

# The rise of Asian universities

## 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.



**EVERY YEAR, MORE** and more universities in Asia are making their mark in multiple global rankings.

Last year, the UK newspaper *Independent* had this headline: "UK universities' world reputation 'diminishing' as Asian institutions gather pace."

In last year's QS World University Rankings, nine of China's top 13 universities moved up, and three of Hong Kong's seven – including HKUST – were in the top 50. Many Japanese and Korean universities' ranking improved significantly; and Singapore maintained its position as the top-performer.

Why the sudden rise?

For a long time, the university, as an entity in Western traditions, had always been related to the church, and its audience were elites of the society.

In today's terms, it was an "exclusive club" for a select few.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, states in Asia began establishing universities of their own, to serve as engines to produce capable personnel to work in both the public and private sectors. For many states, there was a dire need to educate and empower their own people to face the mounting challenges of the time.

The gold standard for education was that of the West – Asian countries were underdeveloped, their economies weak, and the power balance of the world was in heavy favor of the West.

Now in the 21st century, we are witnessing a sea change in that power balance. The world today is more globalized and connected than ever before.

Advancement in technology has given humans unforeseen mobility, as well as unprecedented communication and information sharing capabilities.

With many Asian economies registering unprecedented growth, the world has shifted its focus to the continent, and we are seeing more and more Asian countries trying to shift their focus from a labor-based economy to a knowledge-based one.

The rise of a growing middle class, with aspirations for a better living and an even better education, means that Asian universities must keep up with the

times and the needs of society to stay relevant. Our governments' stakes in education are also higher than ever – they need a highly skilled work force with global knowledge and awareness to keep fueling the growth engine of their economies, and as a result we are seeing more and more states in Asia raising their investment in higher education.

Political leaders expect universities to not only conduct knowledge transfer, but also nurturing graduates who would start their own companies that bring growth. China, for example, is en route to outspend the United States in research and development by 2020, with the lion share of the investment going to universities. With a strong influence of policy and influx of funding, it is no surprise that Asian universities are flourishing today.

Inevitably, there will be challenges. With newfound mobility, rising family finance, and global competition, students and faculty can now go anywhere to pursue knowledge and area of interest.

Just as it has become easier to recruit students and faculty from around the world, they will also have an easier time to choose one destination over another.

The need to recruit and retain talent is higher than ever before.

A second important challenge is how we maintain

our relevance. The cautionary tales of once-prominent global brands which have fallen into obscurity – such as Nokia, Kodak, Motorola, BlackBerry, and even Yahoo – serve as a great reminder to us that we must always keep up with the times or someone else will eat our lunch.

Some have said that we are now witnessing the fourth industrial revolution – a digital revolution with a speed of no historical precedent, disrupting almost every industry in every country.

To maintain our relevance, we educators will have to be at the forefront to lead change.

We have to be quick to adapt with a flexible mind-set. An open mind and willingness to embrace innovation and technology, both in teaching it to our students and also in employing it to deliver the education will be key.

There are new enterprises being set up, using new educational models based on innovative technologies, to not only compete with traditional universities but also to replace them.

For years, we have always taught our students to be determined to pursue their own dreams. It is our turn now, as educators, to rise to the occasion. Should we succeed, I believe, we will all be witnesses to an unprecedented golden age of Asian universities.