 2010, p. 70).

Given so much competition for so few slots, it is not surprising that the academic quality of those Mainland Chinese students who gain admission to Hong Kong universities is very high. Prior to the 2008–2009 academic year, the UGC placed a 10% cap on the proportion of non-local students that the eight UGC universities could enroll. The vast majority of these spaces – 92% in 2007–2008 – were filled by Mainland Chinese students. Only 4.8% of students in 2007–2008 originated from elsewhere in Asia and 2.7% from the rest of the world (Cheng, 2009, p. xii).

Beginning in 2008–2009, the cap for non-local students was raised to 20% of the overall student population. Revised visa rules made it easier for non-local students to remain in Hong Kong for work for one year following graduation (UGC, 2010, p. 54). This was and remains a controversial step. Local demand for slots at UGC-funded universities exceeds supply. Despite some growth in overall capacity, any major increase in the numbers of non-local students means fewer spaces for local students. While non-local students pay a higher rate of tuition compared with local students, non-local tuition still covers only 25% of the average unit cost of a placement at a UGC institution (Cheng, 2009: 27). So the education of non-local students is heavily subsidised with public funds. Also, non-local students, who do not have the option of living with their families in the community, place additional strains on the scarce supply of on-campus housing.

The rationale for expanding the number of UGC-funded slots for non-local students at Hong Kong universities and for encouraging students exchanges and other forms of study abroad programs differs in the case of Hong Kong from that for traditional international study destinations. For British, American and Australian universities, the desire to attract tuition-paying students from abroad serves as a key incentive for internationalisation. Many international students pay full freight for tuition, receiving little financial aid from the university. Most complete their entire degree program at the host university rather than enrolling for only a semester or a year. Given the financial benefits to recipient universities, it is clear why many institutions in these countries devote considerable resources and attention to international student recruitment.

As suggested above, these conditions clearly do not apply in the case of Hong Kong, where non-local students serve as a drain on financial resources rather than a source of profit. Indeed, this may account for why one major study found that Hong Kong universities were poorly represented at regional higher education recruitment fairs in countries such as India and Malaysia. In general, the study concluded: “Hong Kong

higher education was barely visible in some emerging Asian countries with growing demand for international higher education” (Cheng, 2009, p. xii). Given the cap on UGC-funded slots for non-local students (only recently raised from 10% to 20%), the ease of recruiting significant numbers of high-performing students from Mainland China and the lack of financial incentives, Hong Kong universities had little motivation to engage in active recruitment of students from other countries in Asia or around the world.

The UGC report calls for correcting this perceived deficiency by seeking to position Hong Kong as a regional ‘education hub’ that can compete with the United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore in attracting a significant share of the large and growing number of Asian students who seek to study abroad. As one report notes, total Asia-Pacific region student enrollment in higher education rose from 15% of the relevant age cohort in 2000 to 26% in 2007 and is expected to climb another 40–50% by 2017 (Cheng, 2010). The UGC report notes that the number of students studying outside of their home country is expected to more than triple by 2025 and that 70% of these students will originate from Asia (with 50% from China and India alone) (UGC, 2010, p. 24). The report calls upon the government and the universities to compete more effectively for a share of this market by providing additional housing for non-local students and to collaborate in developing more aggressive outreach and recruitment efforts (for additional background on developing Hong Kong as an education hub, see Cheung, Cheng, Cheng, & Yuen, 2011; Cheng, 2010).

The benefits to be gained by expanding the number of non-local students at Hong Kong universities have been described in various terms. Anthony Cheung (2008, p. 26) argues that: “Local universities are motivated to recruit more international students to help boost the brand-name of higher education in Hong Kong and enhance benign competition between local and non-local students to promote excellence”.

