

HKU: Globally Connected, Globally Respected

What does the term “internationalisation” mean and how does it specifically affect HKU and its students? The following article examines these questions and frames them within the changes taking place on the University campus.

By Professor John A Spinks

The impetus for change, from local to international, in the education that universities provide today, comes, of course, from the nature of the world and society around us. As Thomas L Friedman, in his now famous book, “The World is Flat”, has argued, the world today, through its global communications facilitated by the Internet, is offering many more opportunities to emerging market countries to capitalise on new opportunities for economic growth. India is particularly singled out in this book, but China is, of course, benefiting just as much.



To put his arguments into a more familiar (for me) football analogy, the world can be thought of as being a more level playing field for all nations, but the important message he asks us to pay attention to is that everyone, wherever he is in the world, now has to work harder (or run faster) on this playing field, as there is so much competition for places in the team.

This rapidly unfolding change in world order means that graduates from universities today will not just be working alongside graduates from their own or neighbouring universities. They will be working alongside graduates from India and China, from the US and Europe, and, if they cannot at least match them, they will lose out in this new and fiercely competitive environment.

A less positive side to this is how the recruitment of students (at high tuition fees) from developing world countries has become part of the commodification of education. The “trade in education services” (including education within GATS) has become a commonplace way of discussing educational developments these days. But student’s access to a quality education, which we all believe is important, is hardly helped when they have to pay fees which, by their countries’ standards, are way in excess of what they or their families can afford.

U21 Global, the online learning arm of the Universitas21 network of leading universities around the world (of which HKU is a member, of course) tried to get around this problem by aligning its tuition fees with the GDP per capita of the country of residence of the student.

The internationalisation of education has many facets. Historically, HKU has always had very good research links with colleagues and laboratories around the world. It has developed an extensive student exchange programme that offers wonderful opportunities for HKU students to go to other leading universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, around the world.

Today, we can add to this list, summer schools abroad, international competitions, field trips abroad, summer study tours, international community projects, and internships abroad. As I have pointed out above, HKU is a member of the prestigious Universitas21 network of universities, along with McGill, Melbourne, NUS, Nottingham, and 14 others. This consortium helps our internationalisation agenda in HKU by expanding student exchange places and



holding international conferences and summer schools – all for undergraduates.

Members of this consortium also offer undergraduate courses on aspects of critical global importance (such as security, world health issues, poverty), where students from HKU, UBC, Melbourne, Nottingham and Auckland work in collaborative teams online on the project work of these courses, which, if successful, lead to the award of a Certificate in Global Issues.

The result of all these is that HKU becomes a name that is recognised today by many around the world. Our position at number 33 in the world, according to the Times Higher Educational Supplement rankings, is in part due to this recognition. We are ranked as the fifth best in the world for the internationalisation of our professors.

In view of these achievements, some may be surprised that it is only in the last eight years or so that HKU has been able to take in any international students (including those from the Mainland). With the 3,000 plus students whose country of residence is abroad that we have today, the changes that have taken place in this short period of time have been quite startling.

While very few students question the value of internationalising the student body at HKU, some have argued that the pace of change has been too fast. This is understandable – indeed, any change results in some extra stress on the system. But our provision of new facilities has been planned in such a way that local students will benefit as well.

The construction of the new Global Lounge, besides being an imaginatively designed place for international activities for all students, both local and international, was a symbol of the University’s progress in internationalisation. It is admired by Vice-Chancellors and Presidents from universities all around the world.

But, perhaps more importantly, the University has plans to increase its number of accommodation places, initially through renting out apartments in the area for international and local students to share, to the provision of as many as 1800 beds in the nearby Lung Wah site.

There are stresses and strains to the system at the individual or social level as well to some extent. For example, the presence of alternative viewpoints on campus is leading us to reflect on whether some of our more traditional activities in HKU are suitable for today. But, in comparison with many universities, I see here in HKU a very positive attitude amongst local students to the international students.

The issue of how to bring international students more into the social activities of the University is one that is being actively debated at present. “A pluralistic environment” is one of the key phrases of our HKU Mission Statement. HKU students are embracing that concept in a way that we hope all students of the future, from all parts of the world, will do.

Contributor of this article

Professor John A Spinks is Senior Advisor to the Vice-Chancellor. He is particularly involved with the internationalisation of HKU, and with the recruitment of students from outside Hong Kong. He is currently Chairman of the University Admissions Committee and member of the JUPAS Board.