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# The quest for world-class university status: implications for sustainable development of Asian universities

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## Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction .....	2
Higher education expansion and pursuit of world-class status: evidence from selected Asian countries.....	3
Hong Kong: emphasis on research performance.....	5
Taiwan: two key policy targets .....	6
China: the ‘211 Project’ and the ‘985 Scheme’ .....	6
Japan: flagship universities project .....	7
Singapore: ‘global schoolhouse’ ambition .....	7
Under- and unemployment of graduates: expansion and world- class status for whose benefits?.....	12
‘Fit-for-purpose’: the role of a liberal arts university in Asia: Lingnan University’s experiences .....	14
Whole-person development .....	15

Research and knowledge transfer .....	15
Excellence in teaching quality and student learning .....	17
High-quality graduates .....	17
Going beyond ranking: international engagement and research collaboration in Asia and the Pacific.....	19
Conclusion: broader policy implications.....	22
References .....	23

# The quest for world-class university status: implications for sustainable development of Asian universities

Ka Ho Mok

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## **Abstract**

With the strong intention to rank highly in global university leagues, Asian governments are exerting serious efforts to boost their universities' global competitiveness. The massification of higher education (HE) in Asia has also generated growing concern for graduates confronting under- and unemployment. Within this policy context, this study investigates the major challenges confronting HE in Asia and examines the specific purpose of higher education. With particular focus on addressing the growing diversity of learning needs, this study critically examines the role of liberal arts education in Asia, specifically exploring the importance of role differentiation and fit-for-purpose education for sustainable development.

## Introduction

Higher education worldwide has been experiencing a continuous trend of transformation shaped by different types of international drives, which 'operate[s] in a constant flux of globalisation' (Kosmützky and Putty 2016: 8; see also Albrow 1996; Bauman 1998; Giddens 2002; Gray 1998; McGrew 1992; Mok and James 2005; Robertson 1992; Sklair 2002; Yang 2005). Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Asia-Pacific region are not immune to this overwhelming trend. In their drive to improve national competitiveness and elevate their position in the world market, governments in this region have endeavored to reform their HE systems. The major features of the reforms can be summarised as the massification and privatisation of HE to generate additional resources for development, the eager pursuit of world-class university status, and the internationalisation of student learning by engaging in transnational HE. As Mok (2011) argues, 'the rise of transnational higher education in the Asia-Pacific region has undeniably reflected the growing pace of globalisation and the subsequent pressures imposed by it' (61).

Although these reform measures have enhanced HE in the Asia Pacific, the side effects of rapid massification in HE must not be overlooked. International and comparative research has clearly shown the negative consequences of rushing HE expansion. These include an increase in inequality in tertiary education, stratification of HEIs, under- or unemployment of graduate students, a decrease in quality in both teaching and research, and the deprivation of cultural identity.

This study takes into account the broader social and economic background to examine the major challenges confronted by Asian countries and explore the implications for sustainable development of national HE systems. It begins with a discussion of the massification trend in HE, followed by the strategies adopted to enhance global university rankings. It subsequently presents a case study review of one of the leading liberal arts universities in Hong Kong and Asia, Lingnan University, to illustrate the importance of role differentiation in terms of HE development, considering whether it is fit-for-purpose to meet the diversified needs of students.

Finally, this study discusses the significance of regional collaboration and examines broader policy implications for the sustainable development of HEIs in this region.

## Higher education expansion and pursuit of world-class status: evidence from selected Asian countries

The expansion of tertiary education used to be a priority in Western industrial societies in the 1960s and early 1970s, as it was considered beneficial for sustaining/stimulating growth and reducing inequality. In Europe, the massification of higher education in the 1970s caused concerns regarding the employment of graduates and whether they were ‘over-educated’ or ‘over-qualified’ for some working positions, especially during the economic stagnation period in the 1970s to 1980s; nonetheless, the enrolment rate has continually increased (Teichler 2001). As illustrated in Figure 1, the enrolment rate in HE systems worldwide has expanded at an unprecedented pace, even faster than the growth in real GDP and the increase in population.

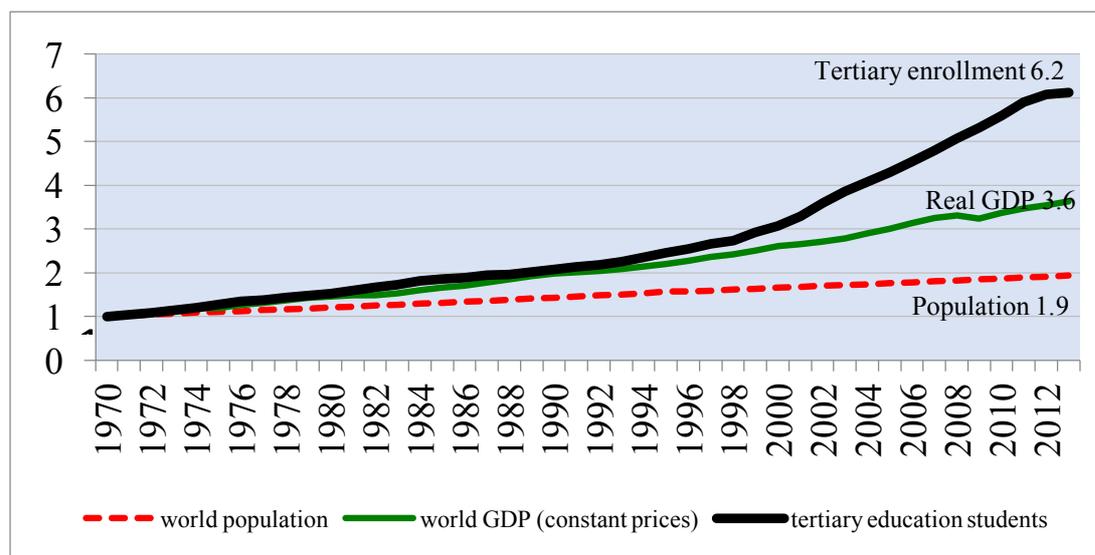


Figure 1: Population, Real GDP, and Tertiary Enrolment from 1970 to 2012 (1970 = 1.0)

Source: Marginson 2016. Original data derived from UNESCO 2016; World Bank 2016.

