

22 December 2020

(28 December 2020: minimally revised A., updated C.3)

Re: Reflections on the Provost's statements at HKUST's Social Science Division meeting on 7 December 2020

A. Guangzhou campus

Provost Lionel Ni talked at length about the Guangzhou campus (without apparent connection to our division). He said it wasn't "they wanting us," followed by HKUST running out of land, and HKUST being the smallest among the top 30-40 universities.

* HKUST's model, Caltech, has 300 faculty, 900 undergraduate students, and 1,300 graduate students ([here](#)); i.e., it is half the size of HKUST. Caltech is ranked #2 worldwide ([here](#)).

Thus, size and ranking are not correlated. We are not even yet talking about causality.

* Provost Lionel Ni's growth objective does not feature in the HKUST mission and vision, nor in the HKUST "strategic plan." ([Here](#) and [here](#).)

A speech about the Guangzhou campus inevitably includes a reference to the great interdisciplinary fudge (see my evaluation [here](#); or my [2006 take](#).) I wonder about President SHYY Wei and Provost Lionel Ni's personal experience of "interdisciplinarity" and checked their google scholar profiles. President SHYY Wei doesn't have one. Provost Lionel Ni does: I don't see a single article title that sounds interdisciplinary. There is plenty of articles related to "wormholes," but nothing about Immanuel Kant's take on wormholes.

B. Some older colleagues are not that productive

Provost Lionel Ni said that some of the older HKUST faculty members are not very productive and that this hurts HKUST's ranking, and rankings are important because those outside the university, such as students and parents, take them very seriously.

First, Provost Lionel Ni did not present any evidence for his claim about faculty member productivity. Second, he did not ask *why* faculty productivity may have declined. When confronted with a rationale for any decline (by me, using myself as an example), he said he doesn't comment on individual cases. To repeat the rationale: If you screw your faculty year-in year-out—in my case, among others, with a real salary that has basically been flat for the last seventeen years—then what do you expect? When your message is: We destroy your professorial status, we humiliate you, we treat you like 5-year old mental retards, we make sure there is not a shred of academia left, we kick you in the stomach every year, and we destroy your school, then what do you expect? From this point of view, a decline in HKUST faculty members' productivity is evidence either of management failure or of a HKUST management that is hell-bent on destroying academia.

C. Get a General Research Fund (grant) within three years or teach extra courses

Provost Lionel Ni announced that SOSC faculty without a GRF in the last three years will teach an extra course every year. Colleagues presented arguments on the detrimental effects this has on research and teaching. Provost Lionel Ni had no counter-argument. He stated that

the “university” gets an extra HKD 1 million for each GRF, and that GRFs are part of the accountability framework that the Council Chairman signed with the government.

(1) The emphasis on the HKD 1 million per GRF contradicts the Provost’s previous emphasis on ‘ranking’ (performance) and productivity. When his instrumentation of grants as tool to make money was pointed out to him (by me), he responded that we need to have money.

(2) The accountability framework includes past GRF numbers as part of a propaganda spiel (https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/activity/university_acc_agree.html, HKUST). There is no “get X GRF or the Council Chair is sacked” as, indeed, would make no sense. What control does a Council Chair (or we) have over independent reviewers of GRF proposals?

(3) After 25 years at HKUST, I know to distrust the manipulative use of select financial data by HKUST administrators. HKUST being a taxpayer-funded, public university and not a privately owned sweatshop ([here](#)), nothing short of *full financial disclosure* will do.

In 2019/20, HKUST received HKD 741 million in donations, yielding HKD 1.482 billion thanks to the Hong Kong government’s matching grant scheme ([here](#)). In contrast, one-third of HKUST’s 490 faculty members applying for a GRF and half of these being successful yields HKD 82 million, equal to 6% of the donation-generated amount. How much greedier can one get? Is 6% more play money for the manager really worth abandoning academia and whipping faculty into becoming money-making machines for the manager?

(4) Where do the extra GRF-generated millions go? Not into the salary budget, given the supposed rules for salary adjustments. Provost Lionel Ni’s message becomes: Waste your time and gamble for me; if you win, I’ll take the winnings, and if you lose, I’ll beat you up.

(5) We spent months on HKUST’s fake “consultation” process following Provost Lionel Ni’s directive to design a “research-inactive” policy, which includes GRF applications (my response [here](#)). Provost Lionel Ni’s latest change of mind suggests we are just his toys.

D. Star professors

Provost Lionel Ni said the Hong Kong government is rolling out a HKD 2 billion program to hire “star professors,” with each star professor receiving an extra HKD 1 million per year for five years, and another HKD 1 million per year for the star professor’s “team” for five years.

I note the obsession with stars rather than research and teaching. The corollary of a “winner-takes-all,” marketing-focused strategy and the industrialization of “research”—a questionable approach to discovery and the quest for truth—is that your existing faculty is reduced to stage-helper status (which isn’t exactly conducive to academia).

One element was blatantly missing: The urgent need to find a Star Provost and a Star President, stars in understanding human behavior and implementing progressive humanistic principles that allow a university to thrive rather than being reduced to rubble.

E. Number of PhD students to supervise

Provost Lionel Ni asked how many PhD students some HKUST faculty are supervising and—after a dramatic pause—gleefully announced: “40.”

