



Policy environments for Asian universities

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As the race to build world-class universities intensifies, many governments are formulating policies to strengthen the capacity of their flagship universities. This helps to explain why Asian research universities continue to stun the academic world. According to the latest Times Higher Education ranking, four more Asian universities have joined the ranks of the world's top 200. No fewer than 24, almost one-eighth, of the world's top 200 universities are Asian. At this pace, a quarter of the world's best could be

Asian by 2040, and this excludes Australian universities which some consider as within the Asian block.

Asia's leading research universities are committed to help drive their nation's global competitiveness. Unlike Singapore and Hong Kong which have small highly selective systems anchored in service economies, the other three Neo-Confucian economies (Japan, Korea and the Chinese mainland) are industrial giants that received

enormous financial support from their governments in the form of policies, plans and programmes such as Brain Korea, Japan's COE21 and China's 211&985 plans. These government initiatives gave their universities a jump-start just as the rankings became a measure of prestige, confidence and investment potential.

As globalization intensifies, East Asian research universities are expected to play an even greater role in strengthening their economies and civil societies by providing an internationally competitive and high quality higher education.

One of the challenges for the eastern Asian region in the years to come is to forge mutually beneficial cross-border partnerships and high quality teaching and research programmes to help ensure that Asia will become a centrepiece for the world's knowledge production and innovation by 2050. This is no small order. While Asia's top-tier universities have made excellence a priority, only Singapore and Hong Kong have been able to ensure quality across the entire higher education system. With over eighty per cent enrolment rate in Korea, the task remains daunting. For China, with the most university students in the world, there is enormous potential for worldwide influence in the coming decades.

To position itself as a global hub, the entire system's reputation for excellence is a necessary condition. Reforms are underway that will place the onus on the academic profession to adapt to rapid change, and to integrate teaching and research with knowledge exchange that addresses the pressing problems in their societies. Performance-based assessment will become increasingly common among the professoriate in Asia.

In order to continue their rise and without increasing the risk to their core academic mission, Asian research universities need more effective governance at both state and institutional levels to gauge, adjust and balance quantity and quality in teaching and research. Far more direct and systematic attention is needed on the improvement of second and third tier-colleges, polytechnics and universities, equal access to top-tier universities by students from under-served communities, and cultural diversity on campus.

Gerard Postiglione has engaged in policy-related projects with the Asian Development Bank (on China's 13th Five-Year Plan), Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (on building research universities), United Nations (UNDP on university reform in Mongolia, and UNESCO on promotion of academic staff), and the World Bank (on world class universities), as well as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (on the academic profession), and the Ford Foundation (on China's educational reforms). He is currently the Humanities and Social Science Prestigious Fellow at the University of Hong Kong.