

HKUST Guangzhou Campus: A Critique

At an online faculty forum on 16 April 2020 the management of Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST) provided an “update on the academic development” of a new HKUST Guangzhou campus. Similar information is publicly available at <https://gz.ust.hk/>. Questions arise about the motivation for the new campus, the benefits for HKUST, the academic safeguards, and exit strategies. This article shares the author’s observations as a HKUST faculty member. It touches upon the bigger issues of changing university management practices, self-censorship and academic freedom, and academia under a totalitarian regime.

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The planned Guangzhou campus of the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST) in Nansha—Nansha District, Guangzhou City, Guangdong Province, People’s Republic of China (PRC)—constitutes a major expansion of HKUST.¹ The first of two construction phases is to be completed in 2022 for a first local student intake in the fall semester of 2022.²

1. What’s the motivation for the HKUST Guangzhou campus?

Imagine you are running a university and someone comes to you and says: “Why don’t you set up another, similar university for me? You can innovate and experiment to your heart’s content and design the campus however you want. We’ll build the campus according to your specifications. We’ll provide more than plenty of land, as well as access to a high-speed train network. Once the university is built, we’ll pay the running costs. You decide on all academic matters: who to hire, at what salary, and how to run the university. We’ll just pay.”

And now imagine that this is not a fairy tale. Et voilà, you have arrived at the new HKUST Guangzhou campus! London, Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam or Rome aren’t calling on HKUST. So why is “Guangzhou?”

Guangzhou is the *name* of an administratively defined geographic entity and not that of a decision-maker. Presumably, the decision-maker is the Guangzhou city government and thus ultimately the Chinese “Communist” “Party,” in the following abbreviated “CCP.”³

What is the CCP’s motivation for establishing the HKUST Guangzhou campus? We don’t know. The HKUST Guangzhou campus is being explicitly linked to the implementation of innovation-driven development in the “Greater Bay Area” (Guangdong – Hong Kong – Macao).⁴ But if the distance between the current HKUST Clear Water Bay campus and the new HKUST Guangzhou campus is short enough to allow for faculty members and students

¹ This article draws on information about the new HKUST Guangzhou campus presented at the online faculty forum on 16 April 2020, the slides distributed after the faculty forum (unless otherwise stated, the first/main file titled “HKUST(GZ) faculty Forum_Provost”), and the HKUST Guangzhou campus website (<https://gz.ust.hk/>, last accessed 5 June 2020). At the online faculty forum, HKUST President SHYY Wei, Provost Lionel NI, and Vice-President for Research and Development Nancy Yip introduced the HKUST Guangzhou campus; four HKUST professors—co-listed in the February 2020 University Communications Directory as the four Acting Deans of the HKUST Guangzhou campus—each spoke briefly about one of the four “hubs” that constitute the Guangzhou campus.

² Upon completion, the HKUST Guangzhou campus will have approximately 400 faculty members (compared to HKUST’s current 495 faculty members) and 10,000 students, beginning with a first phase of 6,000 postgraduate students (compared to HKUST’s current 6,000 postgraduate students and 10,000 undergraduate students). The total land area of the HKUST Guangzhou campus is twice that of the existing HKUST Clear Water Bay campus.

³ The ground breaking ceremony at the new campus was attended by “Mr. LI Xi, Party Secretary of Guangdong Provincial Committee, and Mr. MA Xingrui, Vice Party Secretary of Guangdong Provincial Committee and Governor of Guangdong Provincial Government” (and others); these two persons are listed second and third, after the “Chief Executive of HKSAR Government.” See <https://www.ust.hk/news/greater-bay-development/hkust-gz-approved-state-ministry-education>, last accessed 5 June 2020.

⁴ See <https://gz.ust.hk/about/background>, last accessed 5 June 2020.

to shuttle back and forth, then why the need for another campus? Surely, a cluster of academics in one locality is preferable to academics spread out across multiple locations.

Why the CCP chose HKUST and not one of the many existing universities in Guangdong Province, we don't know. One clue is provided by HKUST Council Chairman Mr. Andrew Liao: "Talent is key to GBA's [Greater Bay Area's] development into a global innovation hub. As an *international* research university, HKUST hopes to bring its vision and teaching experience into Guangzhou and [...] groom innovative talents with *global vision* for the region" (italics added).⁵ In other words, HKUST may be better placed than existing local universities to advance the CCP's objectives thanks to HKUST's *international* status.

