What Matters in Global Outreach?  
The Case of the University of Hong Kong

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While university presidents sometimes write books about their own universities, academics usually steer clear due to the risk of compromising their neutrality. The risk is more onerous in my case, due to being among the longest serving members of my University. Nevertheless, I have chosen to accept the invitation. I make no claim to neutrality, and I write with the assumption that the readership includes academics and institutional managers of universities in developing countries who are interested in what has matters to a leading international research University that only several decades ago was a small undergraduate institution surrounded by a region with much poverty.

Age matters

When one examines the leading universities in the world, it becomes clear that age matters, especially in global outreach. 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. In eastern Asia, specific policies in China, Japan, Korea and Malaysia helped the ascent of their well-established research universities, including a few new universities. Less attention has been focused on how Asia’s long established universities retain their resilience in the face of rapid economic globalization. The University of Hong Kong transversed several major stages in its 100 plus years of development (Kunich 2012, Kunich, forthcoming). In the 21st Century the University has plays a key role in helping Hong Kong anchor globalization 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 modernization of the rest of the country. This also means addressing the most relevant problems facing the nation.
Since national reunion in 1997, the University’s academic staff has turned its research, teaching and knowledge exchange capabilities toward national renewal. While sustaining its western academic heritage, it 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. This is supported by a unique enabling environment among regional Asian universities of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and mobility, and multi-lingual/multicultural capability.

Its interdisciplinary curriculum and institutional arrangements must be able to support knowledge networks, and a pattern of brain circulation that ensures the recruitment and retention of internationally recognized scholars and scientists from China and around the world. The University has to manage three strategic balances: between indigenous and international academic leadership, recruitment intake from Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland, the Asian region and more globally, and research funding from local and national governments, as well as industry, alumni and other stakeholders.

For these and other reasons, 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). Among its key resources are amphibious entrepreneurs – those administrators, academics, alumni and other stakeholders with extensive networks on multiple continents (Powell & Sandholtz 2012).

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. From the early 1980s (until the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis), those four Asian tigers posted impressive growth rates (Chen 1979, 1983, 1994, 1997). 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). It also managed to rid itself of corruption, and still remains unscathed by global terrorism (Lee 1981).
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. Moreover, the tendency of Hong Kong investors to think in the short rather than long term led to an abbreviated vision for the development of high technology industry. Moreover, the government budget for R&D was, and remains, amongst the lowest in the world for an economy with average personal income levels that has rivaled some developing countries. In fact, allocation for R&D was 0.7% of GDP, placing Hong Kong in the 50th position in global rankings for this indicator (Ng and Poon 2004, World Bank 2012). Nevertheless, Hong Kong scientists are among the regional leaders in research performance (UNESCO 2014).

Known for its entrepreneurial prowess, global trade, and competitive business practices, Hong Kong evolved to become a center 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. Among its more recent challenges was to overcome the Asian economic crisis that began in 1997 and lingered through the 2003 SARS epidemic (So and Chan 2002, Loh 2004). The University played a major role in cracking the genetic code in the fight against SARS (HKU 2004).

It is imperative for research universities in a global city like Hong Kong to ensure that economic globalization works for, rather than against, research productivity and innovation (Albach and Salmi 2011, Postiglione 2011). With a scarcity of natural resources and manufacturing industries, the city is left to rely almost solely upon its human resources. Its school system produces one of the highest calibers of educational achievement in mathematics and science in the world (OECD 2012). Its senior secondary schools and its universities have reformed their curriculum by adding a strong dose of liberal studies to encourage creativity, critical thinking and innovation. Meanwhile, the University is often noted for the heavy emphasis it places on performance measurement in the allocation of resources (Postiglione & Wang 2011).

**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. The low access rates were possible because the large English-medium school sector broadened students’ opportunity to enter university overseas. For the same reason, other Asian tiger economies like Korea and Taiwan which were without a large
English-medium school sector, had to absorb more of the demand domestically for university education.

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. Its share of government funding was largely determined the recommendations of the University Grants Council (UGC), composed of a group of local and international leaders in academia, business and society (UGC 1996, 1999, 2002). The Research Grants Council (RGC) of the UGC provides advice and research funding that steer the format for the knowledge networks of research universities.

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, including in the area of advanced technology transfer (Task Force 2000).

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 modernization of China, and the adjacent mainland of China with its policy of economic reforms and opening to the outside world (Postiglione 2006, 2007, Altbach and Postiglione 2012).