Dr. A. Lam, then chair of the UGC, made the case in 2004 that:

The cultural diversity of the student body is an important foundation for a truly excellent education because it stimulates “out of the box thinking”. Having more non-local students in Hong Kong will assist tremendously in the cultivation of long-term interpersonal contacts and friendships with potential future business and opinion formers of other countries. Non-local students also help Hong Kong’s international image and stimulate healthy competition. (cited in Fok, 2007, p. 188)

The UGC report itself suggests that Hong Kong must seek out high-performing students from other countries in order:

to keep incoming talent in Hong Kong and with the degree to which those educated here retain an affection for and understanding of Hong Kong. This will affect Hong Kong’s business, political and other informal networks, and will contribute to the development of what Professor Joseph Nye has termed “soft power”. It will generate a virtuous circle in that the quality of higher education in Hong Kong will attract external recognition and commitment, thus further enhancing its reputation and ability to improve. (UGC, 2010, pp. 54–55)

In short, the arguments in favor of increased flows of non-local students to Hong Kong emphasise:

1. The need to attract talent to Hong Kong and build relationships that will enhance business opportunities in the future.
2. The increased cultural awareness that international students will bring to campus life.
3. The push that increased competition will provide in motivating better student performance and greater institutional innovation.

Nevertheless, any major increase in international students – especially those from countries other than China – will produce tensions, including the displacement of local students, the diversion of additional financial resources to overseas recruitment and the strain placed upon campus housing. In addition, the UGC report comments on the difficulties of integrating non-local students into the social environment of Hong Kong universities when these students do not speak the local language:

Hong Kong students have not exhibited sufficient desire to embrace non-local students in their circles. A common complaint from both international and Mainland students is that Hong Kong students are generally reluctant to speak any language other than Cantonese, and show little interest in including non-local students in their activities. We are concerned about this insular attitude. Our institutions could do more in providing counseling, support and encouragement to both local and non-local students to promote a more inclusive attitude on campus. (UGC, 2010, p. 70)

What seems striking about this passage is that it is the local Hong Kong students who are chastised for speaking in their native tongue in social circumstances where non-local students are present. Meanwhile, there is no expectation placed upon the non-local students to learn Cantonese, the dominant language among the inhabitants of the place where they have chosen to study. This situation provides a recipe for isolation on the part of non-local students and resentment on the part of local students toward the demands that they essentially abandon their native language in campus social life.

These considerations may limit the attractiveness of Hong Kong as a degree-seeking destination for international students. To this must be added the problem that some programs of study require community-based practicums in which an ability to speak with members of the public in Cantonese is required (Cheng, 2009, p. 58). Non-local students will seldom be able to meet this requirement. Also, the 3+3+4 reforms, by extending the time to degree by an additional year, add to the cost in both time and money for international students considering study abroad destinations.

The UGC report suggests that universities encourage greater ‘inclusiveness’ and integration of non-local students into the campus community through improved ‘counseling’ services. This seems unlikely to provide an effective solution by itself. Other ideas should be considered. One common practice at some American universities

is to place international students with volunteer host families if the student so desires. Host families help the adopted student adapt to the local community and involve them in family activities and holidays. This offers a valuable set of cultural learning opportunities for international students and creates a more supportive and welcoming environment. Another approach would be to assign upper-division students to serve as peer mentors for non-local students during their first semester in Hong Kong.

Still, non-local students confront language issues in Hong Kong that do not apply in the United States context. Given the serious obstacles to integrating non-local students into university life outside of the classroom, the expressed hope of the UGC report that growing numbers of non-local students would serve to educate and sensitise local Hong Kong students to other cultures and perspectives may be based upon overly optimistic assumptions.

The UGC report also encourages additional support for Hong Kong students who wish to study abroad based upon rationales similar to those cited above: Hong Kong students who study abroad

serve as ambassadors to promote Hong Kong [while also] demonstrat[ing] to the world what Hong Kong can offer as a regional education hub. Furthermore, institutions could more actively mobilise them to drive the development of a multicultural awareness back on their home campuses and to facilitate integration between local and non-local students. (UGC, 2010, p. 58)

Most Hong Kong students who spend a semester or year abroad do so through exchange agreements that involve the reciprocal movement of international students to Hong Kong for one or two semesters. HKU was an early mover in creating such exchanges. In 1997, HKU served as a founding member of Universitas 21, which is an international consortium of elite universities that facilitate student exchanges and distance learning among member institutions. HKU also adopted a standardised credit system in 1998 with the expectation that doing so would, according to then Pro-Vice Chancellor Wong Sui-lun, “facilitate academic exchanges with overseas universities” by simplifying articulation agreements (cited in Fok, 2007, p. 189; Spinks, 2011).