As of late May 2020, this has taken on particular relevance since U.S. President Trump wants to restrict PRC access to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education for PRC nationals in the U.S., especially for PRC nationals with connections to the CCP's military. The CCP's motivation would then be to use HKUST—located in Hong Kong and thus in a territory that is (or: was?) in free exchange with the U.S. and other Western countries—as a conduit for channeling Western expertise into the PRC mainland.⁶

How the particular arrangements came about, we don't know. Perhaps the CCP when developing the Greater Bay Area scheme approached its Hong Kong agent, the Hong Kong "government," which then ordered HKUST to go along. Or perhaps the CCP approached HKUST directly. Or perhaps individuals at HKUST (including in the HKUST Council), as part of regular exchanges with CCP members, co-developed the idea of the HKUST Guangzhou campus.

2. What's in it for HKUST?

HKUST is a *name*. In the following, I will have in mind 'benefits' for "academia" (the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship; google/Oxford definition) as well as benefits for HKUST stakeholders: the Hong Kong tax payer (society), HKUST management, HKUST faculty members and staff, and HKUST students.

HKUST President SHYY Wei says "With the new campus located next to the newly planned high-tech park in Guangzhou, HKUST students could better transfer their research achievements and innovative ideas through the established industrial chain there."⁷ He does not elaborate further.

Provost Lionel NI's presentation of the HKUST Guangzhou campus at the faculty forum on 16 April 2020 included a slide titled "Important Considerations" (slide 14):

- Intrinsic synergies between CWB and GZ campuses to realize a unified HKUST system for

⁵ See <https://www.ust.hk/news/greater-bay-development/hkust-signs-collaboration-agreements-guangzhou-government-and>, last accessed 5 June 2020.

⁶ Other possible motivations include that since the CCP has issued the "Greater Bay Area" slogan, the slogan now needs to be filled with content (some form of integration of Hong Kong into the mainland), or that the new HKUST Guangzhou campus may give the CCP more leverage over parts of Hong Kong academia. (On the co-optation of academia by the CCP, see Perry, 2015.)

⁷ See <https://www.ust.hk/news/greater-bay-development/hkust-signs-collaboration-agreements-guangzhou-government-and>, accessed 5 June 2020.

- students and faculty;
- Academic hubs design specifically for cross-disciplinary collaboration to set example for the future of modern university;
- Integrated teaching, learning, research and knowledge transfer to stimulate academic and social interaction;
- Expanded facilities to support entrepreneurship, industrial collaboration and international engagement to support societal needs and economic advancement;
- Capitalise on waterways as positive features and connect to urban context to create a serene and harmonious ecosystem;
- Sustainable planning with nature preservation (50% of the site) to create a fresh and natural experience for students and faculty; and
- Distinctive yet complementary precincts with capacity for future growth and expansion.

Synergy, the first item, refers to “the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects” (google/Oxford definition). What the interaction is to look like—apart from possibly some professors of the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus teaching on the HKUST Guangzhou campus, and some students attending classes on both campuses—is not further specified. Nor has any argument been presented as to in what respect(s) the combined effect of the two campuses will be greater than the sum of their separate effects.

The second item will be analyzed in the next sub-section. Items 3 through 7 are boiler plate, university management phrases.⁸ If these issues were so important, they could long have been implemented on the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus; President SHYY Wei has been with HKUST since fall 2010 (as provost through mid-2018).⁹

a. Cross-disciplinary collaboration

“Cross-disciplinary” collaboration features prominently on the HKUST Guangzhou website, where it is elaborated on in three paragraphs under the title “What is Cross-disciplinary?:”¹⁰

Cross-disciplinarity in education and research is an integrative approach in which collaborative efforts of any form occurs between multiple disciplines. While the importance and needs of cross-disciplinary learning have been recognized by almost all academic and industry leaders; and many variations, such as multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, have been proposed and advocated, the effectiveness of cross-disciplinary learning has been hindered by the traditional curricula which are normally siloed along conventional disciplinary lines.

As each discipline usually has a set of well-founded rules or viewpoints, collaborators are expected to respect diverse perspectives from other disciplines to achieve collective

⁸ Slide 20 further explicitly lists “benefits” as “share costs and maximise synergies / complementarity; maintain consistent University branding and strategies; and prevent unwarranted competition.” I would think only the first item of “share costs...” qualifies for the appellation “benefit.” I need to see these cost benefits specified in order to be able to evaluate them. Separately, a file by HKUST Vice-President for Research and Development Nancy Yip distributed after the faculty forum consists of just one slide with the words “exciting opportunities abound at HKUST (GZ);” no details are provided (though at the faculty forum further slides may have been shown).

⁹ Provost Lionel Ni has been at HKUST for even longer (except in 2015-2018), as Head of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering (2002 to 2008), Dean of the HKUST Fok Ying Tung Graduate School and Special Assistant to the President (2010 to 2014), and as “Director of a number of research institutes (2006 to 2014). See <https://www.ust.hk/news/announcements/hkust-appoints-prof-lionel-ni-provost>, last accessed 19 June 2020.