While these basic conditions constitute an enabling environment, they alone do not drive research output and innovation. This is also determined by the government’s macro-steering and the strategic management of the University. In simple terms, the government steers but the University has a high degree of autonomy. The University’s research portfolio has the responsibility to attract and manage funds, persuade funding bodies, plan strategic research themes and areas of excellence, monitor and evaluate research and publications, disseminate and publicize (and sometimes commercialize) research breakthroughs, as well as provide research
teams and their doctoral students with a supportive environment to increase academic research output and innovative science.

**Institutional autonomy matters**

Through the University Grants Committee (UGC) the government has leverage to steer the direction of the University of Hong Kong through prioritized funding and performance guidelines (UGC 2004a). 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 because it has the responsibility to ensure that tax payers’ moneys are spent well. It offers advice to the University and receives advice from government. It is expected to take on a role in promoting quality, especially regarding international standards, through peer reviews and initiatives to monitor and enhance the academic standards. For example, it carries out a Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), the results of which are used to adjust the distribution of the research portion of the block grant to the University. In this way, it aims to hold the University accountable and drive improvements in its research output.

The decision to establish a Research Grants Council (RGC) was pivotal for the transition to a leading research University (Universities Grants Committee 2000:11). 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. The RGC made competitive research grants available to academic staff. 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. The members sometimes act as network brokers and conduits between the University, the international community and the rest of China. Though some of the members are local by residence, they are globally connected and act as amphibious entrepreneurs across a number of sectors, including international universities, business, and industry (Saskin 2004).

**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. More than 6,800 of the 10,795 students enrolled in 2012-13 required a visa. Within Hong Kong, the University always attracts students with the best admission scores. However, it now attracts applications from international students and students from the Chinese mainland who have even higher academic standards than those students from Hong Kong secondary schools. This is significant as Hong Kong secondary school students are consistently ranked near the top (between first and third) of the 60 countries Program of International Student Evaluation (OECD 2012).
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 (Spinks & Wong, 2014, HKU 2014a). 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). This can be attributed not only to the caliber of the students enrolled, but also to the prospects of graduates.

For example, Southeast Asia’s rapid economic development has meant that more and more students are choosing to attend top regional universities, including the University of Hong Kong. In this way, they remain closer to the most vibrant labor market in the world. 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. The starting salaries of graduates were the highest in Hong Kong in 2012 and amongst the highest in the world (INGRADA Global Graduate Survey, 2010). In the QS Asian University Rankings 2013, HKU achieved a score of 99.8 in the QS ‘Employer Reputation’ survey (HKU 2014a). Since there are hundreds of multinational companies head-quartered in Hong Kong, due in part to the Chinese mainland’s geographical proximity, the University developed a global hub for Asian industry and services. The recent Sea Turtle Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2013) named Hong Kong as the 3rd best city in the world for the return on investment gained by international students.

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 programs, 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. Enquiry-based approaches are meant to align with the characteristic Asian dedication to study. A healthy competition amongst students for high grades straddles the University’s experiential learning curriculum. The extension of the undergraduate curriculum from three to four years in 2012 permitted the institutionalization of a core curriculum which gives students increased choices, echoing the characteristics of the North American system. The Times Higher Education remarked that it was “surprising that the University of Hong Kong is embarking on such wholesale reforms when it is already a member of the international elite with a reputation to maintain” (Times Higher Education 2010).

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. The University recognizes that promoting leadership for China and the region through experiential learning can help adapt and strengthen the role that it has taken for a hundred years. This also aligns with the vision of the University Grants Committee for students and academic staff.

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. Their social and public role is vital to the development of a civil society and the quality of life” (University Grants Committee, 2004b).
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. 125 of its professorial staff have been ranked by Thomson Reuters as being among the world’s top 1% of scientists, based on the number of citations recorded for their publications in 2013 (HKU 2014a). The level of scholarship at the University is reflected in that of its president, a world-renowned geneticist.

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 organization 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, including ways to better manage research networks and academic output. For example, the University has five strategic research areas comprising 16 strategic research themes and five emerging themes viewed as critical to the advancement of Hong Kong, the Chinese mainland and the rest of the world. The five strategic research areas are community, biomedicine, environment, frontier technology and China. Funding comes from the University, and other sources including the Areas of Excellence (UGC), Theme-based Research Scheme (RGC), and partnering with the State Key Laboratories, and the National Key Basic Research Development Program on the Chinese mainland (HKU 2014d).