The Asia-Pacific region has been experiencing an expansion trend similar to that of its Western counterparts (Hawkins, Mok and Neubauer 2014), although it may have differences in ideology. Calderon (2012) reports that enrolment in HE in Asia has increased by over 50 per cent in the last decade. To cater to their countries’ economic needs and compete globally with other nations, governments in the region have strived to provide more university education opportunities for their citizens. Both developed and developing countries in this region, such as South Korea,

Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, have expanded their HE provision from a few elite universities to a large cohort of HEIs with international awareness (Figures 2 and 3).

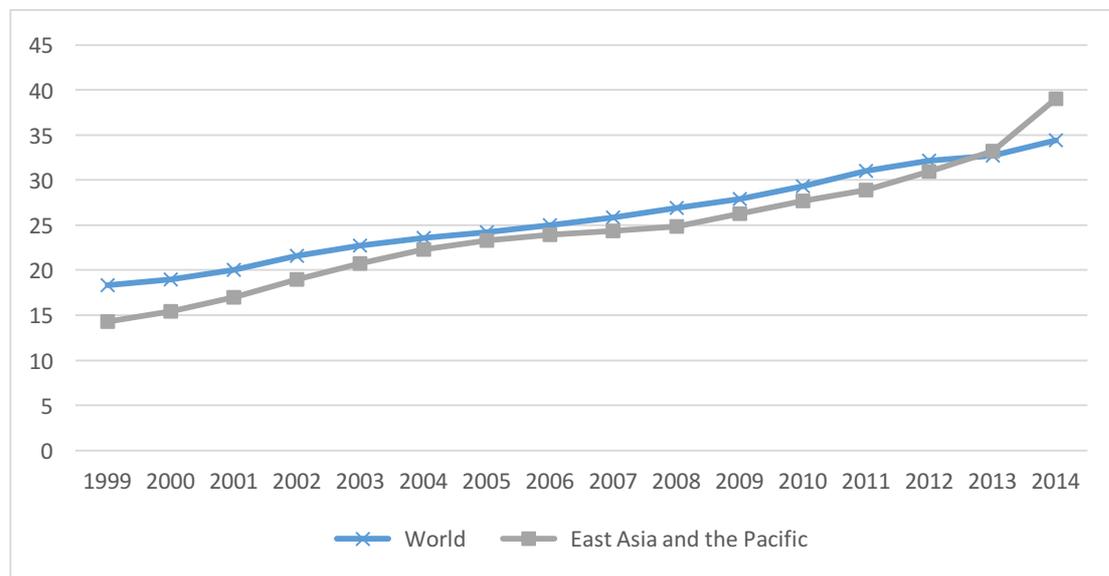


Figure 2: Expansion of HE globally and in East Asia and the Pacific region (indicated by the gross enrollment rate) (1999–2014)

Source: UNESCO database, retrieved from <http://data.uis.unesco.org>

In China, for instance, the enrolment rate in tertiary education increased from 1.7 per cent in 1980 to 17 per cent in 2003, with an average increasing rate of 26.9 per cent annually from 1998 to 2004. The number of university graduates increased from 1.08 million in 1998 to 4.47 million in 2004 (Wan 2006). By 2020, 50 per cent of candidates are expected to be admitted to HEIs (Yuan 2016).

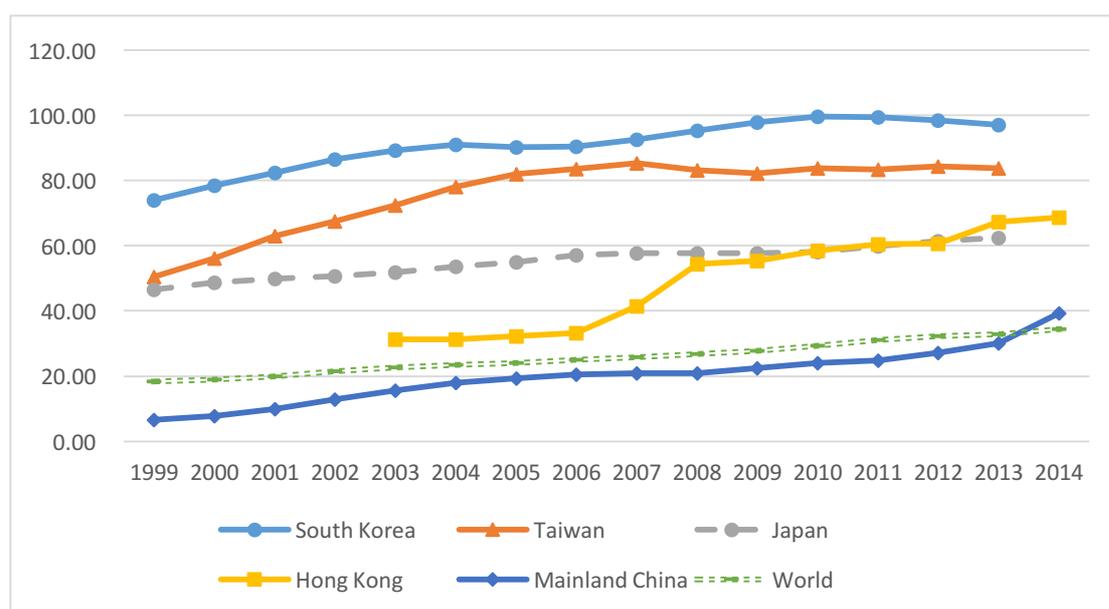


Figure 3: Expansion of HE enrolment rate in selected Asian countries (1999–2014)  
Source: UNESCO database, retrieved from <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