¹⁰ See <https://gz.ust.hk/academics/what-is-cross-disciplinary>, last accessed 2 June 2020.

thinking. Cross-disciplinary learning is a holistic approach best suitable for graduates to become adaptable lifelong learners.

HKUST(GZ) [HKUST Guangzhou campus] is well poised to adopt a cross-disciplinary approach which will enhance students' creative thinking, empower them to build their own ideas, cultivate their ability to engage with the social life so as to identify and solve real-world problems. It will deliver learning experiences which focus on the higher capabilities demanded by the brave new world.

The second item in the provost's list of "Important Considerations"— "Academic hubs design[ed] specifically for cross-disciplinary collaboration"—captures this pre-occupation with "cross-disciplinary collaboration." In an email to the provost on 16 April 2020, I asked:

(4) In the presentation it was said (or written) "hubs specifically designed for cross-disciplinary collaboration." Can you please provide concrete specifics of that design? (And why it can't be done on the CWB [Clear Water Bay] campus?)¹¹

I have not received a response.

The provost's second item additionally includes an assertion that such an academic hub design is "to set [an] example for the future of the modern university." This implies underlying assumptions as to what constitutes a "modern" university, none of which are stated or known to HKUST faculty members, let alone have passed the HKUST Senate.

Slide 18 of the provost's presentation, titled "Enquiry-based Cross-Disciplinary Active Learning" has a key feature of requiring all HKUST Guangzhou campus MPhil and PhD students to take a 2-credit course on "cross-disciplinary research methods" and a 2-credit course on "cross-disciplinary design thinking."¹² The Social Science Division in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at HKUST has been teaching a set of at least *half a dozen* (each 3-credit) research methods/design courses to postgraduate students of the most varied disciplinary backgrounds and interests for at least a dozen years. In other words, the projected new "cross-disciplinary" methods course requirements for the new HKUST Guangzhou campus *fall far short* of what is currently being offered in the Social Science Division on the existing HKUST Clear Water Bay campus.

Slide 6 states that on the HKUST Guangzhou campus, "faculty offices will be randomly assigned." We already have that in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences on the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus, with offices for the faculty and staff from the Social Science Division, the Division of Humanities, and the Center for Language Education randomly assigned. The result is that I have no clue who my immediate office neighbors are (I wouldn't even know their names) and that those colleagues (of various disciplines) of my Social Science Division that I would usually talk to, and would like to talk to, cannot be easily located. I don't even bump into them in the corridor anymore (they are somewhere else, in some other corridor) nor in the division's general office (which has been abolished by an earlier dean). The division has become such an estranged place that hardly anybody uses their faculty offices anymore. By implication, will the HKUST Guangzhou campus simply become a collection of deserted office buildings?

¹¹ For the complete email see

<http://carstenholz.people.ust.hk/CarstenHolz%20GZ%20campus%20questions%2016Apr2020.pdf>, last accessed 2 June 2020.

¹² Why these are 2-credit courses and not standard 3-credit courses is not explained.

Replacing four (or five) schools on the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus by four “hubs” labeled function, information, systems, and society, each with four “thrusters,”¹³ i.e., by four new schools, each with four disciplines or quasi-disciplines—which give the impression of being newly pulled out of a hat—does not create “cross-disciplinarity.” Switching from a diagram of four (or five) vertical bars representing the “siloes” schools on the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus to a diagram of three randomly arranged L-shapes plus one square shape—the design being void of any meaning—does not augur well for what HKUST management call the “brave new world.” Why not draw the four or five schools of the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus as multi-colored stars, diamonds, and flowers?

The Social Science Division at HKUST has been an interdisciplinary division for thirty years. The success of “interdisciplinarity” has been decidedly mixed. Faculty members of different disciplines weren’t exactly falling over each other to participate in (now abandoned) attempts at co-teaching one course.¹⁴ I lose track of the various incentives provided by management over time to “collaborate”—as if they somehow knew that collaboration is the holy grail—but in the end, academics aren’t stupid: They collaborate across disciplines if they find such collaboration fruitful, and they don’t collaborate (including across disciplines) if they don’t find collaboration fruitful. Their actions all too often reveal that they do not find it fruitful, and incentives set by management to distort scientific inquiry towards unproductive collaboration prove ultimately to be of little relevance.¹⁵

If HKUST management assumes that interdisciplinarity in research will just happen once they have the magic HKUST Guangzhou campus (hardware) in place, they are probably wrong. Hardware is not the issue; individual faculty members’ research ideas and the facility to find sympathetic colleagues are, as are individual faculty members’ teaching interests and initiatives.¹⁶ Nothing about the HKUST Guangzhou campus indicates greater facilitation of collaboration than on the existing HKUST Clear Water Bay campus.