The first significant student exchanges involving HKU only occurred in 2005, but have grown rapidly since then. For the 2010–2011 academic year, 7.5% of the HKU undergraduate population studied abroad through such exchanges while incoming international exchange students accounted for 7.9% of the undergraduate population. Note that incoming international exchange students do not count against the 20% cap on non-local student enrollment, which applies only to those who seek degrees from Hong Kong institutions. Thus for those institutions that enroll degree-seeking non-local students at the full 20% cap and also engage in active student exchange programs, the actual proportion of non-local students among the undergraduate population will significantly exceed 20%.

The UGC report recommends the expansion of student exchanges through more funding and the development of a greater variety of such opportunities. The report

notes that the 3+3+4 reforms should facilitate these types of exchanges with universities in the United States and China (which also offer four year undergraduate degrees) and provide more scheduling flexibility for Hong Kong students who wish to study abroad. However, housing continues to serve as a constraint since incoming international students require on-campus accommodation while outgoing Hong Kong students typically live at home and thus their absence does not free up such space in on-campus hostels.

The UGC report gives little attention to another form of study abroad: short-term (weeks or months) travel seminars and internship placements overseas. I was unable to locate data for other local universities, but it is evident that these types of programs have become important tools for internationalisation at HKU. The Center of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS) Service 100 program places students in volunteer and internship posts in a variety of countries over the summer. The Faculty of Social Sciences sponsors a Global Citizenship program that will place 80 students in volunteer positions in China and Thailand over the summer of 2011. The Faculty of Social Sciences also organizes a Global Citizenship Summer Institute in Seoul, South Korea and Taipei for HKU students. For incoming international students, the HKU Faculty of Social Sciences offers a traveling summer seminar on “Asia as the Global Future” in Hong Kong, Macau, Beijing and Seoul. These types of programs provide intensive learning experiences that often involve service and serve as a spur for students to seek out additional and longer-term overseas opportunities in the future.

In general, the UGC report focuses heavily upon developing Hong Kong as an ‘education hub’ capable of attracting degree-seeking students from across Asia (UGC, 2010, pp. 54–55). By contrast, less emphasis is given to international student exchange programs and little to short-term study-travel seminars or overseas internship placements. Yet it is possible that just the reverse priorities would better serve the purposes of internationalisation.

Despite the high quality of the Hong Kong higher education sector, the attractiveness of Hong Kong as a destination and signs of growing interest among students from around the region (Wahab, 2012), it is not evident that more vigorous recruitment efforts will do much to increase the numbers of non-Chinese students wishing to enroll in undergraduate degree programs in Hong Kong. Were international student demand for entry to Hong Kong undergraduate programs to rise, supply-side constraints would limit growth. Most of the UGC-funded placements under the 20% non-local cap will continue to be filled by Mainland Chinese students, limiting the slots available to students from other countries.

Other supply-side constraints include lack of adequate on-campus housing and likely popular resistance to moves that further displace local students or drain taxpayer funds. One could perhaps loosen these constraints by requiring, as many American and British universities do, that non-local students pay sharply higher tuition rates (funds that could be used to create additional housing or support higher overall

enrollment). But such a step may simply price Hong Kong out of the international market for higher education. In general, the idea of transforming Hong Kong into an 'education hub' seems impractical, unwise and unnecessary. And the incentives for the eight UGC institutions to move in this direction appear insufficient to motivate the required efforts.

International students exchanges, on the other hand, are far more practical and serve many of the same purposes without some of the drawbacks of the 'education hub' strategy. Exchange programs bring international students to Hong Kong campuses without displacing local students. For every international student who arrives to begin a given semester, a local student departs to spend a semester abroad. The benefits – for the students themselves and their institutions – attach to flows in both directions. These exchanges are nearly revenue-neutral. They do not require an extensive and expensive outreach and recruitment apparatus. They raise the international profile of Hong Kong's higher education sector and spread cultural awareness. And while Hong Kong universities are unlikely to attract a large number of undergraduate degree-seekers from outside of Asia, the potential for establishing exchange relationships with universities in Europe and North America are excellent (especially since the 3-3-4 reforms will ease articulation between Hong Kong and U.S. universities). Housing and language issues still apply, but are more manageable when incoming international students are staying a semester or year versus four years.

Short-term internships and travel-study seminars bring other benefits, including the development of professional networks outside of Hong Kong, exposure to experiential types of learning that serve to cultivate a sense of global citizenship and the development of good will toward Hong Kong and its people. In short, the UGC report appears to emphasise those mechanisms for encouraging cross-border flows of students that are most expensive and least practical while giving too little attention to more feasible and attractive alternatives.

