

JOB HUNTING?

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Second-rate universities ripe for shake-up

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Lord Sutherland is an important man. He is the vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh and is completing a major review of the SAR university system, with recommendations for some radical changes.

Change is badly needed, as no one seems to be happy with the status quo. If Hong Kong wants to re-invent itself as a "knowledge-based" society, a goal held dear by Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, its universities must play a pivotal role. Unless they succeed, the SAR will remain second rate.

Singapore has understood that stark reality and has succeeded in luring eight world-class universities to help lift it from intellectual mediocrity.

Hong Kong's universities are failing. Bosses decry the poor standards of graduates. The Chief Justice has recently lamented the appalling quality of home-grown young lawyers. Our doctors often speak broken English.

Many professors privately admit 30 to 50 per cent of their students should have been kicked out, but unspoken rules prevent this. As a result, 98.6 per cent graduate each year. No wonder the job market is awash with semi-literate graduates.

Hong Kong academia faces many deep-seated problems. Here are just three. One: there are too many universities, with wasteful duplication. Two: their financing rules are costly and irrational. Three: the Government's role is too pervasive, its goals unrealistic.

Hong Kong cannot afford eight equally good universities. City and Polytechnic universities are fine engineering institutions. In recent years, under ambitious, politically well-connected vice-chancellors, they have drifted away from their historic missions while trying to become comprehensive. Predictably, ambition far outstrips performance.

City University offers a Law School and a School of Creative Media. It has a Cross-Cultural Centre to promote Eastern and Western fusion. These are admirable goals. However, it has neither the experience nor

the expertise to offer quality courses.

The Institute of Education trains teachers. It should have been absorbed by the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University, as each already has a far better department of education. Hong Kong's children are increasingly being taught by many staff without the benefit of a broad university education and that, in turn, affects the quality of high school graduates.

Lingnan University aspires to be a liberal arts college. But it costs a lot to be a good one, and its half-hearted attempt is only wasting money. It makes better sense to turn Lingnan into a two-year institution to prepare the largely badly matriculated high school students. Baptist University is located across the street from City University. Why not consolidate the two?

A challenging issue for Lord Sutherland is whether, and how, to allocate resources along the lines of departmental excellence.

Most university departments are unable to attain the momentum to become first rate. Merging some could make sense.

This year taxpayers, through the University Grants Committee (UGC), will pay \$14 billion to the eight universities. This is 2.2 times higher than 10 years ago, while the number of students seeking a first degree is 45,600, compared to 29,200 a decade ago, up 56 per cent. Much of that cost increase goes into salaries.

Hong Kong's pay scale is off the chart. We pay our senior professors an average of \$1.5 million a year - more than twice what counterparts get in America's public universities and 62 per cent more than Columbia in New York, a more expensive city than Hong Kong. The local pay scale is tied to that of the civil service, which has the effect of paying mediocre professors more than they deserve, but less than that which is necessary to attract the higher-paid in finance, information technology and the life sciences.

The UGC's funding formula underwrites 70 per cent of the cost to educate a student. Until very recently, it was 100 per cent. The formula assumes the unit cost per student is the same for all universities, ignoring the basic principle of comparing returns on investments. UGC admits it wishes to avoid judging who is better. So the funding rule is more about "face" than quality.

Since headcounts basically determine funding, the universities have no incentive to turn away students or to allow professors to fail some.

A recently introduced research-funding formula says that the more articles published in well-known scholarly journals, the more research money the employing university will get to reward "excellence". This system is mindlessly quantitative - quality cannot be measured solely by publication numbers.

The Government plays Big Brother and decides how many students the universities must accept, and within that not more than four per cent can be foreigners. As a result, our student body is homogeneous and provincial.

Mr Tung aims for 60 per cent of the 18-20 age group to get higher education, against 17 per cent now. He also wants a "New Elitism" in our society. Is there a contradiction here? At present, our universities cannot even properly educate the existing crop.

One colonial "time tomb" Mr Tung loves to keep under his hat is his chancellorship at all eight universities. Since he is also the political leader, his status automatically politicises the intellectual community, even though he delegates his authority to his stand-in, the vice-chancellors.

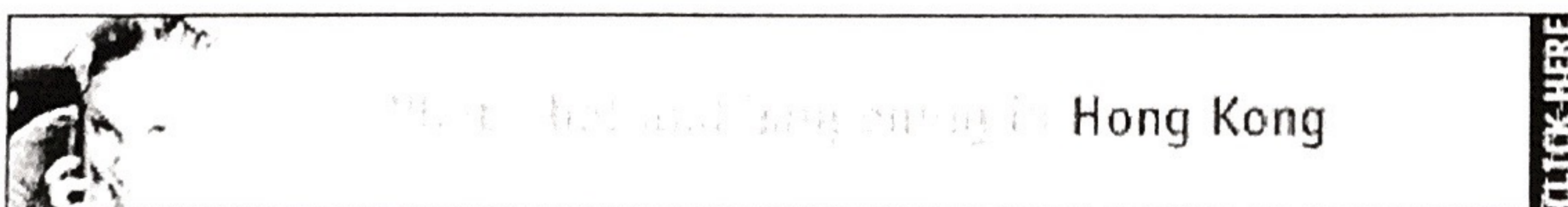
He appoints the senior members of the university councils and he can and does reward the more politically correct academics with vice-chancellorships. As a result, many academics think they should be circumspect about what they say publicly.

Dr Ng Ching-fai, vice-chancellor of Baptist University, has said he advised his faculty to stay out of politically controversial issues. It is a puzzling position to take in a free society that expects its scholars to shed light on public issues. Growing self-censorship is a consequence of Big Brother retaining the top post he should have relinquished after the British left.

Taxpayers and academics await with anxiety the Sutherland Report, which is expected to deal with these and other pressing issues such as privatisation and enhancing competitiveness. The report may address the idea that the competitive advantage of each university should guide future funding, so that a more rational division of academic labour may ensue. The bottom line is: with declining public funds, what change must the universities undertake to become first rate?

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