If I am factory owner and want to invent a specific product, I draw on whatever expertise (discipline) is needed to achieve my objective. HKUST management is not a factory owner.

Research does not know the final product. (Research is “the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions;” google/Oxford search definition.) Research proceeds along the interests of individual researchers. If a researcher comes upon questions (or elements of bigger questions) that exceed his/her expertise, s/he will seek out that expertise, if need be across disciplines, and the physical campus design and organizational arrangements are largely irrelevant.

It is only if the HKUST Guangzhou campus is to become the research arm of local industry (or of the CCP) that campus design and organizational arrangements—to meet the needs of

¹³ HKUST management’s choice of English language terminology may be somewhat unfortunate, as a colleague who associates “thrusters” with *pelvic* thrusters pointed out.

¹⁴ I am not aware if the outcome of these attempts have ever been formally analysed.

¹⁵ For the Social Science Division, I once called it (and described it in writing as) “The Great Interdisciplinary Fudge.” See http://carstenholz.people.ust.hk/HKUST-SOSC.html#Interdisciplinary_Fudge, last accessed 3 June 2020. Past experience in the Social Science Division at HKUST and at other universities (for example, Caltech) suggests that one particular discipline comes to dominate over time.

¹⁶ Some faculty members on the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus are cross-listed across departments and schools, as is standard practice at U.S. universities.

local industry (or the CCP)—may play a role.¹⁷ But given the PRC’s recent history with a multitude of parks and special zones, the “newly planned high-tech park” (SHYY Wei) may never live up to (the alluded to, unspecified) expectations.

As to teaching, HKUST management can combine any number of courses to be taken from different disciplines under any degree label, on any campus. Students can be allowed to freely choose courses outside their discipline. That doesn’t require a new campus in Guangzhou. HKUST management can create cross-disciplinary degrees based on any selection of courses from a wide range of choices within HKUST and across universities in Hong Kong (for which co-operation agreements already exist). Nothing prevents HKUST management from doing all that—to the extent that it is not already being done—on the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus.¹⁸ The very best location for cross-disciplinary innovations is Hong Kong, not a distant campus in a location under direct control of a totalitarian regime.

b. Retirement home

An indisputable benefit of the HKUST Guangzhou campus is that it can serve as a convenient retirement home for HKUST Clear Water Bay faculty members whose HKUST retirement funds are (by design) grossly insufficient at HKUST’s mandatory retirement age of 65 and who will not be able to afford housing in Hong Kong upon retirement. With the majority of HKUST Clear Water Bay’s faculty members enjoying strong PRC mainland links, a few additional years in academia past age 65, on the HKUST Guangzhou campus, would facilitate eventual retirement as well as a transition back into the PRC mainland.

I suspect that ambitious people in HKUST management—including those who are currently, somehow, breaking the mandatory retirement age requirement—wouldn’t mind a leadership position in the new campus, either.¹⁹

c. Economies of scale

Slide 20 mentions “two complementary campuses,” meaning “system-wide offices for certain units serving both campuses, e.g., HSEO, PAO, DAO, ITSC/ISO, LIB, CRF, research institutes, etc.”²⁰ Since complementarity between two public affairs offices does not make much sense to me, I suspect that what is meant is economies of scale.

¹⁷ A map on the HKUST Guangzhou website shows the new HKUST Guangzhou campus to be located next to a “Artificial Intelligence Zone,” a “Industry 4.0 Zone,” and a “Key Business Services Center.” (See <https://gz.ust.hk/about/location>, last accessed 9 June 2020.) At the faculty forum, HKUST management mentioned an autonomous driving test site as part of the new campus. Perhaps this is what local industry/the CCP is asking for. Otherwise, if it were simply ideas thrown about by HKUST management, it is hard to imagine that building an autonomous driving test site on a campus that may begin to be operational in fall 2022 really propels HKUST to the forefront of innovation, a decade *after* private companies have begun tackling the issue on a much larger scale.

¹⁸ On the existing HKUST Clear Water Bay campus, HKUST management has a track record of strictly upholding silo-thinking along discipline lines. Some faculty members of the Social Science Division, largely a service division providing a broad undergraduate education to students in the other three schools (Science, Engineering, Business), are prohibited by HKUST management from offering certain social science courses, and the Business School, with approval of HKUST management, systematically prohibits all of their students from taking certain courses in the Social Science Division.

¹⁹ HKUST’s across-the-board age 65 mandatory retirement rule is conveniently ignored by HKUST management for select individuals.

