CENTRE FOR GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION

Centre for Global Higher Education working paper series

Hong Kong universities: navigating in unknown waters

Hugo Horta, William Yat Wai Lo

Working paper no. 60
March 2021

Published by the Centre for Global Higher Education,
Department of Education, University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY
www.researchcghe.org

ISSN 2398-564X

The Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) is an international research centre focused on higher education and its future development. Our research aims to inform and improve higher education policy and practice.

CGHE is a research partnership of 10 UK and international universities, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, with support from Office for Students and Research England.

Hong Kong universities: navigating in unknown waters

Hugo Horta, William Yat Wai Lo

Contents

Hong Kong universities: navigating in unknown waters

Hugo Horta, William Yat Wai Lo

Hugo Horta is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education of the University of Hong Kong. horta@hku.hk

William Yat Wai Lo is an Associate Professor and the Associate Head of the Department of International Education at the Education University of Hong Kong.

Abstract

Since mid-2019, Hong Kong society was shaken by a social movement, which divided the society of Hong Kong into two sides. The social movement results from a mix of political, economic, cultural, and social tensions that have been gradually building across the years. As intense clashes between protesters and police occurred on university campuses, people have an impression that university students played an active role in the protests. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the territory, later the world, affecting universities as well. How did these changes influence the stability, characteristics, enrollment, and development of universities in Hong Kong? This paper argues that demonstrations were not new to the territory, and that Hong Kong universities even benefited from them. It also argues that the two crises – the social movement in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in opposing impacts to Hong Kong universities. Finally, the paper suggests that Hong Kong universities are expected to remain resilient in the future, but critical values of Hong Kong universities need to be preserved to ensure the continuation of their current prestige, internationalization, and networking centrality in the region.

Keywords: Hong Kong; protests; National Security Law; COVID-19 pandemic

Acknowledgment: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council grants ES/M010082/2; and ES/P005292/1

Introduction

In recent decades, universities in Hong Kong have been getting noticed worldwide, acclaimed as dynamic poles of global and regional scholarly dynamics. This is due to several reasons. Their location in a territory of crossroads where European, North American, and Australian economic, social, and cultural dimensions interact with East Asian, particularly Chinese, counterparts. Hong Kong universities are strongly internationalized in their activities and are long participants of global scholarly communities. Their academic staff and students are known for a heterogeneity of nationalities and educational backgrounds, integrating both local, regional and global networks. The fact that English language is commonly used in the territory and at universities contributes substantially for this high level of internationalization of Hong Kong academia (Postiglione, 2013). The same is true concerning publication dynamics since the publishing is done in English and targeting international peer-reviewed publications and wider audiences (Choi, 2010). The territory is a regional center of knowledge networks. The universities are institutionally diverse, sharing some commonalities, but with different strategies and focuses. Their academics are extremely adaptable, working in the ultimate capitalist neoliberal society, in stress-driven performativity workplaces, where evaluation frameworks prevail. The Hong Kong higher education system is often perceived as a successful and stable, and highly embedded in global trends affecting higher education. The government use of policy borrowing policies ensures that the evaluation of academics and universities follow the considered best international standards (Li & Li, 2021). For example, Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise is to a large extent an emulation of both the former Research Assessment Exercise and current Research Excellence Framework in Britain. Tenure systems at Hong Kong universities emulate to a large extent the same systems in leading US universities. The same is valid for other aspects of higher education governance and evaluation, including quality assurance and accreditation (Chan, 2017).

In this context, it was probably unexpected – even shocking – for many living outside Hong Kong when they came across news that universities in Hong Kong were turned into battlegrounds where students erected barricades and clashed with police forces.

