

Together and open, or isolated and closed?

Out of the Box

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ABOUT A YEAR ago, the UK shocked the world by voting "Yes" to leave the European Union – and now its universities are suffering from the aftermath.

A recent article reported that many UK universities are struggling to deal with the looming impact of Brexit, which cast a shadow on the future of current and to-be EU students and staff in the country.

With European students growing more reluctant to go to the UK, universities are now racing to find replacements for EU students, probably from Asia, who are willing to pay reputable UK schools hefty international tuition fees.

And some universities that have been reliant on EU research funding are facing a future without the money and increasing competition from schools on the continent as a result.

On the other side of the ocean, many universities

in the United States are facing the same challenge of isolationism under President Donald Trump's "America First" policies.

His travel ban and tightening up of immigration rules have alienated many. Presidents from major universities have joined forces to push back many of Trump's isolationist policies, such as the "Muslim ban."

It seems that all the initial excitement and euphoria for a Trump-led United States and a UK heading to Brexit are all but gone. Isolationist policies introduced under Trump and in Brexit UK are putting many tertiary education institutions under siege, for such policies are directly against the principle of openness.

In the long run, universities in both countries would lose out in funding and recruitment under an isolated environment, and their reputation and academic standard would inevitably suffer.

These cautionary tales have relevance for Hong Kong. Similar to both countries, localism and pacifism are rising in our city and, likewise, many are keen to turn their backs on internationalization.

A growing number of people are becoming more outspoken and critical about our universities, and some would even go further to say that international recruitment is squeezing out local students.

These accusations are, of course, short-sighted, and we must keep in mind that for whatever instant gratification populism ideals may bring, we must not



overlook the inevitable consequences that come with them.

Hong Kong's universities are successful and unique because we are international. Being international brings competition and diversity, which in turn brings

out the best in our academics and students. Our schools have done well in international rankings for quite a number of years, and a big reason for the surge is our international appeal and our research excellence.

If we go backward and become "just a local city" that is "built for locals," we will soon be facing the same fate as universities in the UK. Just as we are free to recruit talent from around the globe, they are also free to go around the world to where they are welcomed.

Such openness is what made the United States home to the most Nobel laureates and prestigious institutions, as well as a thriving economy based on innovation – something US educators are fighting hard to retain.

Hong Kong's higher education sector is fully engaged with the international community, and we cannot expect to enjoy the benefits if we slam our door. We must not give up our hard-earned international reputation in favor of populist ideals.

Isolationism affects not just universities.

In the UK already, banks are moving out from London, and other industries may soon follow suit. Whatever the UK is set to lose, others will be eager to replace, and assume its position. This is simply the reality in the globalized world today.

Together and open, we bring more opportunities to everyone in this society. Isolated and closed, we will be alone and left behind.