The enhancement of national competitiveness and hierarchical positioning does not refer solely to the growth of an educated labour force, but also to the prestige of domestic universities being included in world university league tables within their own countries and in the global market (Deem et al. 2008). Universities in East Asia are increasingly experiencing immense pressure to compete internationally. The growing interest in university league tables has become the norm, not only in the UK and Canada, but also in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan, and mainland China (Altbach 2010; Chan 2015; Liu and Cheng 2005; Mok and Hawkins 2010). To date, scholars have not reached a consensus over the definition of ‘world-class university’. As pointed out by Altbach (2015): ‘Everyone wants a world-class university. No country feels it can do without one. The problem is that no one knows what a world-class university is, and no one has figured out how to get one. Everyone, however, refers to the concept. A Google search, for example, produces thousands of references, and many institutions call themselves ‘world class’ – from relatively modest academic universities in central Canada to a new college in the Persian Gulf. This is an age of academic hype, with universities of different kinds and in diverse countries claiming this exalted status of world class – generally with little justification’ (5). Moreover, the notion of a ‘world-class university’ has become a common language in many Asian universities (Deem et al. 2008). The following section will critically examine the major strategies adopted by selected Asian countries to stimulate their domestic universities into achieving ‘world-class’ status.

### **Hong Kong: emphasis on research performance**

In positioning itself as a regional HE hub, the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has placed emphasis on research performance, as reflected by the research-led funding method it employed for grant distributions (Mok and Cheung 2011). Since the 1990s, HE in Hong Kong has undergone several Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs), which are modified from the UK approach to monitor the research performance of its HEIs. Specifically, for the universities, role differentiation has been required by the government in terms of different missions, specific strengths, and developing centres of research excellence. For academics, there are increasing pressures to participate in international research, establish global networks, provide qualified teaching, and contribute to professional and community services. Aside from the RAEs, the universities in Hong Kong have also

accepted Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews, Management Reviews, and University Governance Reviews to ensure the teaching quality and the efficiency of administration (Mok and Han 2016).

### **Taiwan: two key policy targets**

To improve the global profiles of Taiwan's HE sector, the Executive Yuan has proposed two main policy targets within five years: (1) more than one Taiwanese university shall be ranked in the top 100 universities in the world, and (2) at least 15 key departments or cross-university research centres shall be ranked among the top in Asia (Lu 2004). To fulfil these policy goals, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan and the National Science Council jointly promulgated the 'Program for Promoting Academic Excellence of Universities' to improve university infrastructures and invigorate their research capacities. Consequently, university league tables have been developed and there have been heated debates around the initiatives (Lo and Chan 2006; Chan and Mok 2016 forthcoming; Research Institute of Higher Education and University Evaluation 2005). For instance, although the Taiwan Social Science Citation Index (TSSCI) was established to appraise academic performance, the reality is that greater weight has long been placed on content in international publications as regards promotion and research evaluations (Chen and Lo 2007). Scholars in Taiwan strongly believe that these biased evaluation methods have undermined their academic freedom. The special funding support concentrated on selected universities has likewise been criticised as contributing to the further stratification of HEIs in Taiwan, with only a few benefitting from this emphasis on strategic development (Chou 2012).

### **China: the '211 Project' and the '985 Scheme'**

Following the same ideology of enhancing the global competitiveness of its domestic HEIs, the Chinese government has also concentrated its grants on a limited number of universities. These institutions were selected by two major projects, namely, the '211 Project' and '985 Scheme,' to demonstrate the strategic initiatives that can facilitate their transformation into 'world-class universities.' In particular, the government is attempting to develop 100 key universities and disciplines by means of targeted supplementary funding to improve the quality of teaching and research facilities in the '211 Project'. On the other hand, the '985 Scheme' seeks to transform China's elite universities [i.e., Beijing University (Peking University) and Tsinghua University] into super elites widely recognised in the world. More recently, the Chinese government has called for another wave of university enhancement

programmes by developing strategic research areas and leading academic/research programmes to compete globally and become leaders in selected disciplines and fields.

### **Japan: flagship universities project**

The increasing attention paid to the global ranking exercises has stimulated Japan's system leaders to engage in the same 'world-class university' campaign. Yonezawa (2007) states that the development of Japan's HE system has been extensively driven by strong national initiatives since the late nineteenth century, and the generous investments from the government have contributed considerably to the long dominance of Japanese universities in the top echelons of Asia Week's annual 'Asian University Rankings'. However, alarmed by its declining positions in both the regional and global university league tables, the Japanese government has allocated additional resources to promote international collaborations and student exchange programmes (Furushiro 2006; Yonezawa 2007), as represented by the launch of the 'Flagship Universities Project'. Similar to other Asian societies, academics in Japan have expressed their concerns over the sequential differentiation among Japanese universities.

### **Singapore: 'global schoolhouse' ambition**

To ensure its regional hub status, the Singaporean government has strategically identified the leading universities globally and invited them to set up their branch campuses in this city-state. In addition, the government has been actively promoting collaborations between world-renowned academics and local scholars (Gopinathan and Lee 2011; Tan 2016). Singapore's 'global schoolhouse' vision was outlined by the Ministry of Trade and Industry in a 2002 report, with a separate section highlighting the education industry. According to the policy target, the ministry claimed that 'Singapore was well-placed to gain a piece of the estimated US \$2.2 trillion world education market. An ambitious target of 150,000 international full-fee paying students was set for the year 2015, up from the then-estimated figure of 50,000' (cited in Tan 2016: 29). The Singapore government has been successful in convincing world-renowned institutions to establish their overseas campuses or offer programmes in collaboration with local institutions and thus make Singapore the 'Boston of the East'.