Images of protests in the streets and the occupation for several days of the city's airport predated these news and images, and some exaggeration in the reporting gave the impression that the city was in a state of siege. Since mid-2019, Hong Kong society was shaken by a social movement, which divided the society of Hong Kong into two sides. One side, aligned with the government of the territory and the actions of the police – called blue camp, and other side, reclaiming five demands that the government opposed – called yellow camp. Although peaceful for some time, several events and actions escalated the situation leading to violent confrontations (Purbrick, 2019). Although coming to boiling point in 2019, the social movement results from a mix of political, economic, cultural, and social tensions that have been gradually building across the years (Veg, 2017; Kwong, 2018). As intense clashes between protestors and police occurred on university campuses, people have an impression that university students had an active role in the protests, or even started it. This may have been further perceived by global broadcasts reporting mainland students living in university residencies feeling unsafe and leaving university campuses, returning to the mainland. Suddenly, ideas may have formed that the international, stable, and prestigious universities of the territory were no more or were facing decline. The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic hitting the territory in early 2020, and later the world, affecting universities as well, may have compounded this perception (Lo, 2020a). The question to be raised is: How did these crises influence the stability, characteristics, enrollment, and the future development of universities in Hong Kong? We argue that demonstrations were not new to the territory, and that Hong Kong universities even sometimes even benefited from them. We also argue that the two crises – the social movement in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in opposing impacts to Hong Kong universities. Finally, we argue that Hong Kong universities are expected to remain resilient in the future, but critical values of Hong Kong universities need to be preserved to ensure the continuation of their current prestige, internationalization, and networking centrality in the region.

This paper is organized as follows: in the next section we provide a brief historical evolution of the Hong Kong higher education system and universities. This historical evolution is relevant to understand the progress and current situation of Hong Kong universities. Then, we discuss the impact of the crises of 2019 and 2020 in the

universities, academic work, activities, and outputs. The final conclusion summarizes our main thoughts and cautions for the future development of the Hong Kong higher education system.

Brief evolution of Hong Kong higher education

Hong Kong's higher education system rise to global prominence, particularly through the placement of its universities in the group of leading universities, is remarkable. In Europe the first modern universities appeared in the middle-ages, in the Americas in the 16th century, and in Australasia, mostly in the 19th century (Rüegg, 1992). Comparatively, the first modern university in the territory, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) was founded in 1911, at the start of the 20th century. From 1911 up to 1963, HKU was the only university in the territory, and arguably it is difficult to state that Hong Kong had a higher education system until the 1960s. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was established in 1963, and until the 1990s, there were only 2 universities funded by the Universities Grant Committee. The higher education system only started to develop fast in the 1990s: The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology was founded in 1991, while Polytechnic University and Baptist University were granted university status in 1994, Lingnan University in 1999, and only recently the Education University of Hong Kong in 2016. These are the universities supported by government funds, but self-financing higher education institutions are also present, most also established in or after the 1990s (Lo, 2020b).

Considering the above institutional evolution, it is not surprising that up to the late 1980s, Hong Kong was characterized as an elite higher education system, which accelerated the process of massification since the 1990s, and became a universal higher education system after 2007 (using Martin Trow's taxonomy). The fast development in the later period of the 20th century was related to a growing demand for higher education and the government embrace of human capital and endogenous growth theories to use education as a formal learning activity that would be capable to promote economic transformation. This transformation related to promote

economic growth through having a larger segment of the population with higher educational qualifications and to transition from an industry-based economy to a high-end service economy in finance, insurance, retail and tourism. While the low and mid-technology industrial capacity that the territory had moved to Shenzhen and other locations in Mainland China in the 1980s and early 1990s, the territory kept its role as a commodity trade hub and key entry port into China (Baark & So, 2006).

In the context of this fast evolution, it can come as a surprise that Hong Kong manages to have 4 universities in the top 20 Times Higher Education Asia University Rankings, and always 3 to 4 universities in the top 100 top world university rankings. This is further surprising for the fact that most of the public funding universities were for most of their existence teaching universities, that underwent a process of institutional change to become increasingly research oriented. Currently, most of these universities are still in this changing process. However, these universities also benefited from several factors that allowed them to be transformed and increasingly networked, and research intensive and visible. The fact that English is an official language in the territory leads most of its academics to publish in English language journals. The academic staff at universities is also highly internationalized, with several international academics working at universities in Hong Kong – even if with substantial variations in number and percentage – and most being awarded their doctorates by universities in North America, Europe, and Oceania (Postiglione, 2013). This relates to the capacity of Hong Kong universities to attract and maintain talented human capital worldwide, not only by providing good salaries but also an internationalized, autonomous working environment that requires little to no adaptation, and the power to contribute to scholarly and institutional development. A culture of cooperation and competition associated to academic freedom and autonomy coupled with being a regional/global science network pole with an internationalist perspective, creates a virtuous cycle that places Hong Kong universities at the center of East Asian scholarly networks and knowledge production (Postiglione, 2013; Altbach & Postiglione, 2015). This is boosted by the complete capitalist rationale that prevails in Hong Kong: one is recognized for what one produces, and one needs to produce more to show that one is competitive (Mok & Cheung, 2011). Everything in Hong Kong academic is rooted in often accelerated