LANGUAGES

Recommendation 16: Institutions should make renewed efforts to ensure and enhance students' biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) abilities. (UGC, 2010, p. 60)⁶

Most of the UGC institutions require students to take Chinese language courses to ensure high-level literacy. Students are also strongly encouraged to develop spoken competence in Putongua. As a result, the levels of bi-literacy and tri-lingualism among Hong Kong university graduates are impressively high, providing them with the ability to communicate locally (Cantonese), globally (English) and nationally (Putongua). Compared with many other countries, this represents a considerable accomplishment. The UGC report calls upon universities to "make renewed efforts" to ensure multi-lingual graduates.

⁶ Putongua refers to standard Mandarin Chinese.

Yet left unacknowledged by the report is that, in practice, English serves as the dominant medium of instruction rather than Cantonese, the native language of the local inhabitants. Cantonese and Putongua are essentially treated as ‘foreign’ languages rather than as conveyances of content. One commentator has labeled this practice as internationalisation via “Englishization” (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Among Hong Kong’s eight UGC-funded institutions, six follow English-language medium policies. The exceptions are Chinese University of Hong Kong, which has an official bi-lingual (Cantonese and English) policy and Hong Kong Institute of Education, which has an official tri-lingual (Putongua, Cantonese and English) policy (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 8). Moreover, most official gatherings are conducted in English.

Academic staff members are strongly encouraged to publish in English-language journals. Indeed, Chinese language publications count for little in terms of academic advancement. The primary reasons are that English-language journals are more internationally prestigious, more widely read and English-language articles are more likely to be cited by other scholars. As a result, research published in English rather than Chinese is more likely to boost an institution’s global and regional rankings.

Despite the UGC’s endorsement of multi-lingualism, it proposes no changes to the dominant and lopsided role that English plays in Hong Kong higher education. Nor does the UGC report acknowledge the costs associated with the heavy emphasis on English-medium instruction at most UGC institutions. As a result, the tensions that have long surrounded language issues in Hong Kong higher education are left unaddressed by the report.

For instance, the present approach assumes that all relevant knowledge is available in English, either as the original source language or in translation. This is a problematic assumption. Some types of knowledge, particularly Chinese sources of a cultural or historical nature, are eliminated from the curriculum by a strict English-medium policy, even where they are both relevant and accessible to Chinese-literate students, who constitute the vast majority.

The trend for English to displace local languages in teaching and research is evident in university systems across Asia, raising concerns among some about the “Anglo-Saxonization” of Asian higher education (Mok, 2007, p. 7). Anthony B.L. Cheung (2008, p. 7) suggests that “one should not cast aside the concern about sidelining indigenous languages as vehicles of teaching, research and intellectual discussion, especially as Chinese is fast becoming a language of ‘international’ significance in the 21st century following the rise of China”. Ka Ho Mok (2007, p. 17) goes further, pointing to “the danger of recolonization and the rise of new imperialism in Asian education systems”. He couples this with a call for “internationalizing with East Asian characteristics” by developing “alternative academic paradigms for promoting cross-cultural understanding and cross-national policy learning” (Mok, 2007, p. 18).

These concerns are not new. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was established in 1963 as a Chinese culture- and language-centric alternative to the

University of Hong Kong, which functioned as a colonial institution built around English-medium instruction and British-style education. While English has since made inroads at CUHK, a 2006 report sought to strike a balance that would allow CUHK scholars and students to participate in global academic dialogues via English while nonetheless preserving an important role for locally relevant knowledge via instruction and research in the Chinese language:

academic subjects of a universal nature, English will, in principle, be used at lectures. For subject related Chinese culture, society, and history, and General Education courses, Cantonese and Putonghua will, in principle, be used at lectures, and the use of Putonghua at lectures should be increased in accordance with actual need. For subjects related to local culture, society and politics, Cantonese will, in principle, be used at lectures. (cited in Cheung, 2008, p. 7)

While seemingly offering an ideal balance, in some ways, this approach places great linguistic demands upon both instructors and students. It is also notable that, aside from the Hong Kong Institute for Education (which already had a bi-literate, tri-lingual policy), the other Hong Kong universities have not followed CUHK's lead.