²⁰ I assume these abbreviations refer to “Health, Safety & Environment Office,” “Public Affairs Office,” “Development and Alumni Office,” “Information Technology Services Center / Information Systems Office,”

Except for the case of the library, it's hard to see significant economies of scale. Surely minor cost savings in the lowest single-digit percentages (if not fractions of a percentage point) of HKUST's current budget do not warrant setting up a second campus.

If economies of scale were indeed a valid argument, then there must be plans for a large-scale transplantation of HKUST administrative offices into the PRC mainland and replacement of Hong Kong staff by—presumably significantly cheaper—PRC mainland staff. I am not sure that I want to seek mainland help in tunneling through the mainland (if not future Hong Kong and HKUST) Great Firewall. I don't want Human Resources to be run from the mainland with my personal information (including, for example, the health records and family information held by HKUST) managed by mainlanders on the PRC mainland and subject to direct CCP access.

I will not be comfortable to have to deal with an administration that does not follow (let alone understand) Hong Kong law, replaces “rule of law” by “rule by CCP ‘law’,” and doesn't have Hong Kong's (albeit possibly quickly disappearing) human rights standards.

d. Serve HKUST students on the PRC mainland

Close to 100% of the current MPhil and PhD students in the Social Science Division come from the PRC mainland. It will likely not be much different in other departments. We are already a quasi-mainland PRC university. Why not operate more cheaply and perhaps more conveniently directly out of the PRC mainland? If protests erupt in Hong Kong, frightened PRC mainlanders need no longer flee Hong Kong. It would also seem only fair that Hong Kong tax payers don't have to pay for the education of near-exclusively PRC mainland postgraduate students at HKUST. (The possible drawback is that some faculty members in the division may not want to teach on the PRC mainland, including for reasons of personal safety, and some faculty members may be banned by the CCP from entering the PRC mainland.)

3. What safeguards for academia are in place?

Several questions arise as to if/how the academic freedoms that we (still) have in Hong Kong are being protected given the expansion with a new HKUST Guangzhou campus.

a. What's the agreement between the CCP and HKUST for the new campus?

How does HKUST management safeguard the interests of Hong Kong tax payers and HKUST's stakeholders? The HKUST Guangzhou website is not particularly helpful:

“The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) has started a new chapter as The State Ministry of Education (MoE) has approved its application for proceeding to establish The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou) (HKUST(GZ)).”
(<https://gz.ust.hk/about/background>, last accessed 1 June 2020)

and “Library.” I don't know what CRF stands for; it is not included in the February 2020 University Communications Directory.

The text of this application is not publicly available (and not available to me).

It also appears strange that the HKUST Guangzhou campus website announces a *21 December 2018* collaboration agreement regarding this new campus with the Guangzhou government and *Guangzhou University*:

“The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology officially signed agreements today with the Guangzhou Municipal Government and Guangzhou University to establish Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou) (HKUST (GZ)) ...”
(<https://www.ust.hk/news/greater-bay-development/hkust-signs-collaboration-agreements-guangzhou-government-and>, last accessed 1 June 2020)

(i) The date precedes any faculty consultation. (ii) Guangzhou University was not mentioned once at the faculty forum, does not appear in the distributed slides, and on the HKUST Guangzhou campus website appears only in this news item on the collaboration agreement.

In other words, HKUST management signs an agreement that until today isn't shared publicly;²¹ later, it holds a propaganda blitz (“faculty forum,” HKUST Guangzhou campus website) in which it skips over the crucial details of what it has already signed HKUST up for in favor of promoting a glamorous new campus: here is a futuristic-looking new campus straight out of a sci-fi movie, these are the hubs and thrusts, and all of this is ‘free.’ What Guangzhou University has to do with it—its involvement likely being unknown to the vast majority of colleagues—remains a complete mystery.

We don't know what the contractual rights and duties are (and what happens in the case of disagreements between the different parties). Not that agreements with the CCP, as Hong Kongers well know, mean anything.²² But do Hong Kong tax payers and HKUST faculty, staff, and students not deserve to be properly informed of what has been agreed upon by a few HKUST management figures on their behalf?

b. Censorship

I raised four questions at the online faculty forum, in writing.²³ They were not addressed and I then raised them in slightly more polished form by email with HKUST Provost Lionel Ni afterwards, on 16 April 2020 (at the time of writing still unanswered). The first three are:

(1) What do you do when individual professors are banned from entering the mainland (are denied visas, or arrested on the mainland)? What happens to their courses and research projects?

²¹ At the faculty forum, HKUST President SHYY Wei stressed the importance of “transparency” about the HKUST Guangzhou campus.

