

# Beijing may pump in the money but where's the quality?

## 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.



ON APRIL 27, the universities in China directly under the jurisdiction of the ministry of education announced their 2018 budgets. These budgets provide a glimpse into the developmental trends in higher education in China. There are quite a number of interesting and surprising observations.

Seven universities have budgets exceeding 10 billion yuan (HK\$12.36 billion): Tsinghua University (27 billion yuan), Zhejiang University (15.5 billion yuan), Shanghai Jiaotong University (14.5 billion yuan), Sun Yat Sen University (13.5 billion yuan), Tongji University (13.4 billion yuan), Peking University (12.5 billion yuan), Fudan University (10.9 billion yuan).

The surprises are Peking University has dropped from No 2 in 2017 to No 6, and Tongji is in this elite

group. The second thing to note is the change of the budgets from 2017 to 2018. Out of the 75 universities listed, all but 10 have an increase in their budgets and nine have an increase of over 30 percent.

Some of these changes are quite significant. For example, Tongji's increase is a whopping 75 percent, whereas Peking University's has declined 35 percent. Tsinghua, Sun Yat Sen and Xian Jiaotong each got about 15 percent more. These increases are obviously much higher than inflation and indicate to me a deliberate strategic investment in these universities. I am left wondering why the dramatic decrease for Peking University.

More generally, funding for universities that focus on humanities and social science lacks far behind those focused on science and engineering.

This can probably be explained by the higher cost of equipment and materials for science and engineering, or this may reflect the government's push for innovation and technology in its national plans.

Another observation, which does not seem surprising to me, is universities on the east coast got higher budgets than those in the west and the center.

The student body sizes of the top seven universities listed above are 47,800, 53,700, 38,700, 50,900, 37,200, 42,700 and 33,300, respectively.

Now if we scale their budgets by the number of students, one gets the following figures in yuan (again in the same order of the top): 560,000; 288,000; 365,000; 264,000; 361,000; 294,000; and 327,000.

I am quite struck by the much higher funding per student for Tsinghua compared with the others, which confirms my own observation that Tsinghua has become the flagship university of China. Peking University is No 5 by this measure.

By comparison, I look up the corresponding figures for five public universities in Hong Kong.

Only 2017 data is available but unfortunately our universities do not list budgets – and the closest numbers I can get is income (HK\$, no of students): University of Hong Kong (HK\$9.8 billion, 28,744), Chinese University (HK\$9.2 billion, 19,585), University of Science and Technology (HK\$4.7 billion, 14,220), Polytechnic University (HK\$6.15 billion, 25,796), City University (HK\$4.76 billion, 14,325). And the corresponding Hong Kong dollar per student figures are: 341,000; 471,000; 332,000; 238,000; and 332,000.

The government contributes about HK\$200,000 per undergraduate.

One notices that mainland numbers are noticeably higher than Hong Kong ones, with Tsinghua's significantly higher.

In terms of purchasing power, the mainland numbers are even higher.

This crossover most probably occurred only in the last few years. I expect this trend to continue.

Of course, higher budgets do not automatically imply better quality. After all, I have always stressed the fact that Hong Kong can boast of having the most number of universities in the global top 100 for both Quacquarelli Symonds and *Times* Higher Education, among cities (not nations).

But even by quality measures, mainland schools have improved dramatically over the last decade.

Tsinghua is now ranked among the top universities in the world, according to most global university rankings. However, Asian universities in general, and Chinese universities in particular, have been criticized for failing to train innovative and creative students and researchers.

Money is no longer an issue as China has no lack of financial resources for investing in universities.

Part of the reason could be an administrative system and academic culture that is not conducive to innovation and creativity.

Whether Chinese universities can truly compete with the best in the world will depend more on these factors than on financial ones alone.