The University is as closely linked with its national and international counterparts as with other universities in Hong Kong. The high velocity of brain circulation provides the University with the capacity to facilitate cross-border and international research collaborations. The template of institutional arrangements, network agents, and brain circulation for anchoring globalization and national development facilitates a large amount of research collaboration by the professoriate. 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 and Whitelaw 1994, Postiglione 1997, ISCAP 2007, Postiglione and 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. Research collaboration in the postcolonial era retained the traditional
networks of collaboration with Anglo-western countries but became augmented by newer patterns of collaboration, not only with academics on the Chinese mainland, but also with counterparts in many other parts of the world, such as Eastern and Southern Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The University’s high degree of international research collaboration is unsurprising because the professoriate is highly international by citizenship. About 70 percent of those with doctoral qualifications earned it overseas, usually at a university in the United Kingdom, North America, or Australia. Recruitment is based on qualification and need, not nationality. The University has shifted its emphasis from recruiting renowned professors to recruiting young scholars for long-term sustainable development.

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 recognized scholars and scientists. Institutional management facilitates academic productivity by providing advantages for building international knowledge networks and for publishing research findings overseas.

All academic members of staff are rigorously assessed each year on the basis of the University’s internal web-based template of performance indicators. Despite the sometimes bureaucratic nature of the annual performance review, the professoriate tends to agree that decisions about personnel and allocation of resources are made more objectively than might otherwise be the case. While there can be a downside to the rising culture of academic assessment, appraisal, and evaluation in universities around the world, the University has been able to absorb the criticisms. Performance measures have been found to increase stress on Hong Kong academics. However, these also appear to coincide with relatively high levels of job satisfaction, due in part to the view that institutional decisions are viewed as relatively fair and less politicized (Postiglione and Wang 2011).

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 internationalization. There is a reflective discourse about how to bring the University’s Western academic model into the service of China. One Hong Kong scholar made reference to this: “Will Asia be just producing more of the same of the Western-originated contemporary higher education model, or will it be able to unleash a more critical understanding and practice in higher education, a cultural and epistemological reflection on the role of universities as venues of higher learning” (Cheung 2013). This has become more important as the Chinese mainland continues to consider what kind of higher education system is best for its future. Beyond the race to excel on international indicators of university success is the longstanding issue of how to strengthen the nation in the face of historical humiliations and foreign exploitations. China has finally learned how to effectively borrow, not copy, from the West without muting the influence of its ancient culture. More attention is being focused on how higher education can be guided by China’s own unique
heritage ideas and principles. It is common to credit towering figures of the classical era, such as Confucius and Mencius, Sunzi and Mozi, and later Wang Yangming and Zhu Xi for shaping educational ideas. In the modern era, Hu Shi is well known, but others such as Cai Yuanpe, Liang Shuming, Ye Yangchu, Mei Yiqi, Jiang Bailing, Yan Fu, Tao Xingzhi, and Pan Guangdan were also influential educational thinkers. There is an ongoing concern that university education has not been sufficiently shaped by indigenous ideas and academic traditions dating back to the Song and Tang Dynasties.

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). On a 2012 visit to Hong Kong, the President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences associated Hong Kong scientists with the Chinese mainland’s need to propel the birth of scientific discovery. In fact, China has now spends more than any other country in Asia on research and development. It increased the proportion of its GDP for research and development from 0.95 percent in 2001 to 1.84% in 2011. It devoted 1.98 per cent of its GDP to science and technology in 2012 (a 7.6 percent increase from 2011). Its Five Year Plan calls for an expenditure to 2.2 percent of GDP for research and development by 2015, (which will put it above the 28 member states of the European Union) (SCMP 2014).

The door has opened to increased research funding for scientists of the University at partnering state laboratories (2014e). In the adjoining region of Guangdong province, there are seven strategic areas for cooperative research with University scientists: Energy saving and environmental protection (clean energy technology); next generation IT (modernization of the country's telecommunications infrastructure); bio-technology (pharma and vaccine manufacturers); High end equipment (airplanes, satellites, manufacturing technology); new energy (nuclear, wind, solar); new materials (rare earths); and new energy cars (electric and hybrid cars, batteries).

The University has signed a partnership agreement with China Bio-Med Regeneration Technology to study how stem cell can slow down the aging process (HKET, Sing Tao). 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 (Ta Kung Pao). 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 organization 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.”

**An integrated process model matters**

The University of Hong Kong model anchors globalization by capitalizing 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 recognize 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 a one that places an emphasis on the establishment, protection, and elaboration of collaborative knowledge networks and academic freedom. That means a model in which the university takes strategic advantage of its capacity to make globalization work for China’s continued rise and growing international leadership in economic development, science and technology. Its location in one of the world’s major cosmopolitan centers gives the University open access to international knowledge networks that help address national challenges.

Looking ahead, the dynamic economy of East Asia will probably continue to be an asset in favor 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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