²² See the Joint Declaration (<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201399/v1399.pdf>, last accessed 29 May 2020), pp. 33ff., especially the sentence on p. 63 “This Joint Declaration and its annexes shall be equally *binding*.” (my emphasis), or, p. 37 “本联合声明及其附件具有同等约束力,” vs. the PRC's Foreign Ministry statement that the Joint Declaration “does not have any binding effect” (for example, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/%EF%BB%BFchina-says-sino-british-joint-declaration-on-hong-kong-is-void/>, last accessed 19 June 2020). The treaty contains no enforcement or dispute provisions. The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, to which both the UK and China are parties, provides only for the suspension of the operation of a treaty in the event that it is breached (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8616/>, last accessed 29 May 2020).

²³ My questions were submitted through the Zoom chat function and could be seen by all participants. From the visible commotion around the laptop in the “leadership” venue and the audible background Putonghua chatter I conclude that my questions were received (and ignored), at the time, by the provost.

(2) What do you think are the effects of HKUST's new GZ campus on the willingness of universities in the West to cooperate with HKUST? Aren't you afraid that HKUST will become isolated internationally as an agent of the mainland regime?

(3) How are you going to protect research (and each individual professor's career) given what we know about academic freedom / freedom of speech on the PRC mainland? How do you ensure that professors do not have to self-censor in order to survive in HKUST academia (or not be disappeared on the mainland)?²⁴

These three questions address issues of censorship. We know that the PRC mainland has no freedom of speech. Contrast that with HKUST's core values of, among others, "excellence, integrity, and academic freedom" (my emphasis).²⁵ I don't see how one can have academic freedom without freedom of speech. As one measure of a free flow of information, the PRC ranks 177th in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index. HKUST management couldn't sink much lower in betraying HKUST's core values: After the PRC there is only Eritrea, Turkmenistan, and the finalist (180th country) North Korea.²⁶

My three questions cut to the very core of what makes a university a university and they cut to the very core of HKUST's core values. Not having answers and having no safeguards in place smacks of critical negligence.

LI Shaomin, then a professor at City University, was imprisoned in the PRC mainland for 5 months in 2001, eventually charged with "spying" and then deported.²⁷ I wonder what HKUST will do when one of its faculty members is arrested or disappeared. The stakes will have become higher, too, with the CCP now having advanced to seemingly taking long-term hostages.²⁸

How City University's leadership behaved in LI Shaomin's case is well known. In LI Shaomin's own words, published in the *Wall Street Journal* (3 July 2002):

Throughout the period when I was in jail, the president of my university, Prof. Chang Hsin Kang, never once sought to inquire with the Chinese authorities about my whereabouts, what the charges were and whether my legal rights were protected. He refused even to forward a letter to Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa from my wife, who also teaches at the university. Instead Mr. Chang told her that, even though I am an American citizen, the U.S. government would do nothing to help me, because I am ethnic Chinese.

Even after I returned to Hong Kong, my ordeal was far from over. Mr. Chang initially said he wasn't sure I would be allowed to return. When Beijing did permit me to return to Hong Kong, he sounded almost disappointed. "I don't know why the government let him enter Hong Kong," Mr. Chang told a reporter.

²⁴ For the complete email see

<http://carstenholz.people.ust.hk/CarstenHolz%20GZ%20campus%20questions%2016Apr2020.pdf>, last accessed 2 June 2020.

²⁵ See <https://www.ust.hk/about/mission-vision#core-value>, last accessed 1 June 2020.

²⁶ Hong Kong ranks 80th, down from 73 in 2019 and near-continuously declining in rank from 58th in 2013 and 34th in 2010 (the earliest year checked). See <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>, last accessed 28 May 2020. (It could be that there is a statistical break in ranking practices in 2013).

²⁷ A google search for the LI Shaomin case will bring up numerous sources.

²⁸ See Christian Shepherd, "The detentions that serve as a warning to Hong Kong," 2 June 2020 (<https://www.ft.com/content/00ebbb5c-655d-41f7-82b5-601fd9e2bc2c>, last accessed 8 June 2020).

The university then organized a meeting to question me about my supposed "crime." Only after I told them that I would not go through with what amounted to a second interrogation did they cancel this.

Even after I was allowed to return to work, the university placed one obstacle after another in my way. First I was told that I had used up all my leave while in jail. In fact, I ended up paying the university about HK\$58,000 (\$7,500) because my vacation days were insufficient to cover the five months I spent in prison. Then the university rejected my application for unpaid sabbatical leave, leaving me with no option but to quit and leave Hong Kong last weekend.

I want to see fool-proof guarantees of academic freedom on HKUST campuses and credible assurances that HKUST faculty members will not be treated as LI Shaomin was by City University. What institutional mechanisms has HKUST management put in place to protect academic freedom as well as the personal safety of those who will teach/live on the HKUST Guangzhou campus?