and complementary – sometimes also opposing – combinations of collaboration and competition. Hong Kong universities assumed managerialism and performativity as guiding mantras, and this is something that makes sense in a capitalist society where one is responsible for one's successes and failures (Macfarlane, 2017). Recent findings showed that the more stress academics have in Hong Kong the more satisfied and greater institutional commitment they have (Horta et al., 2019), which suggests that those academics that stay at Hong Kong universities are those that can handle its competitive system.

The Hong Kong government draws heavily on policy borrowing, mainly from the UK system (The research funding institution is called RGC – Research Grants Committee which will be familiar to UK academics) and the US higher education system (the tenure track system for example). Systemic evaluations, reforms and assessments are a constant in the higher education system. Yet, the funding to do research is relatively low. The territory investment in knowledge is lagging and still below, even if close to the 1% of the GDP invested in knowledge (GERD), and the research budget of Hong Kong universities pales in comparison with its counterparts in China Mainland (Wang, 2018). One can argue that the sustainability of the academic knowledge capacity of universities in Hong Kong are the extreme working capacity of academics, their effectiveness and the professionalism of the technical and administrative staff supporting their work, and the critical environmental and institutional characteristics and incentives, that include: competition, collaboration, academic autonomy and freedom, cosmopolitanism, and international focus (Postiglione & Jung, 2017).

Recent crises

In 2019, the social movement also known as the "Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement", erupted, first as a peaceful event, then escalated to become more violent that impacted universities in the territory. It is important to mention three facts here before discussing its impact on the universities. First, the protests that were seen in the past year, were not new, and in some cases led to an actual

development of the city. For instance, the social reforms in the 1970s were considered the outcomes of disturbances and riots in 1966 and 1967. Though many of the social welfare initiatives were initiated before the 1967 riots, the social unrest forced the British colonial government to reformulate the overarching perspective of how Hong Kong was to be governed (Yep & Lui, 2010). For the impact of the 2019 protests, it is too soon to say. Second, this was not a movement started by university students or university student associations, but due to evolution of the crisis, some universities became battlegrounds and some of them suffered badly from it. Because of the latter, there may be a global impression that students were leading it. Actually, there was no one leading the 2019 protest and decision seemed to be taken communally in social media. The protests were marked by actions similar to guerrilla and attrition warfare. Thus, the movement was considered leaderless and diverse (Purbrick, 2019). Third, the protests were not about demanding the independence of Hong Kong from the People's Republic of China. Yet, given the gradual rise of localism in the city in recent years, the 2019 protests (as well as the 2014 movement) are considered a sign of growing separatist tendencies by the Chinese authorities (Pang & Jiang, 2019).

The causes for the events of 2019 are multiple and seem to relate to a complex web of social and economic inequalities, geopolitical and local positioning and politics, but also to matters of culture and identity, losers and winners, and expectations that failed to be met (Veg, 2017; Kwong, 2018). The events of 2019 were a cause of significant concern for university managers and academics. Academics were stressed and concerned because they were worried with the safety of students (those that may be participating in the protests; and those who could be the targets of protests). Academics were cautious to talk about what was happening because it was clear that there were colleagues supporting opposite camps. Since emotions were so extreme, it was difficult to debate rationally. It is important to say that the 2019 protests led to divorces, splits in families, friends stopped talking to each other, some shops stopped having little to no clients because the owners took a side, among other similar phenomena. Some academics, students, and population in general supporting the blue camp (i.e. the government), others the yellow camp (i.e. demanding reforms to the government). It was an extremely divisive and

heartbreaking moment in the life of the city because the feeling was of an eminent sort of civil war, the end of a cycle, and possible decline of the city (perhaps too soon to really consider it). It was the kind of phenomenon that could not be avoided, and from informal conversations with colleagues, it was clear that the vast majority of the academic staff spent large parts of the day in front of the computer refreshing pages or watching live streams of the confrontations. The reasons were the same, watching out of concern for the people involved, for what it meant to the city, and for what the consequences would be in the short, mid and long run. It was all disrupting to academic work, and definitely a crisis, and university leaders tried their best to manage a situation that was obviously out of control.

