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The Hong Kong Education Reform: The Research Agenda for Higher Education (0094)

Hong Kong is in the process of converting from a 5+2+4 system of education: (five-years secondary school to certificate-level) + (two-years senior-secondary to advanced level) + (three-years university), to a 6+4 system: (six-years secondary school to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education – HKDSE) + (four-years university).

The main intention of the reform is to extend secondary education for all students to *grade 12*, while at the same time implementing a more open curriculum and pedagogy (Hong Kong Education Commission: 2000). But as the first cohort progresses toward graduation in 2012 with HKDSE qualifications, the scale of the collateral impact on Hong Kong higher education has become increasingly clear (Education Bureau: 2008; University Grants Committee: 2010).

From the point of view of researchers and policy makers, the Hong Kong experience is an unusual opportunity to learn more about the forces at work in contemporary higher education, the formulation of responses to those forces and the effectiveness of these responses. This presentation provides an overview of the relevant research agenda under two main heads: institutional change and higher-education education policy; and the reform of the undergraduate experience.

Under the pre-reform 5+2 secondary-school system, only about 30,000 students progress to A-level and graduate with a clear path to post-secondary education. In summer 2012, the entire cohort – more than 80,000 students – will graduate with the HKDSE. A much larger number of these school leavers will expect to continue with their education – an essential step to employment in Hong Kong's increasingly metropolitan economy.

The policy response to increased demand for post-secondary education has not been to expand the intake to a directly subsidized, bachelors' degree places provided by universities (about 15,000), but to encourage the expansion of a broader post-secondary sector through incentives for institutions (loans and grants of land) and loans to students.

The context for these policy decisions is familiar: the growth of participation in higher education; the role of vocational qualifications and the potential for an over-investment in bachelors' degree education; and the durability of institutional hierarchies, with elite established universities at their apex.

From the researcher's perspective, the articulation of policy, planning for the reforms, and implementation all require consideration (see Gornitzka, Kogan, and Amaral: 2005). At each level, much is revealed about the world-view, purposes and leverage of agents as they have evolved.

Researchers with a more focused agenda also have much to learn, in particular: options for the use of public funds across the higher-education space; models for articulation across institutions and credit transfer to facilitate movement up the qualifications ladder; differences in the legal and policy treatment of institutions; modalities for quality assurance and accountability; the role of private providers of post-secondary education; and the durability of the institutional hierarchy as the system is reshaped (see Williams and Filippakou: 2010).

More recent preoccupations with leadership and with norms in determining behavior might also be followed up (Braxton: 2010).

Apart from the step-up in student numbers as an additional year is added to enrolments, the key challenge for universities is the revision of the undergraduate curriculum and the enhancement of the undergraduate experience.

Typically, the starting point of this revision is an existing set of dense, programmatic three-year degrees. It might have been expected that across different disciplines and institutions a range of new models would emerge, but apart from professional programs in medicine, law and so on, there has been a convergence toward a model that emphasizes a more open curriculum, including a substantial component of liberal, general education. This open model has been warmly supported by policy makers and the funding agency and has met surprisingly little opposition from academics.

As part of the redevelopment of the curriculum, and in line with the themes of the educational reform as a whole, increased attention has been paid to competencies and broader intellectual and personal development, raising the profile of the

on-going campaign for a more learner-centred pedagogy and a reduced emphasis on mastery of content in favour of more generic outcomes. Complementing this development are plans to implement an enhanced transition to university, an *intentional* year-one curriculum, undergraduate research opportunities and *capstone experiences*.

In terms of educational delivery, the Hong Kong experiment represents an effort to realize a broadly progressive agenda widely shared by theorists and practitioners (Tagg, 2003). Most observers will concede that while this model has considerable rhetorical leverage among higher education managers, on-the-ground success is harder to achieve and sustain, given the accommodation that must be made with the demands of disciplines, the practice of discipline-oriented academic staff, and the poorly defined goals of stakeholders.

Research on this aspect of the reform is called for to understand more clearly what is being attempted, the commitments being made and, as we proceed to the post-2012 implementation phase, how far the reform can be advanced against the head winds.

There is also scope for researchers skeptical of the current conventional wisdom, who have discovered instrumentality and *busno-power* disguised as an orientation to student learning (Servage: 2009).

Across this broad terrain a wide variety of research methods are relevant, including: work to archive materials and to maintain an accurate record of events and demographic developments; analysis of the large set of documents produced to explain and define the reforms; interviews with key personnel and samples of stakeholders; questionnaire studies; and meta-studies of the large number of on-going student surveys undertaken by Hong Kong institutions.

The Hong Kong reform may now be said to be at the *end of the beginning*. It is becoming urgent that researchers to pick up the challenge of before-and-after studies. There is no time to waste.

References

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