Two other issues deserve mention in connection with the problem of language. The emphasis that Hong Kong universities have placed upon English-instruction has recently prompted some local high schools to begin teaching science and math classes in English so as to improve their students chances of gaining acceptance to the university of their choice. This move may help ensure that students are better prepared for the English-medium instruction that they will eventually face at the university level. Some, however, fear that the immediate result will be a decline in student achievement in science and math at the secondary level since not all instructors are well prepared to teach these subjects in English and not all students will comprehend science and math concepts as well when presented in English (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 9).

Even while English comes to play a bigger role in some respects at the secondary school level, the 3+3+4 reform means that students entering university will have one less year of formal secondary school language instruction in English. It remains to be seen whether this may undercut the readiness of entering students to manage the demands of English-medium instruction at the university level.

In general, the tensions surrounding language within the Hong Kong higher education system seem likely to persist. Language is not simply a medium for comprehension and expression, but also serves emotional and symbolic purposes for a given community. English will, for some time to come, continue to play a role as a global *lingua franca*. Putongua, however, will become increasingly important for Hong Kong considering the territory's growing integration with the Mainland and China's own aggressive efforts to promote Putongua as a second language throughout Asia and elsewhere. Cantonese, by contrast, already appears marginalised in terms of formal education and research at the university level in Hong Kong.

One possible consequence is a growing gulf between the university sector and its graduates and less-educated Hong Kong residents who speak only Cantonese. The UGC report itself refers to the danger that the emphasis on internationalisation – as exemplified by the heavy reliance upon English – will lead to “disembedding,” which occurs when “activity that takes place in the global space becomes sufficiently important to overshadow or displace activity in the domestic space” (UGC, 2010, p. 66). Since fluency in English (and even Putongua) is a marker of privilege in the Hong Kong context, the disembedding brought on by internationalisation could also easily serve to reinforce Hong Kong’s already severe class divisions. While recognising this issue, the report offers no compelling solutions and suggests steps that may exacerbate the problem.

These considerations weigh in favour of a more flexible approach to the uses of Cantonese and Mandarin as mediums for teaching and research in well-defined areas. More generally, conscious efforts should be made to ensure that internationalisation is carried out in ways that complement and integrate with local knowledge and needs. For example, one need not go abroad to study the processes and effects of globalisation since these are evident locally in Hong Kong to a degree found in few other places in the world. The UGC report alludes to the need for such integration, but offers few concrete ideas for achieving it in practice. Language is one area where proper attention may help ensure that the relationship between the international and the local does not become unbalanced.

CURRICULUM

Recommendation 17: UGC-funded institutions should actively maintain the international mix of their faculty. (UGC, 2010, p. 61)

Recommendation 18: The higher education sector should develop a number of jointly funded and staffed international centres for high quality research and graduate programmes combining Asian and Western perspectives. (UGC, 2010, p. 66)

The most disappointing section of the UGC report deals with internationalising the curriculum. Only one paragraph is devoted to the topic, where it is rather blandly suggested that more courses in the humanities and social sciences should address themes relating to Asia (UGC, 2010, pp. 59–60). This is surprising given that the report correctly notes that internationalisation “should permeate the whole gamut of institutional activity” (UGC, 2010, p. 52). The report calls for the creation of international centres to support graduate and research programmes that bring together Asian and Western perspectives (UGC, 2010, p. 66), but these centres would have little impact upon the undergraduate curriculum. The report also recommends that UGC institutions maintain the international mix of their faculty (UGC, 2010, p. 61), which currently consists of roughly 45% non-local instructors (Fok, 2007, p. 188). International staff members are cited as possible role models for students and as “instinctive advocates of the virtues of looking outwards” (UGC, 2010, p. 61), although no evidence is cited for either conclusion. In any case, as an internationalised

faculty has long been a feature of Hong Kong universities, their continued presence cannot be assumed to provide new stimulus to internationalisation of the curriculum or the higher education sector as a whole.