The crisis of 2019 damage to the universities in Hong Kong was less than initially believed, except for the Polytechnic University and CUHK, which suffered substantial physical damage particularly the former. There was a fear that non-local students would stop coming (both those from Mainland and international students), that the talented prospective academics and researchers would find the city too dangerous (given protests on the television) or a risky choice (and this could have been the case due to the enactment of the National Security Law, and potential concerns regarding academic autonomy and freedom), and that the prestige of Hong Kong universities would be diminished. However, one year and a half past, the number of applicants from Mainland and abroad are increasing (possibly a result of the pandemic). One of the authors when interviewing applicants to a master program in 2019 was told expressly that they would come independently of the situation in Hong Kong. In terms of research, academics continued to collaborate globally and producing research, and the university autonomy and academic freedom have not been constrained, despite concerns raised by academics in the territory (Silver, 2020). The ordinance about academic freedom in Hong Kong is still in place. If one thinks of the institutional autonomy in terms of the leadership of universities, this may be interpreted different, but it is mostly related to the fallout of the Occupy Central Movement. Given that university students and some academics were actively engaged in the movement and that the movement was seen as an indication of rising separatist tendencies, the Chinese authorities have drawn political red lines against the spread and infiltration of Hong Kong independence on university campuses

(Law, 2019). In the case of HKU, Johannes Chan, a pro-democracy activist and lawyer, apparently was blocked from the position for the post of pro-vice-chancellor for staffing and resources of HKU; Arthur Li, current member of the Executive Council and former Education Secretary of the Hong Kong Government, was appointed to chair the HKU university council, which became more active to assert control over the situation; Benny Tai, one of the three organizers of Occupy Central was fired from the Faculty of Law due to his involvement in the movement; and finally the appointment of the current Vice-Chancellor, Xiang Zhang, a Chinese national from Mainland which took many by surprise. These incidents and appointments may present the indirect and gradual ways adopted by the Chinese government to tackle dissent at universities in Hong Kong (Huang, 2019).

The introduction of the National Security Law brought some concerns at Hong Kong's universities. At HKU, the Dean of the Faculty of Law and a member of the Senior Management Team set a meeting with academics from all the Faculties to explain what it is. They assured academics that it would not be overly problematic, but some grey areas remain. From the explanations, it seemed that in terms of what can be published, business as usual, but probably one needs to be more careful if one goes to the newspapers with political views or gets involved in local politics (more bound to affect academics that are from Hong Kong, since many of the newspapers, radio and television shows are in Cantonese), or with what one says in class. It is not so much about what one says, but rather how what one says can be interpreted by students leading them to commit specific actions. The concern is that this may lead to greater levels of self-censorship, and this is something that requires a broader discussion because self-censorship is an increasing threat to academic freedom and speech worldwide (Burns, 2020). Meanwhile, university management has become more sensitive to the nature and contents of student activities on campuses. Such a sensitive attitude towards student activities emerged in the context that controversial incidents on political issues happened at Hong Kong's universities in recent years. As university management believed radical student activism would harm the universities' reputation, they saw the rise of student activism as a kind of risk to be managed (Lo, forthcoming). Nevertheless, the introduction of the National Security Law changes the nature of the issue from managing

reputational risk to avoiding legal liability. In this changing circumstance, CUHK decided to cut ties with its student union and impose strict measures on its members, as the student union executive committee made claims, which could be in breach of the National Security Law; the members of the executive committee resigned afterwards.

The COVID-19 crisis hit next and completely unexpectedly. So unexpectedly and quickly that in October 2019, the government banning for wearing masks in public (the reason was for the police to be able to identify the most radical protesters in the 2019 social movement), was quickly reversed to make the population mandatorily wear masks. The pandemic effect on HK universities was relatively minor because universities were on crisis management since 2019. This was just a new crisis coming as the other was abating. The effects of the pandemic in HK universities is similar to what happened in other countries (Jung et al., 2021) and may have been even beneficial to HK universities because Hong Kong has a relatively low number of cases, and also because concurrently Australia become a no-go country for Mainland Chinese students, same with the US, while in the UK the pandemic seems to be less controlled. This made Hong Kong to be a safe haven for Mainland Chinese students (and to other students as well), and this is perceived by the growing number of applications.