I am aware of the extent of self-censorship that prevails across Western academia in all matters "China" (Link, 2002; Holz, 2007). I have no doubt that such self-censorship is prevalent at HKUST, and I am vaguely aware of "mainlanders" on the HKUST Clear Water Bay (Hong Kong) campus confronting others they deem to not self-censor enough. Has the "Gleichschaltung" of HKUST (Holz, 2018) already proceeded so far that censorship-related questions (like the ones that I raised at the faculty forum and in my email to the provost) have become irrelevant?

c. Faculty rights

Do the faculty members who teach on the HUST Guangzhou campus enjoy the rights of Hong Kong citizens? This includes the rights "guaranteed" by Hong Kong's Basic Law. Or does HKUST management envisage these faculty members to operate within the constraints of the PRC mainland's totalitarian regime?

What protections are in place for current HKUST faculty members against blackmail or unfair treatment by their "superiors" when it comes to teaching on the HKUST Guangzhou campus? Will HKUST faculty members be given to understand that they will not get a promotion / salary adjustment / sabbatical leave etc. unless they have put in time in Guangzhou? Or will management use slightly subtler mechanisms: a better package if one opts to move / co-work on the Guangzhou campus (vs. a stagnant package if one doesn't)?²⁹

The hiring of faculty members for the new campus proceeds along HKUST's well-established patterns through "search and substantiation" committees recommended by deans and approved by the provost (slide 28). This allows the necessary screening for political correctness as such committees are regularly staffed by a dean with loyal followers; the provost reserves the ultimate right to shape committee composition.³⁰

²⁹ Regarding the financial aspect, HKUST management's handling of all HKUST financial matters (including faculty compensation) is undisclosed and presumably this will extend to the HKUST Guangzhou campus.

³⁰ HKUST management adopts the CCP's screening mechanisms for Hong Kong's "elected" "chief executive." At North American universities, *all faculty members* of a department collectively decide on new hires.

d. Military-civil fusion

What is being done to prevent the HKUST Guangzhou campus from being dragged into the CCP military machine, assuming this is not the intended purpose of the campus to begin with? The “Framework Agreement on Deepening Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Cooperation in the Development of the Greater Bay Area” is explicitly referenced on the HKUST Guangzhou campus website.³¹ The Framework Agreement includes this sentence:

"To take forward military-civilian integration in innovation development in the nine PRD [Pearl River Delta] municipalities, and support the establishment of a demonstration zone of military-civilian integration in innovation development."³²

Could the HKUST Guangzhou campus be part of a demonstration zone? Is the HKUST Guangzhou campus expected to play a role in the CCP’s military-civil fusion strategy?

4. What’s the exit strategy?

What’s the criterion for success vs. failure of the HKUST Guangzhou campus? Is there any ‘bar?’ Or is the bar set so low—some teaching will happen on the HKUST Guangzhou campus, and the fans will run in some laboratories—that the HKUST Guangzhou campus is a “success” by definition? What’s the time frame for what kind of achievement?

Is there any boundary to interference in a professional university environment? Given the—to the public unspecified—rights of HKUST on the HKUST Guangzhou campus, what degree of infringement must occur for HKUST to walk away from the Guangzhou campus? What would walking away from the HKUST Guangzhou campus mean? (What does the collaboration agreement say about ending the collaboration?)

What happens if the CCP walks away?

What happens to the faculty members working on the HKUST Guangzhou campus? Will they become HKUST Clear Water Bay (Hong Kong) faculty members? (Who will newly pay their salaries?) Or will they be abandoned on the Guangzhou campus to a new sub-contractor to the CCP?

It’s great to have a vision. Elon Musk has a vision and makes it become reality. Tesla is driving the electric car industry. HKUST President SHYY Wei, Provost Lionel NI, and Vice-President for Research and Development Nancy Yip have a vision for the university of the future on a new HKUST Guangzhou campus.

If Tesla fails, Elon Musk goes broke. If the HKUST Guangzhou campus fails, will SHYY Wei, Lionel Ni, and Nancy Yip go broke? Or will they just have used (or abused?) current HKUST faculty and staff time and HKUST tax payer money? It’s easy to have great visions when success of the vision means great personal success/gain, while failure means others pay

³¹ See <https://gz.ust.hk/about/background>, last accessed 1 June 2020.

³² See https://www.bayarea.gov.hk/filemanager/en/share/pdf/Outline_Development_Plan.pdf, last accessed 16Apr2020). I am grateful to a colleague for pointing out the military aspect.

/ have paid. It's even easier if by the time the failure becomes apparent, one has long been promoted and left HKUST behind.³³

5. Conclusions

It appears that no valid case for a second campus for HKUST has been made and that the most basic questions regarding crucial issues of academia remain unanswered. Concrete information—on issues ranging from the contractual rights and duties of HKUST to finances and the role of the CCP on the new campus—are completely missing. We, the faculty and the public, know next to nothing about what's really going on. We are being fobbed off with pictures of a fancy new campus design, colorful charts, and empty phrases.