The section on internationalisation makes no mention of the ongoing general education reforms that serve as the foundation of the 3+3+4 initiative. Yet general education often serves, in other countries, as a key medium for ensuring that all students are exposed to global and international perspectives. Whether this will be the case in Hong Kong, however, remains uncertain at present. Among the eight UGC institutions, only three include some sort of global study (outside of language and Chinese studies) as a requirement in their new general education programs. Lingnan University will require coursework in World History and Civilization, though it is unclear whether this will address contemporary global issues. Hong Kong Polytechnic will require a course in “Community, Organization and Globalization.” The clearest commitment to internationalising the curriculum through general education can be found at HKU, where “Global Issues” constitutes one of four required Areas of Inquiry. While particular courses that address international and global issues or perspectives will certainly be present under various general education categories at all UGC universities, it is striking that such courses are not required in a majority of the general education programs at these institutions.

The UGC report also fails to address the development of additional specialised programs dealing with international disciplines and topics. Another oversight is the lack of attention to infusion approaches to internationalisation: the weaving of international perspectives and content into existing courses and requirements across a wide variety of majors and disciplines (Skidmore, Marston, & Olson, 2005; also see Williams, 2011). Without systematic efforts to ensure that students grapple with global, international and multicultural perspectives and problems as an integral part of their education, whatever the specialisation, then internationalisation will continue to be viewed as simply an ‘extracurricular’ activity – something to be accomplished only by going abroad or interacting socially with students from a different culture – rather than as a serious element of the core academic mission of the university. Having missed the opportunity to drive this point home, the UGC report may leave some with the impression that internationalisation has more to do with strategic institutional positioning, for example, raising the profile and rankings of the Hong Kong educational sector or with projecting economic and political influence than with broadening the knowledge base and geographic or cultural perspectives of students.

Alternative approaches are available. For instance, two organisations in the United States have developed a wealth of resources focused on diverse and creative approaches to internationalise the curriculum and higher education more broadly. The first is the Inter-Association Network on Campus Internationalization (2012), which offers a compilation of such materials. The second is the American Council on Education (2012), which offers a similar collection of internationalisation resources. What is notable is that neither institution advocates a standardised recipe for

internationalisation, but instead offers examples of how successful institutions have adapted their approaches to internationalisation to unique features of their missions and institutional profiles. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that narrow, technocratic approaches to internationalisation are not confined to Hong Kong, but can be found at many institutions in the United States and other countries as well.

CONCLUSION

As a guide to internationalisation, *Aspirations for the higher education system of Hong Kong* suffers from significant shortcomings. The UGC report fails to clearly define internationalisation or to place it within some compelling conceptual and normative framework. The top-down process for implementing internationalisation could easily stifle bottom-up innovation. The suggestion that Hong Kong serve as a regional ‘educational hub’ seems unfeasible while more practical measures to encourage international student exchanges are given little attention. The problems that surround the overwhelming reliance upon English as the medium of instruction are left unacknowledged. Finally, the report fails to offer mechanisms for infusing international perspectives across the curriculum.

The weaknesses of the UGC report do not suggest that internationalisation cannot or will not succeed in Hong Kong. These deficiencies may be recognised and addressed by the Hong Kong government, individual universities or by the UGC itself. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that the UGC has failed to take full advantage of an opportunity to provide a certain and steady vision for how Hong Kong’s universities can best prepare students for their roles as global citizens and internationally competent professionals.

References

- American Association of College and Universities (2012) Shared Futures: Global Learning and Social Responsibility. Retrieved on December 1, 2012, from <http://www.aacu.org/SharedFutures/guidingprinciples.cfm>.
- American Council on Education (2012). Internationalization Initiatives. Retrieved on October 16, 2012, from <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Center-for-Internationalization-and-Global-Engagement.aspx>.
- Bosenquet, A. (2010). Higher education guarantees global citizenship, or does it? Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, University of Hong Kong. Retrieved on January 4, 2012, from http://mq.academia.edu/AgnesBosanquet/Papers/657402/Higher_education_guarantees_global_citizenship_or_does_it.
- Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book* (2011). Retrieved on January 6, 2012, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/hk.html>.
- Cheng Y.C. (2009, March) A Technical Research Report on the Development of Hong Kong as a Regional Education Hub. Hong Kong Institute of Education. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from <http://home.ied.edu.hk/~yccheng/doc/articles/Technical%20Report%20on%20Ed%20Hub-final-09.pdf>.
- Cheng Y.C. (2010, April 16) A Typology of Higher Education Development in Asia-Pacific: Reforms and Education Hub. (powerpoint presentation) Ideas and Universities Virtual Seminar Series.