However, Tan points out that ‘right from its inception, the global schoolhouse initiative was plagued with various difficulties’ (Tan 2016: 30). Confronted with rising resistance from its citizens, who are criticising the government for bringing in too many overseas students to compete with the locals, the Singaporean government has been scaling down the project since 2014. Table 1 summarises the various schemes adopted by selected Asian governments to concentrate their resources into facilitating their domestic HEIs to become globally competitive.

Table 1: Different schemes in promoting world-class universities

Country/Region	Project
Hong Kong	Comprehensive Education Reviews; Role Differentiation Exercise; Positioning Hong Kong as an International Key Player in HE; University Merging and Deep Collaboration; Research Assessment Exercises; Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews; Management Reviews and University Governance Reviews
Taiwan	Programme for Promoting Academic Excellence of Universities; Five Year – 50 billion Excellence Initiative; Development Plan for World-class Universities and Research Centres for Excellence
China	‘211 Project’ and ‘985 Scheme’
Japan	Flagship Universities Project; ‘Global 30’ Scheme; Competitive Funding Allocation Method (the 21st Century Centres of Excellence; the Global Centres of Excellence; the World Premier International Research Centre Initiative)
Singapore	‘World-Class Universities’ Programme

Source: Cheng, Wang, and Liu, 2014; Mok, 2005.

The governments’ efforts to improve the global profiles of their universities have been well rewarded, as revealed in recent international university benchmarking exercises. In the Times Higher Education University Rankings (2015–2016), nine out of the top 10 universities in Asia ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide, with five universities listed in the top 50 in the world, including National University of Singapore (26), Peking University (42), University of Tokyo (43), University of Hong Kong (44), and Tsinghua University (47). Table 2 presents further details of the performance of Asian universities in various global university leagues. The ranking tables developed by QS and Times Higher Education illustrate the relatively advantageous positions of Asian universities from 2010 to 2015. Similarly, the Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking shows the rise of Asian universities during the last couple of years (Figure 4).

Table 2: Increase of Asian universities ranked in the top 100 in QS and Times University League (2010–2015)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
QS	NA	NA	19	17	17	19
Times	10	9	11	11	11	9

Source: QS World University Rankings (2011–2015), retrieved from <http://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings>; Times Higher Education World University Rankings (2010–2015), retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2016/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25>

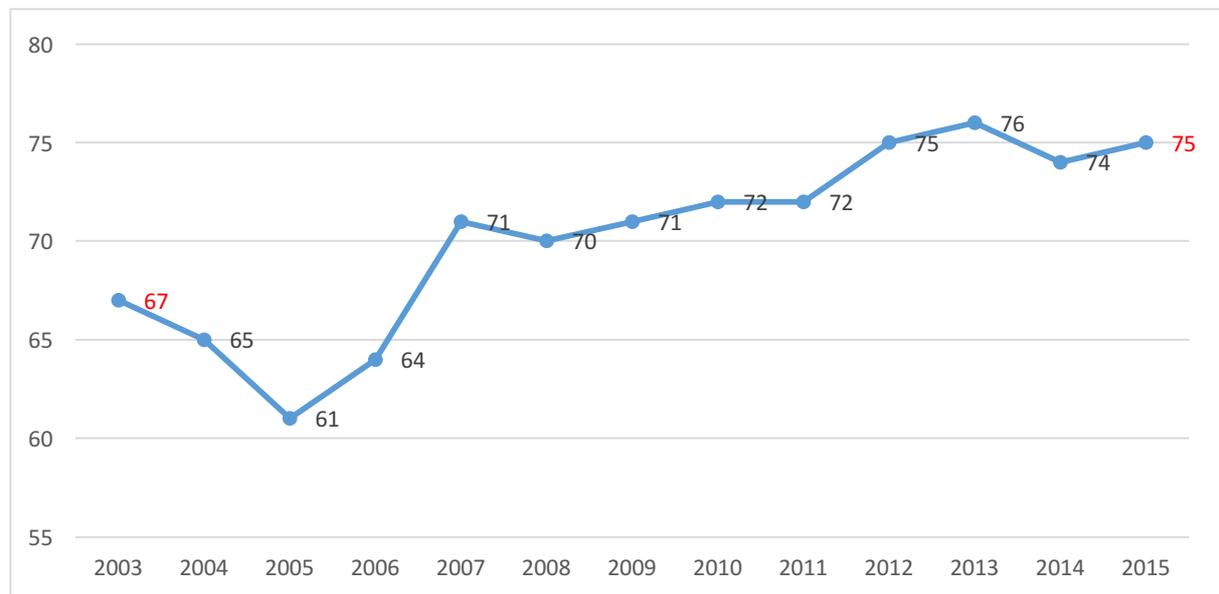


Figure 4: Increase in the number of Asian universities in the Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking

Source: Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities (2003–2015), retrieved from <http://www.shanghairanking.cn/ARWU2015.html>

In the case of Hong Kong, the capability of its eight public-funded universities was demonstrated by their advantageous positions in the world university ranking exercises (Table 3). In the academic year 2015/16, two out of eight Hong Kong universities ranked among the top 200 universities in the Academic Ranking of World Universities produced by Shanghai Jiaotong University, five out of eight in the QS ranking, and three out of eight in the Times ranking table. Although some swing may appear in the results owing to the different criteria employed by the ranking systems, the overall performance is satisfactory. Thus, the leading status in the region of Hong Kong’s universities has been ensured.

