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Full Length Research Paper

Globalism and the Emergence of Competitive Culture in the Universities of Hong Kong

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, a competitive culture has emerged in the universities in Hong Kong. Suddenly Hong Kong universities are becoming very competitive on a variety of performance indicators, such as the number and the venue of their faculty publications, the size of their research grants, the quality and marketability of their students, their ranking in the world’s top universities, etc. In the universities’ strategic plan, there is a vision to develop themselves into the world-class universities in the near future. The aim of this paper is to outline the traits of this competitive culture and to show how it is linked to the forces of globalization. In the end, this paper will also examine the impact, the future trajectory, and the theoretical implication of this competitive culture.

Keywords: Globalization, universities, Competitive Culture, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

On 23 September 2005, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) reported that according to the EIU (The Economic Intelligence Unit), its MBA program was ranked the highest in Asia and 45th in the world (HKU 2005a).

A month earlier, however, the Business School of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) also reported that according to an international study by Arizona State University, it ranked first in research productivity in Asia-Pacific and ranked 23rd of the world. The Arizona State report pointed out that HKUST was the only Asian university listed among the top 25, its ranking was even ahead of UC Berkeley and Yale (both 25th), Princeton (46th) and Dartmouth (49th) (HKUST 2005a).

While HKU and HKUST boasted their business school as the best, so was the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). CUHK also claimed that its business school was “Asia’s Best MBA School” in the August 2003 issue of the Business Magazine Asia Inc. (CUHK 2003)

So the three business schools of HKU, HKUST, and CUHK all claimed that they were ranked number one in Asia! These number one claims show the emergence of competitive culture in Hong Kong. The University of Hong Kong (HKU 2005b), for example, claims that it has achieved the:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Highest number and funding among all UGC-funded institutions for awards in University Grants Committee (UGC) and Area of Excellence (AoE)
  \item Highest number among all UGC-funded institutions for awards in National Science Foundation of China (NSFC)/Research Council Joint Research Scheme (RGC JRS)
  \item Largest number among all UGC-funded institution in terms of Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) membership
  \item Highest among Hong Kong institutions in terms of total number of citations on HKU papers published in journals tracked by ISI (Institute of Scientific Information)
\end{itemize}

Obviously, other universities in Hong Kong are not going to be out-ranked by HKU. For example, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) claimed that it has achieved the following ranking in the world (SCMP 2005):

\begin{itemize}
  \item World number 42 university
  \item World number 20 university for Engineering and IT
  \item World number 50 university for Science
  \item World number 6 EMBA (Kellogg-UST EMBA)
  \item Asia Pacific’s number 1 provider of customized executive education programs
\end{itemize}

This competitive culture can also be seen from the university’s strategic plans. The Hong Kong University of
Science and Technology (HKUST), for example, include the following global vision in its Strategic Plan 2005-2020 (HKUST 2005b): to be a world-class university at the cutting edge internationally in all targeted fields of pursuit (emphasis added). Similarly, the vision statement of the University of Hong Kong includes the following: The University of Hong Kong, as a pre-eminent international university in Asia, seeks to sustain and enhance its excellence as an institution of higher learning through outstanding teaching and world-class research (emphasis added).

In sum, the universities in Hong Kong have articulated a "world-class" vision and they are very keen in playing the ranking game to reach the top in the world. Since the late 1990s, this competitive culture has been institutionalized in the university system. During departmental meetings, school board meetings, senate meetings, or council meetings, the first agenda is always on how well the unit has performed in the most recent ranking, and how the unit’s ranking is compared to the ranking of other universities in Hong Kong. Also, whenever there is any public occasion (like during the open day or the graduation ceremony in the fall semester), the universities always take the opportunity to report their most recent ranking. If the universities can’t wait until the next public gatherings, they will send emails to all members of the university to brief them about the latest ranking news. Of course, the ranking news will be reported in the university newsletters and websites as well.