(1) Imagine you have 4 PhD students: You discuss their research, read their writings, and make suggestions. Now multiply by ten. I don't see how one can properly supervise 40 PhD students. I.e., Provost Lionel Ni says that some really bad stuff is going down at HKUST.

(2) Dear Provost Lionel Ni: I am happy to supervise five PhD students. If my colleagues were similarly willing, then allocate us 120 Research Post-Graduate student slots. I think we currently have 2 (new) RPG slots (for PhD and MPhil). Could it be that *you*, as ultimate controller of RPG slots and financing, are the cause of the “bad stuff?”

Please then also resolve SOSC's 30-year-old unaddressed problems: Do we have individual faculty hiring RPG students, or does SOSC run a program in the course of which RPG students choose their supervisor? If the latter, then please resolve the 30-year-old problem of how to provide a decent RPG program incorporating half a dozen disciplines—achieved nowhere around the world—with 23.5 faculty members and a skeleton of a RPG program.

(3) Talking about student numbers: Some sacred financing formula retrieved by President SHYY Wei from the Holy Mountain ([here](#), or the second part [here](#)) leads our dean to whip the stage helpers into “teach more undergraduate students!” You then allow the School of Business and Management (with other schools close behind) to reduce the number of core courses taken from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences—some years ago supposedly the provider of a ‘general education’ across the university—to zero. Your revealed strategy is: Make them teach more students and take their students away.

(4) The discrimination doesn't end there: No SBM student—and no student anywhere in the university with a minor in SBM—may take SOSC 1440 Introduction to Economics ([here](#)). Further, the SBM Economics Department blocks economics professors in the Social Science from teaching courses in their field. And if a faculty member dares to say something, he is promptly shown his place ([HKUST's fake grievance procedures](#)).

F. Sabbatical leave

Provost Lionel Ni expressed his surprise at finding out earlier about the de facto absence of sabbatical leave at HKUST, and he doesn't know where that comes from. He doesn't seem to be bothered about HKUST's divergence from the professional norm and sticks to surprising “rules” he doesn't know where they come from.

G. Extension of retirement age from age 65 to 68

Provost Lionel Ni said there was consideration of extending the retirement age from age 65 to 68, under condition that the person is—I don't recall the exact phrasing—highly productive.

The North American norm is: No mandatory retirement age, and, in the case of public universities, such as the University of California system, a defined-benefit pension of up to 100% of one's last salary. The professional norm is not what Provost Lionel Ni has in mind.

Provost Lionel Ni's 3-year extension is dependent on a review. Is this a peer review? Or is this a continuation of the current practice of the Provost's private “review,” leading to extensions at variously reduced pay and variously allocated titles?

The only innovation seems to be that the Provost doesn't have to go to the Council for a formal 3-year extension. Thank you for sharing how you intend to make *your life* easier while *increasing the pressure on faculty to be obedient*. Faculty have little choice, the HKUST pension fund is severely under-funded ([here](#), or in my personal case [here](#)); i.e., faculty members either need to up their degree of submissiveness or find a second source of income.

H. Academic freedom

Nobody asked the Provost about academic freedom and Provost Lionel Ni didn't mention it.

Why is that? Is it pointless to bring up academic freedom with this Provost? Or have we already adjusted to the new Normal? Is another layer of obedience just not a big deal?

I found a passage in my HKUST contract guaranteeing me academic freedom—except that it's worthless ([here](#)).

I would have hoped that HKUST takes precautionary measures to protect the faculty in the face of a military dictatorship assuming unlimited and 100% unaccountable power (the shortest and clearest writing is still [this one](#)). For example: (1) Move the administration of all retirement funds of substantiated faculty outside of Hong Kong / PRC to protect faculty members against the potential [confiscation of their pension](#). (2) The accumulated experience with Zoom as well as management's long infatuation with online teaching suggest arrangements that allow SHSS faculty members to enlighten students about their motherland in an environment free of terror and of immigration officers who [may ban them from leaving](#).

The latter can also be combined with HKUST's secret mission (expansion). 'Land' is the key issue for Provost Lionel Ni: Australia has lots of it. If students can freely attend classes at HKUST (Clear Water Bay) *and* HKUST (Guangzhou), then surely they can at HKUST (Australia). Should Provost Lionel Ni change his mind from land grabs to better integrating HKUST into the Chinese motherland, then establish a second campus in a part of China that is *conducive to academic freedom*: Taiwan.

In conclusion

When you set up a new university you may want to run a tight ship with a small team in charge. But at some point this autocratic structure simply becomes inefficient and yields increasingly sub-optimal outcomes. That's where the historically proven arrangements of academia come in. Pursuing, instead, an alternate reality as real estate developer—while delivering the HKUST community into the hands of the world's fourth-worst oppressor ([here](#))—can gloss over the wreckage for only so long.

One after the other, HKUST managers failed to initiate the transition from an autocratic start-up structure to a professional institution. The outcome is the continuous destruction of the one and only asset that HKUST has: its faculty. You simply don't treat professors like 5-year old retards. Or if you do, that not only has consequences for the institution but says a whole lot about you.

Carsten Holz
carstenholz@ust.hk
<https://carstenholz.people.ust.hk/>