Table 3: World ranking of selected Hong Kong universities (2015/16)

Academic Ranking of World Universities (Top 400)	QS (Top 200)	Times (Top 250)

The Chinese University of Hong Kong (151–200)	The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (28)	The University of Hong Kong (44)
The University of Hong Kong (151–200)	The University of Hong Kong (30)	The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (59)
The City University of Hong Kong (201–300)	The Chinese University of Hong Kong (51)	The Chinese University of Hong Kong (138)
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (201–300)	The City University of Hong Kong (57)	The City University of Hong Kong (201–250)
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (301–400)	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (116)	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (201–250)

Source: *Shanghai Jiaotong Academic Ranking of World Universities (2015)*, retrieved from <http://www.shanghairanking.cn/ARWU2015.html>; *QS World University Rankings (2015)*, retrieved from <http://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings>; *Times HE World University Rankings (2015)*, retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2016/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25>

On the other hand, the outcomes of emphasis on research performance have also been distinct in the analytical articles published in one of the leading internationally refereed journals, namely, *Higher Education Policy*. A steady increase in the number of featured papers developed by scholars based in Asia can be observed. The comparison between the total number of articles contributed by Asian scholars and that of their counterparts in other areas of the world during the period 1988 to 2008 ranked Asia as third, preceded only by Europe and North America (Table 4).

As latecomers in the pursuit of world-class university status, HEIs in Asia have been demonstrating their fast emergence in the global ranking exercises. An increasing number of American scholars have expressed concerns about the waning roles played by American universities because of significant budget cuts, whereas their Asian colleagues appear optimistic about the prospects of the HE sector in Asia, especially when considering the generous investments made by their national governments. For instance, in *The New Asian Hemisphere*, Singaporean scholar and former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani states that the dramatic improvement of

education in Asia could lead to the shift of global power from the West to the East (Mok 2016a).

Table 4: Continents contributing to *Higher Education Policy* (1988–2013) (percentage between brackets)

Continent	1988– 1992	1993– 1997	1998– 2002	2003– 2007	2008–	Total
Australasia	6 (3)	22 (9)	18 (9)	17 (8)	25 (8)	88 (8)
Europe	102 (44)	81 (33)	87 (45)	88 (43)	153 (51)	511 (44)
North America	48 (21)	52 (21)	42 (22)	47 (23)	52 (17)	241 (21)
Asia	35 (15)	46 (19)	26 (13)	33 (16)	50 (17)	190 (16)
Latin America	18 (8)	16 (7)	10 (5)	3 (1)	2 (1)	49 (4)
Africa	18 (8)	27 (11)	12 (6)	16 (8)	17 (6)	90 (8)
Unknown	3 (1)					3 (<1)

Source: Adopted from Huisman 2013: 440.

## Under- and unemployment of graduates: expansion and world-class status for whose benefits?

Despite the remarkable achievements of Asian HE systems, including the widening access for candidates and the ascending international positions of selected universities, the rapid expansion in the last decade has caused various problems. These problems involve emerging issues over the academic standards and quality of universities in mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan (Mok 2013), and the intensifying inequality problems.

The enhanced access to tertiary education likewise cannot be equated to success in the labour market, as perceived by scholars in Europe during the stagnant period from the 1970s to the 1980s (Teichler 2001). The underemployment or even unemployment problems have haunted the central governments in these nations with rapid massified HE systems. In South Korea, three million economically inactive graduates are reported; in Japan, about 38 per cent of the Japanese graduates in 2009 could not find jobs even eight months after graduating. In China, although accurate data are difficult to obtain, it appears that in 2013, only 38 per cent of graduates could secure their first jobs as demonstrated by the issued contracts

(Lauder 2014). According to the statistics presented in Table 5 on graduate unemployment in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, these Asian countries are currently experiencing an unsettling increase in youth unemployment.

Table 5: Youth unemployment in Eastern Asia in 2013 (selected countries)

Country/ Area	Unemployment Rate
China (mainland)	Undergraduate 17.6% (two months after graduation) Undergraduates from Rural Areas 30.5%
Hong Kong	Youth Unemployment Rate (15–24) 9.1% Associate Degree 5.8% Undergraduate 3.8% Master or Above 4.2%
Taiwan	Junior High School 3.53% Senior High School 4.11% Junior College 3.11% Undergraduate 5.81% Postgraduates 3.29%
Singapore	Degree holders 2.8% Graduates with Diploma and Professional Qualifications 2.7% Students below-secondary 2.4%
South Korea (2015)	Youth Unemployment Rate (15–24) 10.5%
Japan (2015)	Youth Unemployment Rate (15–24) 5.6%

Source:

*China (mainland): MyCOS 2013; Hong Kong:*

*<http://news.takungpao.com.hk/hkol/education/2013-06/1687142.html>; Taiwan:*

*<http://www.edu.tw/pages/detail.aspx?Node=4076&Page=20047&Index=5&WID=31d75a44-eff-4c44-a075-15a9eb7aecdf>; Singapore:*

*<http://www.straitstimes.com/news/opinion/more-opinion-stories/story/growing-concerns-over-graduate-employment-20140905>;*

*South Korea and Japan: UNESCO database, retrieved from*

*<https://data.oecd.org/unemp/youth-unemployment-rate.htm>*

As the function of education in upward social mobility is being challenged, academics have become skeptical about the value of education and introspective about the beneficiaries during the period of HE expansion and the pursuit of world-class status. Education may contribute to income increase and social mobility in a

less globalised and elite HE system, but not in the current period highlighted by globalisation and massification, or even the universal access to tertiary education.

Clearly, current degrees are failing to assure employment, high earnings, and upward social mobility for graduates both in developed and emerging economies. Moreover, even though Asian countries have demonstrated their potency in building world-class universities, almost three quarters of entering cohorts come from the highest socioeconomic quartile in these top-tier HEIs. The above discussion has inevitably led to questions about international benchmarking: (1) In whose images are we conducting the imitation? (2) Are we pursuing world-class status at the expense of diversification? (3) How can we prevent the stratification of universities caused by the unequal distribution of funding and the sequential inequality among different social classes? (4) How can we protect our own local culture and heritage?

Academics in Asia must review their HE systems and explore more practical strategies for achieving sustainable development. Several issues deserve more attention when (1) discussing policy learning, which cannot be simplified as policy copying; (2) identifying and sharing good practices, which require consideration of the contextualisation; (3) carefully adapting international benchmarking; (4) honoring and reinventing local cultures, practices, and traditions to solve globalised problems; and (5) elaborating the role differentiation and fit-for-purpose education in discussing the sustainability in HE. The following part of this paper uses Lingnan University, one of the top liberal arts colleges in Asia named by Forbes in 2015, to offer detailed information on the future development of Asian universities.