By the early 2000s, this competition culture was further intensified in the following ways. University ranking has gone beyond the university setting and become a news item for public consumption in the Hong Kong society. It is quite common to read the news about university ranking and awards in the mass media every week. In addition, the universities and the departments are no longer contented to be passive players in the ranking game, i.e., they no longer waited for the overseas ranking reports to come in. Instead, they became more proactive and conducted their own ranking studies. For example, the School of Humanities and Social Science at HKUST has conducted a study on the top three journals in the China Field (The China Journal, The China Quarterly, and The Association in Asian Studies) and came up with its own study of the ranking of China Field in the world. Furthermore, the Hong Kong mass media has also become more proactive in ranking study. A couple Hong Kong mass media agencies (like The Hong Kong Economic Journal and the Education18.com) have conducted their own studies on university ranking. The Education18.com, for instance, has conducted a public opinion polls on the following dimensions:

- General ranking on the universities by the Hong Kong public
- Results on student admission (based on students’ grades in the A level exams)
- Percentage of success rate for proposal submitted for the UGC-funded research
- The performance of university graduates (in terms of percentage employed and the salary of their first job)
- The performance of faculty (in terms of publication)
- Student-teacher ratio
- The volume of books in the library

Based on the above dimension, Education18.com came up with a ranking that the Chinese University (CUHK) is the best and the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED) is the worst university in Hong Kong. Finally, this new wave of ranking study has brought the competitive culture to a new height. In the 1990s, the universities were just competing on scholarly publications and research grants. In the early 2000s, however, the field of competition has further extended to other dimensions such as the quality of students, i.e. on whether they have recruited the best students (in terms of their exam grades at admission) or whether they have produced the best graduates (in terms of their employment rate and their starting salary).

Recently, the competition is further extended to (1) the recruitment of early admission students (those talented students who do so well in their secondary school exam that they can enter university one year earlier) and the recruitment of non-local students; (2) the amount of funds raised from the private sector; (3) the success of their self-financed programs. In order to compete for students in the self-financed programs, the universities are lowering their credit requirements (e.g. from 30 to 24 credits) for a M.A. degree and lowering their tuition fees (e.g. from HK$ 2,500/credit to HK$2,000/credit). CUHK, for example, is very successful in their self-financed programs because they have the lowest credit requirements and the cheapest tuition.

Observing the spread of competitive culture in Hong Kong, the aim of this paper is to find out what this competitive culture means, how it emerges, and what impact does it have on Hong Kong’s higher education system.

The Underlying Logic of Competitive Culture

The emergence of competition culture reflects a profound transformation in Hong Kong’s higher education. In particular, it reflects the trend of marketization and the penetration of market norms in the education sector. By the 2000s, education has become a commodity and Hong Kong’s universities are run more and more like selling agents in the education market. Like other business corporations, Hong Kong’s universities have to
The Origins of Competitive Culture

The competitive culture was the product of the following historical processes: the political crisis in the late 1980s, the spread of neo-liberalism from Britain to the colony in the early 1990s, and the economic recession caused by the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s.

First, the competitive culture had its origins in the late 1980s. In 1989, there was a Tiananmen Incident in China. In order to suppress the student protests at the Tiananmen Square on June 4th, the Chinese government ordered the People’s Liberation Army to clear the Square. The news of the bloodshed at Tiananmen Square sent shock waves to Hong Kong (So 1997). If the Chinese government could do this to its own students at the Tiananmen Square, imagine what the Chinese government would do to colonial Hong Kong when it would resume sovereignty in 1997. Shortly after the Tiananmen Incident, there started a tidal wave of emigration out of Hong Kong. An estimated 50,000 people have left the territory every year in the early 1990s for the United States, Canada, and Australia. Educated professionals were found to be most eager to leave. As a result, there was a shortage of manpower in such middle class professionals as accountants, engineers, and managers (Skeldon 1994).

In order to solve this manpower shortage problem and to restore confidence in Hong Kong, the lame-duck colonial government quickly put together a package to expand the higher education of Hong Kong. The university student population would be increased from 2 percent to 18 percent of the college age cohort, and the number of the public-funded universities will be increased from two in the 1980s to eight in the 1990s. To make the increment possible, the colonial government set up a whole new university (The University of Science and Technology HKUST) and to upgrade several polytechnics (Polytechnics and City Polytechnics) and unaccredited colleges (Baptist College and Lingnan College) to universities. As this higher education expansion was designed as a rescue package to restore political confidence after the Tiananmen Incident, the colonial government didn’t have the time to think through the implication of having so many universities in Hong Kong.