I would like to honor anyone who takes the initiative to explore something new. Thus, I am happy for HKUST management to build their second campus. I have three caveats. First, since core information regarding the second campus is being withheld and all decision-making authority rests with HKUST management (or other, higher-level authorities), it seems reasonable that those who build the new campus should carry personal responsibility for the outcome. In other words, clear criteria for success and failure as well as a system of rewards *and penalties* need to be in place (and those can obviously not be chosen and put in place by HKUST management themselves). Much of what was presented at the online faculty forum (and made available in files afterwards) does not make sense to me. But I also accept that in the creation phase an idea may not yet have assumed concrete forms, and one ought to cut creators some slack to see their ideas through.

Second, unambiguous and credible guarantees and mechanisms must be in place that HKUST's core values, in particular integrity and academic freedom, cannot be compromised on the new campus, by anyone. Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that faculty members (and their families) do not need to fear for their personal safety (including from various forms of the PRC mainland's "security" organs) in the exercise of faculty members' profession.

The issue of student protection has not yet been broached. As Perry (2015) documents, the CCP has established an elaborate system of manifold control mechanisms on PRC mainland campuses. I wonder if we want students who graduate with an HKUST degree to be shaped and constrained (in their learning and in their growing into a profession) by that system.

Third, whatever HKUST management does regarding the new campus, it must not negatively affect the existing HKUST Clear Water Bay campus and its stakeholders. There must be no negative implications for those on the HKUST Clear Water Bay campus who want to have nothing to do with the HKUST Guangzhou campus (or the CCP), including no increased pressure to self-censure, no negative financial consequences, and no transfer of HKUST administrative offices to the PRC mainland. The HKUST Guangzhou campus, HKUST

³³ I am reminded of an earlier provost pushing a new "elite" undergraduate program on the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Within a few years of its creation, the program was ranked *lowest* among all HKUST undergraduate programs. In the meantime, that provost had moved on to become deputy vice-chancellor and then president of other universities. In a different case, under a different HKUST leadership, a different HKUST Council, and in a different political environment, the rationale for a top-down proposed merger of HKUST into the Chinese University of Hong Kong was closely examined and widely and critically debated (including by a possibly much less self-censoring faculty) and ultimately abandoned. (For context, see, for example, <https://www.scmp.com/article/409302/hkust-defies-pressure-cuhk-merger>, accessed 2 June 2020.)

management asserted, is a completely separate campus, and the mechanisms must be in place to ensure it remains that way.

Beyond the big questions raised above, many practical issues appear unresolved, such as accessibility of the new campus (yes, there is a train station, and a train will stop there once or twice a day...).³⁴ At the online faculty forum, the presenters of the four “hubs” that constitute the new campus seemed rather unenthusiastic, perhaps responding to top-down orders leading to forced efforts at the base to come up with something, some laundry list of fashionable sound bites. To pull off the new campus will require the opposite: Individual faculty members with ideas that they want but cannot implement on the existing HKUST Clear Water Bay campus, and with the experience and credibility to be allowed to continue onwards where managers are not qualified to tread.

The faculty forum brought to my mind the dangers of constructivism, the (erroneous) belief that a complex system can be designed from scratch by one (or a small number of) human mind(s).³⁵ It’s one thing for starry-eyed kids to play with gleaming new toys and build sand castles. It’s another thing to undertake large-scale innovation in academia (possibly without the ‘right’ people to do so) and to do so under a totalitarian regime that negates the core values of academia and HKUST.³⁶ Unless, of course, the institution HKUST has been given no other choice (has been force-fed the Guangzhou campus by the CCP, perhaps via its local agent, the Hong Kong “government”), or if HKUST management expects the PRC’s totalitarian regime to crumble in the near future.

³⁴ Perhaps the two campuses will build airplane landing strips for students to be flown back and forth? PRC mainland immigration could conveniently frisk faculty members and students during the flight for USB sticks carrying material endangering “national security.”

³⁵ Details on constructivism can, for example, be found in Friedrich August von Hayek’s writings on the fatal conceit / the errors of socialism.

³⁶ I wonder if academics who have spent a lifetime studying some aspect of China (in particular, Chinese politics and the Chinese economy) would not bring a higher degree of consciousness to how the CCP system ultimately works than even PRC natives (with an overseas PhD and employment in Hong Kong) do. The latter may know well how to work the *guanxi* network but they have not systematically studied the complexity of what one gets into when dealing with the CCP, and the possible consequences.

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