

The Essence of Internationalisation

By Professor Way Kuo

President, City University of Hong Kong

How many non-Chinese students study in Hong Kong? You would expect them to be flocking here. Our universities rank among the best in the world; our professors are well respected; we have strong historical ties to the UK; and Hong Kong, we are told, is Asia's World City, the bridge between the East and West, the gateway to China.

But the reality is that relatively few non-Chinese students come here. Of the 56,921 full-time undergraduates on University Grants Committee-funded programmes in 2011–12, 1,057 came from Asia, outside of mainland China, while 274 came from the rest of the world. Many universities in North America and Europe have at least the same number of international students enrolled as the total number studying in Hong Kong.

This begs the question, why? Why are so few non-Chinese students coming to Hong Kong? Or, for that matter, why so few from Taiwan? In fact, almost none came from Taiwan before 2008, the year I started work at City University of Hong Kong. So, really, how internationalised is Asia's World City?

The essence of internationalisation is the ability to adapt to new circumstances, initiate cultural changes, overcome resistance to change, learn from other cultures and implement new ideas. It does not mean simply the ability to speak English, as a comparison between Hong Kong and South Korea reveals.

South Korea has changed beyond all recognition in the past 20 years, buoyed by the success of companies like Samsung and Hyundai. Its cultural exports, including Korean cuisine, TV programmes and traditional medicine, are enjoyed throughout Asia, and its products used all over the world. Without a doubt, Seoul is an international city, headquarters to one of the most dynamic economies on earth. But what is interesting is that South Korea's success has not been due to the ability of its people to speak fluent English, just as Japan's economy was not built in the 1980s and 1990s on trilingualism and biliteracy. Most visitors to Seoul will agree that people in Hong Kong tend to have greater English language skills. Rather, South Korea's triumph has been to modify its mindset and change with the times.

The Koreans have shown that internationalisation is not wholly dependent on language skills; changing with the times is more crucial. In a globalised world, where our actions are heard, seen and evaluated beyond our borders, we must be able to anticipate the need for change at a deep structural, societal and cultural level. Leadership, either by individuals or as a group, should mean standing up to be counted, forging ahead to embrace change and taking responsibility to liberalise our ways of governance and modernise our systems to implement creative innovations which raise global standards and benefit humankind.

So what is internationalisation in education if it is not simply about learning English? For me, it means more than language skills and exchanges for scholars and students. It means giving our young people the chance to understand their own culture first and opportunities to learn about other cultures. It means establishing curricula reforms that will create space for knowledge creation, original discoveries and innovative thinking by integrating learning and research. Most important of all, it requires a change of

mentality, one that is free of prejudice, open to new ideas, adaptable and all-embracing.

We should note that internationalisation isn't a new phenomenon. It has been around since humans first started interacting and finding common causes and ideals. Two millennia ago, state-to-state exchanges during the Warring States period were the norm before China was unified. The world continued learning from China until the 15th century, and then after the so-called Industrial Revolution in Europe, the world began to modernise, and the West grew in power. But now that East Asia is rising, we can learn just as much from the East as we do from the West, which is why we should develop confidence in our own areas of expertise.

Universities in Hong Kong should take full advantage of Hong Kong's unique cultural and geographical position to enhance their influence as international intermediaries between China, Asia and the West. They should seek cross-border collaborations that develop innovative education programmes and research enterprises with Asian and Western perspectives, and create new paradigms, structures and growth points for global advancement.

Internationalisation grows from our own culture. No matter which way one looks, people in Hong Kong first need to embrace Chinese culture and language, mindful that it is paid greater attention by the rest of the world than ever before. In some ways, since my arrival to Hong Kong, I have felt that the US is actually closer to China than Taiwan is; and that Taiwan is closer to China than Hong Kong is, in spite of geographic proximity and historical connections. In this regard, the US is more internationalised than Taiwan, which is more internationalised than Hong Kong. Keep

in mind, too, that no one is likely to come to study in Hong Kong because we use English; otherwise, why are there far more foreign students in Beijing or Shanghai than in Hong Kong?

Hong Kong and its universities have to consider what to offer the rest of the world. Estimates suggest that Asia will constitute about 70% of the global demand for higher education in 15 years' time. How are we to respond in the context of internationalisation? Only when a greater number of students from the rest of the world is studying in Hong Kong universities can we say that we are making some progress toward internationalisation!