Conclusion

Considerable uncertainty persists about the future of the territory and the future of the universities. However, as long as the fundamentals that bring talented people to come to Hong Kong to work (academics and others) are guaranteed, including academic autonomy and freedom concerning teaching and research, and if there is a more serious public investment in knowledge activities – including especially academic research – then Hong Kong universities will be here to stay and continue to have an important role in East Asian Higher education.

References

Altbach P. G. and Postiglione, G. A. (2015) Hong Kong's academic advantage, *International Higher Education*, 66(winter): 22–27.

Baark, E. and So, A.Y. (2006) The political economy of Hong Kong's quest for higher technology innovation, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 36(1): 102–120.

Burns, J. P. (2020) The state and higher education in Hong Kong, *China Quarterly*, 244, 1030–1055.

Chan, C. K. Y. (2017) Professional development and quality assurance in teaching and learning for Hong Kong higher education, in Postiglione, G.A. and Jung, J. (eds.) *The Changing Academic Profession in Hong Kong*. Singapore: Springer, 109–123.

Choi, P. K. (2010) 'Weep for Chinese university': A case study of English hegemony and academic capitalism in higher education in Hong Kong, *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(2), 233–252.

Horta, H., Jung, J., Zhang, L.F., and Postiglione, G. (2019) Academics' job-related stress and institutional commitment in Hong Kong universities, *Tertiary Education and Management*, 25(4): 327–348.

Huang, F. (2019) Will China tighten constraints on Hong Kong universities? *Higher Education in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, 6: 37–39.

Jung, J., Horta, H., and Postiglione, G.A. (2021) Living in uncertainty: the COVID-19 pandemic and higher education in Hong Kong, *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(1): 107–120.

Kwong, Y.-H. (2018) Political repression in a sub-national hybrid regime: The PRC's governing strategies in Hong Kong, *Contemporary Politics*, 24(4): 361–378.

Law, W. W. (2019) *Politics, Managerialism and University Governance: Lessons from Hong Kong under China's Rule since 1997*. Singapore: Springer.

Li, D. & Li, Y. (2021) Preparing for RAE 2020 in Hong Kong: Academics' research, writing and publishing trajectories in a neoliberal governance landscape, *Studies in Higher Education*, advance online publication.

Lo, W.Y.W. (2020a) A year of change for Hong Kong: From east-meets-east to east-clashes-with-west, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 39(7): 1362–1366.

Lo, W.Y.W. (2020b) Higher education system and institutions, Hong Kong, in Teixeira, P. N. and Shin, J. C. (eds.) *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions*, Dordrecht: Springer, 1109–1115.

Lo, W.Y.W. (forthcoming) Vulnerable autonomy: University governance in the context of student activism in Hong Kong, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*.

Macfarlane, B. (2017) Publication and performativity, in Postiglione, G.A. and Jung, J. (eds.) *The Changing Academic Profession in Hong Kong*. Singapore: Springer, 97–108.

Mok, K. H. and Cheung, A. B. L. (2011) Global aspirations and strategising for world-class status: New form of politics in higher education governance in Hong Kong, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 33(3): 231–251.

Pang A. and Jiang, F. (2019) Hong Kong's growing separatist tendencies against China's rise: Comparing mainland and Hong Kong college students' national identities, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 48(1): 3–28.

Postiglione, G. A. (2013) Anchoring globalization in Hong Kong's research universities: network agents, institutional arrangements, and brain circulation, *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(3): 345–366.

Postiglione, G.A. and Jung, J. (eds.) (2017) *The Changing Academic Profession in Hong Kong*. Singapore: Springer.

Purbrick, M. (2019) A report of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, *Asian Affairs*, 50(4): 465–487.

Rüegg, W. (1992) *A History of the University in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silver, A. (2020) Contentious Hong Kong security law concerns researchers, *Nature*, 582: 321–322.

Veg, S. (2017) The rise of "localism" and civic identity in post-handover Hong Kong: Questioning the Chinese nation-state, *China Quarterly*, 230: 323–347.

Wang, J. (2018) Innovation and government intervention: A comparison of Singapore and Hong Kong, *Research Policy*, 47(2): 399–412

Yep, R and Lui, T.-L. (2010) Revisiting the golden era of MacLehose and the dynamics of social reforms, *China Information*, 24(3): 249–272.