- Cheung, A.C.K., Y.C. Cheng, T.W.W. Cheng, C.Y.M. Yuen (2011). Exporting Hong Kong's Higher Education to Emerging Asian Markets: Marketing Strategies and Government Policies. In P Tripathi and S. Jukerji (ed.), *Cases on Innovations in Educational Marketing: Transnational and Technological Strategies* (pp. 1–24). IGI Global.
- Cheung, A.B.L. (2008, December 10–11). Responding to the Challenge of Internationalization: How Hong Kong Universities Balance the Global and the Regional. Presented at Symposium on Positioning University in the Globalized World: Changing Governance and Coping Strategies in Asia Co-organized by: Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong Central Policy Unit, HKSAR Government; and The Hong Kong Institute of Education.
- Education and Manpower Bureau (2005, May). The new academic structure for senior secondary education and higher education action. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from http://334.edb.hkedcity.net/doc/eng/report_e.pdf. Cite can be found on p. 6
- Education Commission (2000, September). Learning for life, learning through life: reform proposals for the education system in Hong Kong. Retrieved on January 20, from <http://www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/reform/rf1.html>.
- Fok, W. P. (2007). Internationalisation of Higher Education in Hong Kong. *International Education Journal*, 8(1), 184–193.
- Globalization index (2007, October 11). *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved on January 6, 2012, from http://www.atkearney.com/images/global/pdf/GIndex_2007.pdf.
- Inter-Association Network on Campus Internationalization (2012). Resources for Campus Internationalization. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from <http://campusinternationalization.org/about/curriculum/>
- Jaffee, D. (2011). The general education initiative in Hong Kong: Organized contradictions and emerging tensions.” *Higher Education*, October.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2011, January). Internationalization or Englishization: Medium of Instruction in Today's Universities. Centre for Governance and Citizenship, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Working Paper Series no. 2011/003. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from http://libir1.ied.edu.hk/pubdata/ir/link/pub/AK%20CGC%20occasional%20paper%20final_final_----%20Prof%20%20Kirkpatrick.pdf.
- Knight, J. (2004). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8 (1), 5–31.
- Lam, W. (2011, March 21) Different But Equal. *South China Morning Post*.
- Mok, K. H. (2007) Questioning for Internationalization of Universities in East Asia: Critical Reflections. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11 (3–4), 433–454.
- Rosenberg, M. (2011, May 2). Busiest ports in the world. Retrieved January 6, 2012, from <http://geography.about.com/cs/transportation/a/aa061603.htm>.
- Skidmore, D., Marston, J. and Olson, G. (2005). An infusion approach to internationalization: Drake University as a case study. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, Fall, 187–203
- Spinks, J. (2011, April 13). Author interview with John Spinks, Professor of Psychology and Director of Undergraduate Admissions and International Student Exchange; Senior Adviser to Vice-Chancellor, University of Hong Kong.
- Tsui, L., (2010, September 16) A Bridge Between East and West. *The World University Rankings*. Retrieved on January 20, from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2010–2011/analysis-asian-performance.html>.

- University Grants Committee (2002, March). Higher Education In Hong Kong: Report of the University Grants Committee. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from <http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/doc/ugc/publication/report/her/herreport.pdf>.
- University Grants Committee (2010, December). *Aspirations for the higher education system in Hong Kong: Report of the University Grants Committee*. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from <http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/doc/ugc/publication/report/her2010/her2010-rpt.pdf>.
- Wahab, Z., (2012, July 1) Foreign Interest Grows at Hong Kong Universities. *New York Times*.
- Williams, S. (2011, December 7). Approaches to Internationalizing the Curriculum. University of Victoria. Retrieved on January 20, 2012, from <http://web.uvic.ca/~sherriw/approaches.htm>.
- Yeandle, M., J. Horne, N. Danev, and A. Knapp (2009, March). Global Financial Centres Index, City of London. Retrieved January 20, 2012 from <http://www.zyen.com/PDF/GFCI5.pdf>.

David Skidmore is a Professor of Politics and International Relations and Director of the Principal Financial Group Center for Global Citizenship at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa, USA. In 2010–11, he served as a General Education Fulbright Scholar at the University of Hong Kong. Skidmore is author, co-author or editor of six books including, most recently, a monograph titled *The Unilateralist Temptation in American Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2011), and has published numerous articles or chapters in various academic journals and books. david.skidmore@drake.edu