

L7 Chepstow Thursday 6 December 14.15 - 14.45

Reorienting Internationalisation of Higher Education in Taiwan:

From Outward-Looking to Inward-looking (0370)

William Yat Wai Lo

Department of International Education and Lifelong Learning

The Education University of Hong Kong

Abstract

This paper explores how internationalisation of higher education is reoriented in Taiwan through a new initiative known as the Higher Education Sprout Project. It elaborates how perceived domestic problems in higher education, like the phenomenon of emphasising research but neglecting teaching, the overemphasis on certain performance indicators and the resulting effects of homogenisation, are considered the consequences of emphasising internationalisation and the associated discourse on global competition. It also examines how the initiative, which is a response to the problems, constitutes a reorientation of higher education policy. Many studies have commented on how teaching and local studies are threatened by the tendency to stress research and publishing in international journals. Based on these commentaries, apparently the reorientation reveals a shift from outward-looking to inward-looking strategies. However, the paper argues that the reorientation also illustrates the constraints that governments confront in internationalising higher education due to political conditions.

Keywords

Taiwan; internationalisation; performance; local; global

Internationalisation of higher education, the world-class movement and associated problems in Taiwan

It is common that literature describes higher education changes in East Asia in the context of globalisation and internationalisation. As developing higher education is seen as a way to enhance countries' global competitiveness, governments in the region have started to reform, restructure and internationalise their higher education systems with the quest for world-class universities (Chan and Lo, 2008). An implication of questing world-class universities is the differentiation policy adopted by many higher education systems in East Asia, including that of Taiwan. This is owing to the recognition that the number of top-tier universities is limited, and this is particularly true in the condition that many universities are public institutions or heavily rely on the public finance. Thus, it is impossible for the governments to treat all universities the same in terms of budgets and mission. Such an understanding leads the governments to differentiate higher education by setting stratified missions to the sector. Research-intensive universities are usually picked as top-tier institutions and for achieving the quest for world-class universities. Consequently, many East Asian countries adopted have stratified their higher education sectors so as to build their world-class universities.

In Taiwan, the government launched the Aim for the Top University Project (also known as the "five-year-fifty-billion" project), a competition-based funding scheme to provide off-budget funds to universities. The project, which provided NT\$ 50 billion within five years (2006–2010), was designed to promote research excellence and internationalisation in Taiwan's higher education sector. The project was renewed to provide additional NT\$ 50 billion for further five years (2011–2015). Funded universities were considered "flagship" universities in the island and were expected to reach a world-class status within five years.

The "five-year-fifty-billion" project reveals a policy of differentiation and funding concentration that leads to a situation in which limited government funds are concentrated on funding several leading universities to sustain a critical mass of research excellence that drives up quality and ensures the

country globally competitive. The goal of this policy of building skyscrapers was to enhance the prestige as well as the overall quality of the higher education system. However, it caused a steep stratification and differentiation in Taiwan's higher education system. More importantly, a research- and output-oriented culture has been bred and has substantially intensified competition among universities. Some studies argue that this is a zero-sum game that causes unhealthy competition and inequality in higher education (Chou, 2014; Lo, 2014). Owing to the single standard used that merely stressed research outputs in indexed journals, there is a rise of homogeneity that has reduced the diversity of the higher education sector. Meanwhile, teaching is threatened by the tendency of emphasis on research, thereby resulting in a phenomenon of "emphasising research but neglecting teaching".

Policy responses: a reorientation of internationalisation

In response to these problems, the Taiwan government set aside NT\$ 86.85 billion for a new five-year initiative called the Higher Education Sprout Project, after the "five-year-fifty-billion" project ended. The project consists of two parts. The first part focuses on enhancing the overall quality of universities and encouraging diverse development. Four elements, namely 1) promoting teaching innovation, 2) enhancing publicness of higher education, 3) developing characteristics of universities, and 4) achieving social responsibility, are included in this main part of the project. 158 higher education institutions (including 71 comprehensive universities and 87 technical institutions) are funded. In this part of the project, promoting equality in higher education is emphasised, and developing local linkages and nurturing talent are considered the key missions.

The second part of the project is called "Global Taiwan", which aims to make Taiwan's higher education sector globally competitive. This Global Taiwan project is further divided into two subprojects. The first subproject identifies four universities to be the leading institutions, which pursue all-round excellence. The second subproject select and fund 65 research

centres of 24 institutions in order to develop areas of strength of these universities.

Apparently, the new initiative illustrates a shift from an outward-looking strategy to a relatively inward-looking approach, as social responsibility, publicness and local linkages are highlighted in the project. Importantly, this reorientation exemplifies the tensions between global and local agendas in higher education policy (Marginson, 2013; 2018; Lo, 2018).

Implications of the reorientation: the significance of political constraints

The reorientation suggests the relevance of the politics of higher education to the analysis of internationalisation of higher education. Writing about the interplay between the political developments, educational autonomy and performance culture in Taiwan, Lo (2010) pointed out that the political circumstances have substantially affected Taiwan's higher education policy. The island's democratic transition plays an important role in motivating different social sectors to participate in higher education governance. As a result, while a more decentralised framework of governance, in which individual stakeholders exercise more autonomy, was created, higher education policy needs to be more responsive and accountable to the society.

On this basis, it is suggested that the reorientation reveals an attempt to balance the external/global trends and requirements (which are revealed by the world-class movement) and the internal/local pressures (which are institutionalised by democratic elements in higher education governance). Moreover, the discontent with the outward-looking policies reveals a zero-sum opposition between global and local perspectives on higher education development. This zero-sumness not only justifies the shift toward an inward-looking approach, but also suggests that higher education policymaking processes are inevitably local due to a national-bound view (Marginson 2011; 2018). In this regard, the issues of internationalisation of higher education should be framed in ways that incorporate political liability and sensitivity.

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