## **‘Fit-for-purpose’: the role of a liberal arts university in Asia:**

### **Lingnan University’s experiences**

The definition proposed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities describe liberal education as an approach that ‘provides both broad knowledge in a variety of areas of study and knowledge in a specific major or field of interest. It also helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as intellectual and practical skills that span all areas of study, such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings’ (2). Ranked as one of the top 10 liberal arts colleges in Asia, Lingnan University is renowned for its ‘whole-person’ education, research performance, featured teaching quality, and the high employment rate of its graduates.

## **Whole-person development**

Committed to cultivating the students' whole-person development through exceptional teaching, learning, scholarship, and community engagement, Lingnan University offers a broad scope of courses, including professional training, general education, language learning, and information technology literacy. In addition, this university incorporates classroom learning with hostel life and campus activities, thereby developing the capabilities of students in critical thinking, aesthetic appreciation, leadership strategies, social skills, and ethical values. As determined by David Oxtoby, the president of Pomona College in California, educators today are preparing young people to work in jobs and industries that may no longer exist in another 10 or 15 years. Thus, many liberal arts graduates are embarking on cutting-edge fields essential for future success (Mok 2016b).

## **Research and knowledge transfer**

Research performance is another prominent aspect of a university's achievements. Convinced that research enriches both the scholar and student learning, Lingnan University has aligned its emphasis on the development of research and knowledge transfer. In the 2014 RAE, the research performance of Lingnan University was rated by an international review panel as internationally competitive to that of other local universities, with some areas comparing favourably internationally. Figures 5 and 6 below indicate Lingnan University's standing in the social sciences and humanities.

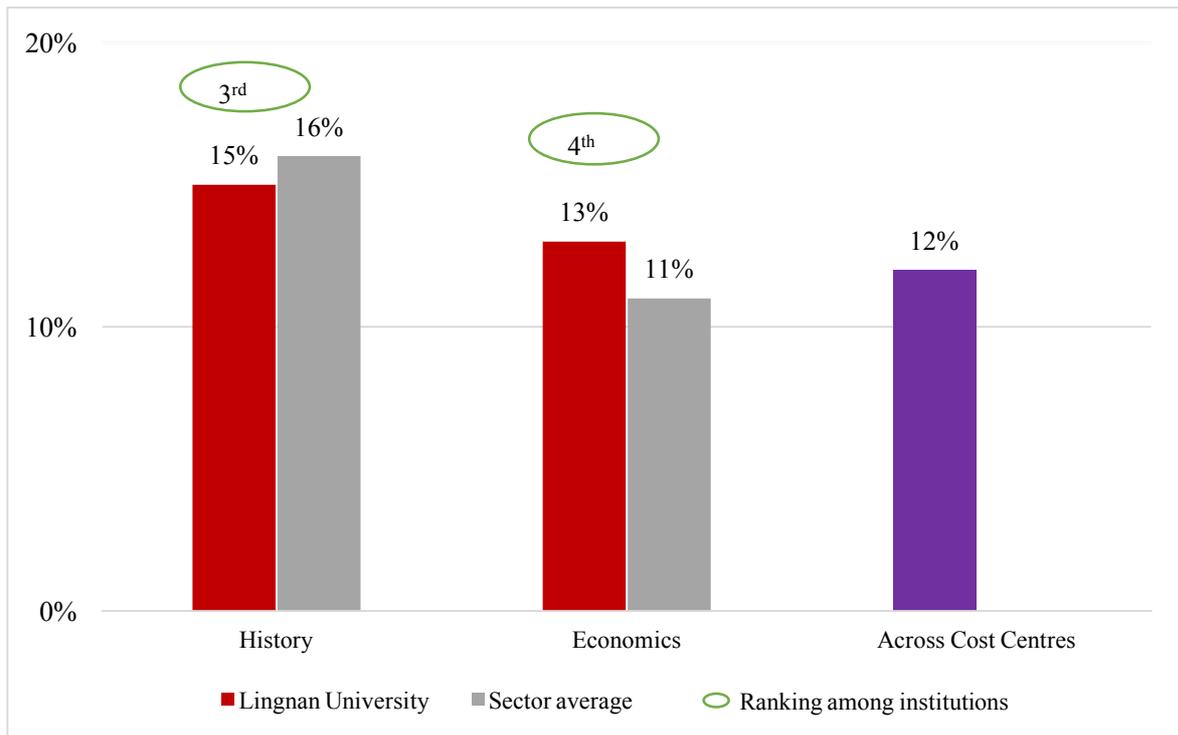


Figure 5 RAE 2014: Output of Lingnan University relative to that of other institutions worldwide.

