

# Overseas Education



# Nobel thoughts

Bob Dylan's songs have touched many people.

## Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



**I**T WAS THE “Nobel weekend” last week, when the prizes were awarded in Stockholm. In some sense, the suspense was already over as the winners had been known for a while, but the ceremony this week brings some reflection for me.

I am most excited to see that one of my hero artists, Bob Dylan, won the Nobel Prize in Literature, which brought much controversy.

When his choice was announced by the Nobel committee, the literary world was aghast that a “popular” songwriter got the prize and thus “lowers” the stature of the prize. As a long-time Dylan fan, I can understand the critics’ feeling, but I do not agree with their position. Some pure mathematicians may not consider applied mathematicians as “real” mathematicians, but that does not mean that we should restrict the prize to a narrowed field of writers.

Dylan’s prize should be viewed in the historical and social context, as well as the impact he has had.

Hiss songs touched many people of his generation, reflecting the angst they all share about the political and social conditions of the time (1960s and ’70s).

I actually only started to listen to him after I’d gone to study in the United States; his songs, such as *Blowin’ In The Wind* and *The Times They Are A-Changin’* expressed the feelings of many American people, especially young ones, of the Vietnam War, the government’s role etc.

A whole generation’s political and social views were shaped by Dylan’s writings.

The controversy surrounding Dylan reminds me that “impact” also plays a big role in Nobel for the hard sciences as well. One was the 2009 Physics Prize to Charles Kao. I, like many other scientists, did not think he would have a chance to win the Nobel because what he did regarding fiber optics was considered by many physicists as “merely” engineering and not worthy of a Nobel.

I was particularly elated to learn that he won it; certainly fiber optics already had a great impact by 2009. Another case is the more recent choice of Shuji Nakamura, visiting member of HKUST Institute



for Advanced Study. Nakamura’s colleague once predicted that “Nakamura will win his Nobel when LEDs are sold in Costco [a supermarket chain in the United States].”

Today, we can just buy LEDs in about everywhere, and Nakamura won the Nobel Prize in Physics for his invention of the blue LED in 2014.

I also noted that all six of the US Nobel science and economics laureates are immigrants.

Three of the science winners are British immigrants, while one of the winners in economics was originally from Finland. Sir Fraser Stoddart, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, was a faculty member at UCLA when I was his dean.

Many at UCLA, including myself, thought that he had a chance to win the Nobel Prize, and we were all happy for him when his name was finally called this year.

After winning the Nobel, he was quoted as saying that the United States should be “welcoming people from all over the world” and that “the US is what it is today largely because of open borders.”

I cannot agree with him more. The United States is the United States precisely because it is “open.”

It is particularly troublesome for me to notice the

recent anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US election, which cannot be good for the long-term well-being of the United States. And the situation is similar in the UK, which resulted in Brexit.

What does this say about Hong Kong?

I hope we will continue to welcome talents from around the world, including from the mainland. Some will argue that in the short term, they may appear to be competing for limited local resources, but the US experience shows that an open society is the right recipe for long-term success.

Generous and unfettered research support in the United States is also a major attraction for foreign scientists. Duncan Haldane, winner in Physics this year, said “there is a tradition of funding very fundamental research without regard for it being ‘useful.’”

As Hong Kong pushes for innovation and technology, there has been a call for our universities to put more emphasis on applied research and technology transfer. Certainly, these are important parts of the mission of our research universities, but we should also be careful not to compromise our basic mission to conduct fundamental research.

If we only look on the applied side of science, the Nobel will always be elusive to Hong Kong.