Second, by the early 1990s, the crisis of political confidence had largely subsided. However, the universities, once they are set up or upgraded, could not be dismantled. It was at this moment that the ideology of neo-liberalism spread to Hong Kong. Modeled after the educational reforms in her mother country, the colonial government began to apply the British neo-liberal policies, principles, and institutions onto its public-funded universities. Like Great Britain, Hong Kong also set up a University Grant Council (UGC) to oversee the allocation of public money to the universities. In order to promote efficiency and productivity in higher education, the allocation of money is now based on the principal of competition and performance. Subsequently, Britain’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR) were transplanted onto the colonial Hong Kong since the early 1990s. Hong Kong’s universities take these teaching and learning processes very seriously.
research exercises seriously as these exercises are used to inform funding in the university’s tri-annum budget. Since the RAE and TLQPR exercises focus on how one university is rated in comparison with another, they laid the foundation of the emergence of competitive culture in Hong Kong.

Although Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony after 1997, these British exercises continued to be applied to Hong Kong after 1997. In fact, it could be argued that these neo-liberalism policies have been further intensified in Hong Kong after it became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China since 1997. This is because Hong Kong experienced a serious economic recession due to the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s (So and Chan 2002). No sooner had the British departed that Hong Kong’s economy went downhill, experienced drastic downfall in the real estate market and the stock market. Unemployment was at a record high at 7.8 percent. Although the colonial government had accumulated a massive budget surplus in the early and the mid 1990s before the British departure, the new SAR government was in deep budget deficit in the early 2000. Needless to say, Business complained about the decline of Hong Kong’s competitive environment in the world-economy during the economic recession.

Facing the downfall in the economy, the complaints from the business sector, and the budget deficit problem, the new Hong Kong SAR government felt it had a mandate to carry out all sorts of neo-liberal policies, such as downsizing the state bureaucracy, public sector reforms, cutting back welfare, and privatizing state assets.

In the higher education sector, the Hong Kong SAR government through the University Grant Council (UGC) has imposed the following policies to make the university more productive and efficient. First, the government “de-link” the salary scale of the universities, so university employees’ salary are no longer linked with the civil servant in the public sector. Departments are given a one-line budget; they are now responsible for their own expenses. Second, the government drastically cuts the university budget and eliminates the funding for the M.A programs. To cover their payroll and to deal with the cut in public funding, the university/department are encouraged to set up all sort of creative “self financed” programs and to seek matching funds from the private sector. In the early 2000s, therefore, it becomes a matter of survival for the university/department to compete for more grant money, to recruit more self-financed students, and to receive more private donations if they want to avoid any downsizing, restructuring, layoff, merger or closing down.

Since the Hong Kong universities are not too much differentiate in terms of tuition, facilities, and location from one another, they seize upon the ranking game (like the assertion that they are the number one in Asia and they are a world-class university) in order to lay the claim to get more funding from the SAR government, to recruit better students from Hong Kong and from the nearby regions, and to receive more donations from the business sector. The emergence of competitive culture has exerted a profound impact on the higher education of Hong Kong, as the following section shows.

### The Impact of the Competitive Culture

Ranking is a zero sum game: one either wins or loses, either catching up or falling behind. Moreover, the ranking game is never ending, as a university is always pushing for a higher and higher ranking, from the best in Hong Kong to the best in China, to the best in Asia, and then finally to the best in the world. When stakes (prestige, resources, power) are high, the competition can be quite fierceful, leading to disputes and divisions among the universities in Hong Kong.

For example, a dispute arose on the ranking result between the President of the Lingnan University and the Survey Research Center of the University of Hong Kong (HKU). Both Edward Chen and Nyaw Mee-kau, President and Vice President of Lingnan University, condemned HKU’s Survey Center’s ranking result as “non-scientific” and “irresponsible”, and “misleading.” (Ming Pao 2005 August 5; Wen Wei Pao July 23, 2005). The Vice President of Lingnan is so angry that he offers anyone a HK$100,000 award if he/she can locate the methodology problems of the university ranking conducted by the HKU Survey Center.

In addition, there was a dispute between Chinese University (CUHK) and City University (CityU) over its ranking of the communication department. In its recruitment advertisement, the English and Communication Department of CityU claimed that its faculty were several times or more productive than its counterpart in CUHK: “According to the statistics shown by the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), in the past five to ten years, the publication output per faculty member in the English and Communication Department in City University was in a ratio of 3 to 1 when they are compared to the Journalism and Communication School of Chinese University, not to mention the ratio was even higher when compared to its counterpart in the Hong Kong University and the Baptist University.” The CUHK was so deeply offended by such a claim that it immediately posted an article on its own website to denounce the CityU of misinformation (Singtao December 8, 2004).