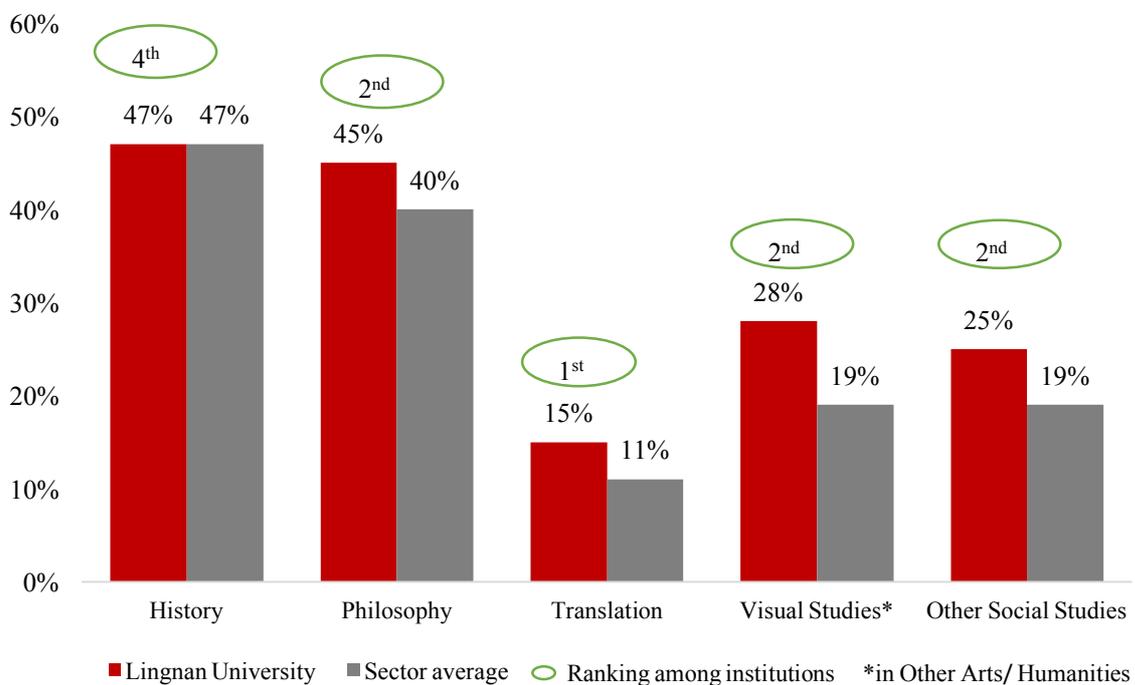


Figure 6 RAE 2014: Output of Lingnan University relative to that of 4-star (world leading) and 3-star (internationally recognised) institutions

Source: Data obtained from the report by the Office of Research Support, Lingnan University, 2016.

Lingnan University is aware of the importance of international research collaboration and has, therefore, been actively establishing platforms for local and international scholars to cooperate on diversified research issues. Its collaborations include the Centre for Global Higher Education, and a partnership with 10 globally leading HEIs to co-organise an international postgraduate summer school and international conference in 2016. The latter international research and student exchange platform has enhanced the university's research capacity and expanded students' learning opportunities, according to participants' testimony.

## **Excellence in teaching quality and student learning**

To promote the teaching and learning performance of eight publically funded HEIs, the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) conducted an audit from 2008 to 2011:

- To ensure that the quality of educational experience in all first-level degree programmes and above, however funded, offered in UGC-funded (University Grants Committee) institutions is sustained and improved and is at an internationally competitive level.
- To encourage institutions to excel in this area of activity. (UGC 2007)

Specifically, during the audit, fitness-for-purpose was encouraged. With respect to the distinct role of different institutions, the audit measured the institutional performance in accordance with its mission statement, rather than a unified standard. Lingnan University underwent its second QAC audit in January 2016. Based on a self-evaluation report and site visit, the international audit panel commended the university's small classes and close relationships between staff and students (QAC 2016).

## **High-quality graduates**

As previously discussed, graduates in the Asia-Pacific region are currently suffering from under- or unemployment after leaving their alma maters. Even though the principles for liberal arts colleges do not cultivate students to become experts in a specific area, the employment rate of Lingnan University graduates is optimistic, consistently exceeding 95 per cent (with one exception in 2012), higher than the average ratio among young people in Hong Kong (94.7 per cent). In 2014, 50.6 per cent of Lingnan University graduates had received a job offer within one month of graduation, while 24.7 per cent had jobs within one to two months. On average,

every graduate employed full-time can be accepted by two employers for full-time occupations (Graduate Employment Survey 2014). The QAC thus rates Lingnan University as creating an enriching learning environment for students to transform their learning experiences.

In other words, the strengths of Lingnan University rest on its belief in role differentiation, which drives the whole institution to strive for different educational experiences for its students. Unlike other performance-oriented HEIs, its whole-person direction compels the faculty to keep the balance between teaching and research tasks, thereby ensuring the students' learning experiences. The distinguished performance in research outputs serves to establish its leading status both locally and internationally, and its strong relationship with world-renowned universities promises more international collaborations. Considering the increasing interest shown in Asia in general, and mainland China in particular, Lingnan University has repositioned itself as the leading liberal arts college not only in Hong Kong, but in Asia as well, distinguished by its outstanding teaching, learning, scholarship, and community engagement. However, Lingnan University also suffers from some disadvantages as a liberal arts college with a relatively small size, and insufficient understanding and appreciation of liberal arts education locally and regionally.

The undesirable outcomes brought by massive expansion in HE and the blind pursuit of world-class status have jointly compelled scholars to re-assess the value of education and explore ways to facilitate graduates becoming globally competitive, capable of surviving local challenges, and adapting to an ever-changing environment. Having critical reflections of the purpose of higher education, liberal arts education provides a learning environment for preparing students to pursue enduring goals with adaptive practice for an interconnected world. Preparing youth to handle increasingly complex global issues, liberal arts education is organised to foster big picture and comparative knowledge across global boundaries and borderlands. With a strong conviction to enhance the powers of the mind, liberal arts education reconceives teaching students to think deeply and work collaboratively across cultural boundaries and differences.

By putting such strategic visions into practice in higher education, liberal arts education nurtures caring leaders with ethical and civic responsibilities (Schneider 2016). The case of Lingnan University, the only liberal arts university in Hong Kong, aspiring to become a leading liberal arts university in Asia, has implemented a novel mission to nurture students with a global vision. With the distinctive role and mission promoting liberal arts education and well-rounded development not only in Hong

Kong, as well as the growing interest in establishing and revitalising liberal arts education in Asia (Jung, Nishimura, and Sasao 2016), I hope the discussion above could offer an alternative approach in terms of HE development. The aim is to provide diversified pathways in addressing graduate unemployment, stagnation in social mobility, and the pursuit for global university ranking.

## **Going beyond ranking: international engagement and research collaboration in Asia and the Pacific**

Confronted by the ever-intensified competition in the world market, both national governments and universities have paid great attention to their global profiles, as demonstrated by the world-class ranking exercises. However, the ensuing problems, such as high under- or unemployment rate, stale social mobility, and aggravating inequality, have alerted researchers and policymakers to the value of education. The limited positions on the top of league tables are causing a large proportion of HEIs to lose out in this championship. How to sustain the useful development of Asian universities, instead of being stuck in the rat race, and benefit the graduates at the same time have become the paramount questions.

The case study of Lingnan University, or from a broader perspective, considering universities in Hong Kong as a case in point, has clearly illustrated the importance of international engagements. Establishing a global research and knowledge transfer network is conducive for academics to collect and compare data in the fields of shared interest and identify good practices for further learning and modification. The active participation in international collaboration is one of the reasons for Hong Kong universities' good performance in global league tables. In particular, academics in Hong Kong proactively engage in both domestic and international collaboration on the basis of their capability to produce high-quality articles published in international refereed journals (Tables 6 to 8). Considering the geographical proximity, close bond, and relatively similar cultural and historical backgrounds, the collaboration among Asian countries may produce more fruitful outcomes than we currently perceive. The solutions to the consequences accompanied by the rapid expansion and the eagerness of pursuing world-class profiles can be easily figured out if policymakers, university administrators, and academics work closely together from a comparative and interdisciplinary angle.

Table 6: Collaboration among academics from 19 HE systems (2007–08) (%)

	Collaboration	Domestic collaboration	International collaboration
Canada	84	69	64
USA	78	61	33
Finland	88	68	70
Germany	68	64	50
Italy	82	77	59
Netherlands	88	64	63
Norway	82	60	66
Portugal	63	69	54
UK	82	67	61
Australia	89	67	59
Japan	62	52	24
Korea	75	65	30
<b>Hong Kong, China</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>60</b>
China	73	37	13
Malaysia	85	55	32
Argentina	88	69	47
Brazil	58	45	28
Mexico	66	47	35
South Africa	54	45	41

Source: Postiglione 2013: 354

Note: %, proportion of 'yes' respondents in each question.

Research collaboration: Do you have collaborators in any of your research projects?

Table 7: Research collaboration for academics in Asian systems of HE (2007–08) (%)

	Japan	Korea	<b>Hong Kong, China</b>	China	Malaysia
International collaboration	24	30	<b>60</b>	13	32
Co-authored with foreign colleagues	31	28	<b>49</b>	3	27

Published in a foreign country	42	53	<b>86</b>	28	49
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Source: Postiglione 2013: 354

Note: %, proportion of 'yes' respondents in each question.

International collaboration: Do you collaborate with international colleagues?

- Co-authored with foreign colleagues: Have you ever published a co-authored paper with colleagues located in other (foreign) countries in the last three years?

- Published in a foreign country: Have you ever published a paper in a foreign country in the last three years?

Table 8: Collaboration on co-authored journal publications in six Asian countries/regions

	<b>Hong Kong, China</b>	Indonesia	Malaysia	Singapore	Philippines	Vietnam
Number of articles (Total)	<b>10,542</b>	1,129	7,749	9,426	940	1,409
Number of authors (Total)	<b>31,721</b>	4,363	20,715	29,791	3,939	5,768
Number of authors (Domestic / Local)	<b>15,439</b>	1,563	12,665	14,890	1,310	1,959
Number of non-local co-authors	<b>China (7,578)</b> <b>USA (2,724)</b> <b>Australia (815)</b> <b>UK (615)</b> <b>Canada (504)</b> <b>Taiwan (473)</b> <b>Singapore (376)</b>	Japan (555) USA (323) Australia (276) Malaysia (259) Netherlands (175) Germany (130) UK (117)	England (650) India (639) Australia (632) USA (576) Japan (525) Iran (524) Saudi Arabia	USA (3,709) China (2,426) Australia (1,155) UK (854) Germany (586) Japan (552) France (537)	USA (580) Japan (262) Australia (144) UK (128) South Korea (119) Germany (107) China (97)	USA (449) Japan (379) South Korea (332) France (259) Italy (241) Germany (216) UK (165)

## **Conclusion: broader policy implications**

This study has critically examined the major attributes of the development of HE systems in selected Asian countries. The above discussion has highlighted their major achievements in producing additional learning opportunities in tertiary education for citizens, ascending in global league tables, and publishing high-quality journal articles internationally. However, we also have to be cautious about the negative effects that have been emerging in the past few decades. The mismatch between the university and the labour market, the stratification among HEIs, and the possible loss of national identity have been attracting increasing attention from both researchers and policymakers. Drawing from Lingnan University's case study, I argue for the re-assessment of HE provision and the meanings of global ranking. Various questions have emerged, such as (1) For whose benefit are universities eager to improve their international fame? (2) Are the students rewarded by their investments in tertiary education? (3) Have we over-standardised higher education development when questing for global university ranking without providing sufficient alternative pathways addressing diversified learning needs of students?

Lingnan University in particular, and HEIs in Hong Kong in general, as analysed above, demonstrate the importance of role differentiation and fit-for-purpose education. While catering to the increasing call for more global integration and closer international connection, local needs should also be taken into serious consideration. Engaging in community services and promoting knowledge transfer are thus becoming imperatives for academics in the current circumstances.

We should not simply count universities as tools to meet economic demands and serve GDP growth, but also as places to cultivate students to become compassionate leaders with international and regional perspectives, broad-based education, and professional skills to handle increasingly complex problems or issues (Mok 2016b). The growing importance of liberal arts in fostering this kind of talent should not be ignored. Lastly, international collaboration in the academe should be promoted to enable researchers from diversified backgrounds, with various expertise, and located in different locations, to jointly explore the common but impending issues regarding HE from different perspectives.

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