Although dispute is quite common in the academic world, it is rare to find this kind of dispute gets blow up in public and reported in the mass media. As the ranking game is getting more intense in the future, this kind of dispute seems to be inevitable.

Aside from the dispute at the inter-university level, the competitive culture will also lead to new social divisions
at the department and the faculty level. In order to boost ranking, there are policies to encourage faculty to get more extra-mural grants and to publish more in top-ranked journals. There developed a new value on teaching; Teaching is considered as having a lower value and a lower status than research. Only when one is poor in research that one focuses on teaching. Gradually, a two-tiered system (Teaching versus Research) has come into being in the university. On one hand, teaching is increasing relied on temporary or part-time young faculty members in order to save money on faculty salary; on the hand, the universities are going after the highly-paid stars that can bring the university ranking to a new height. This two-tiered trend is happening at the university level too. A small number of universities (HKU, CUHK, and HKUST) are labeled as research universities; they get more resources and are groomed to be world-class universities. While the rest (Baptist, Lingnan, Polytechnics, and City Polytechnics) are labeled as teaching universities. This two-tiered trend is further encouraged by the University Research Council (UGC), as it is pushing the so-called “role differentiation” policy so as to justify why it allocates more resources to some universities instead of to others.

CONCLUSION

Following Manfred Steger (2004), this paper distinguishes globalization from globalism. While globalization refers to the multidimensional processes that intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges, globalism refers to the neoliberal Thatcher-Reagan market ideology of the 1980s that promoted the policies of privatizing public enterprises, de-regulating trade and industry, downsizing the state sector, reducing public expenditures, and maintaining strict control of organized labor. The goal of globalism is to liberalize the market from the control of the state and community, so corporation can have a free hand to go all over the globe in the pursuit of profit.

In the Hong Kong context, the ideology of globalism began to take root in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen political crisis. It was further consolidated during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. In the midst of high unemployment, enterprise bankruptcy, and budget deficit, the ideology of globalism became hegemonic, and the new Hong Kong SAR state was called upon to downsize and to restructure in order to restore the competitiveness of the Hong Kong economy. It is under this historical context that a competitive culture emerged in Hong Kong higher education. Hong Kong universities are striving to be world-class and the best in Asia. In the early 2000s, this competitive culture was institutionalized through the department meetings, the strategic plans of the universities, and the news in the mass media. Starting with the ranking of which university gets the most research grant and which university publishes the most international journal articles, this competitive culture is spreading to other arenas like which university recruits the best students, which university receives the largest sum of donations, and which university sets up the most successful self-financed programs.

What is the impact of this competitive culture on Hong Kong’s higher education? To begin with, it has led to increasing social divisions at the university level and at the faculty level. The Hong Kong universities are moving towards the direction of a two-tiered system, with the upper tier focuses on research and climbing up the ranking ladder, while the lower tier focuses on undergraduate teaching and learning. This two-tiered dynamics is happening at the faculty level too. The departments are going after the academic stars that can boost their research ranking to a higher level, while at the same time they also try to save money by hiring temporary, part-time recent Ph.D to do the bulk of teaching.

At present, this competition culture is getting more intense and showing no sign of retreating. Its growing intensity can be observed at the student level as well. In Hong Kong, the students are getting more competitive in order to better prepare themselves for the job market. For undergraduate students, they are not satisfied with just one major degree, and they want to add a minor degree, a double major degree, or even a double major and a minor degree to their undergraduate study. For graduate students, they keep on collecting more and more graduate diplomas, certificates, and Master degrees, thus creating a growing demand for Hong Kong’s self-financed programs. The Hong Kong SAR government further encourages this degree-collecting trend by setting up a “life-long learning” policy which could provide HK$10, 000 for every Hong Kong citizen to take courses in self-financed programs.

At present, it seems that East Asian universities in mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore are all very interested in going global, i.e., asking faculty to publish in international journals, hosting international conferences, sending students to international exchange programs, etc. One wonders whether such global activities would give rise to an intensive competitive culture like that in Hong Kong in the near future.

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