INSIGHT

Beyond numbers

Anthony Cheung says the worth of education cannot be determined solely by marketplace logic. Hong Kong needs to reflect on the true mission of a university to avoid failing its future generations

For many educationalists and professors, it was very discouraging to read the headline of a recent commentary in this paper, "The last thing Hong Kong needs is more education".

Why is more education a bad thing? There seem to be two sceptical views: first, education costs money and academics and teachers only keep on saying, "Gimme more money"; second, education does not help the real world.

While money does not work miracles (as the saying goes, any problem that money can solve is not a problem), it is a necessary ingredient of many solutions to our problems. Without money, many poor countries and rural communities simply cannot provide basic education to improve literacy and promote life skills, never mind consider the quality of education. Unesco, the UN cultural organisation, calls on all governments to invest in education, to provide "education for all".

Having said that, education should not be seen as just an investment business in the sense that we look for money indicators to measure performance – for example, if we invest so much in a law degree student, how much will he or she earn upon graduation – as if justice can be measured by earnings.

Yet, time and time again, universities in Hong Kong are coerced into informing the media (and parents and employers) how much their graduates are earning, as though this reflects the quality of the teaching and the value of education.

Our schools have for too long been driven by an examination culture. If the whole purpose of our school system is to prepare a percentage of the students for entry to higher studies, then its value would be defined by the number of A-grades its students get in examinations or how many of them enter universities, the value of which are in turn defined by league tables and so-called world rankings.

I am not suggesting such indicators are irrelevant, but that we should look beyond them.

Much of the concern about education is often expressed in market terms, questioning whether education brings financial benefits. On the other hand, people see education funding as a social investment, and believe the government should provide more money. If policymakers and stakeholders look at education mainly from such perspectives, we cannot blame students for their consumerist or utilitarian understanding of what education is for (to get a better-paid job, to get back what they have "invested" in tuition fees and other expenses).

Under the current world trend to see education as a commodity, higher education is in danger of turning into a diploma mill. This will breed a vicious cycle, with people chasing money and qualifications. Meanwhile, the core values of education are easily forgotten in the name of the search for excellence – "hollow excellence" or "excellence without a soul", in the words of Harry Lewis, a former dean of Harvard College.

An institute of learning is not determined by its hardware but by the quality and commitment of its scholars and teachers – the software and "heartware". When Ch'ien Mu and his fellow intellectuals founded New Asia College in 1950, they ran a place of learning under very unfavourable physical and financial conditions, and yet they groomed some of the finest graduates of the times.

The core values of education are easily forgotten in the name of the search for excellence

Programme marketing nowadays places too much emphasis on the benefits and welfare available to students – scholarships, grants, hostels, job prospects and earnings, for example – which might induce a distorted sense of education among our youngsters.

Without playing down the importance of modern universities in human-capital formation and in leading to new knowledge that lifts human productivity, it is time to seriously reflect on the mission of a university. Do we only go for the numbers game (grant numbers, citation numbers) and international rankings?

Or do we care more about the grooming of our new generation to be active and responsible citizens who seek purpose in life in what they study, learn not just for the sake of earning, and are ready to serve the community? Do we want them to be able to display imagination and creativity unbounded by conventional wisdom and mainstream thinking?

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A welcome lift

Peter Kammerer's gloom over the erosion of the identity of his home city is lightened by a fellow Hongkonger's act of kindness

No matter how bad things may seem, a good deed can make all the difference. I have of late been feeling down about Hong Kong's future and my little part in it, all brought to a head with the overly tight security around Vice-Premier Li Keqiang's (李克強) visit last month. Instantly, the grey clouds turned black, and where there had been the chance of a silver lining there suddenly appeared only the prospect of a gloomy future. But, for all the foreboding, all it has taken to turn my thoughts from negative to positive has been a helping hand from a bus driver named Steve.

Mainland China's influence on Hong Kong is inevitable given our lack of natural resources and space. The future naturally lies north, no matter how we feel about the politics across the border, level of wider-world understanding and limits to basic rights and freedoms. As a trading and cultural crossroads, we have always welcomed those from elsewhere and this has to be even more the case with people from the country of which we are a part. My sense, though, has been that our government, businesses and even shop owners have been unreasonably accepting.

This is not a matter of pride or prejudice, but fairness and identity. Most noticeable is how shops are catering less and less to our needs and are instead stocking shelves with what sells best among mainland visitors. Anecdotally, I am aware that company bosses are increasingly favouring the opinions of mainland staff over those of local ones, disregarding the more international local perspective. The prospect of there being only pro-Beijing candidates for the chief executive election next year has me wondering whatever happened to the idea that Hong Kong and the mainland would become one in 2047. To my mind, it was all put into depressing perspective when Li came to town.

Putting Hong Kong people second not only erodes identity, it also makes us second-class citizens in our own city. That thought was on my mind as I left the office on Thursday night, to be immediately enveloped in a cloud of cigarette smoke from a passing group of mainland tourists. The fug drifted with me as I crossed to the bus stop, where I found I had just missed my bus home by a fraction of a second. I stood dejectedly in front of its closed doors as it revved to move into the flow of traffic, stewing in my negative thoughts.

But the bus did not roar off, as expected, and instead stayed put. Suddenly, the doors opened and the driver bounded off, introduced himself as Steve, said he had driven me home before and quickly helped me to a seat before getting back behind the wheel. Later, he told me that my stop was nearing and, as I got off, wished me a pleasant good night. I have since been back in the world of positives, seeing good where before I had only been able to see evil.

From little things, big things grow, the song written by a former university classmate, Kev Carmody, goes. It is about struggle, hope and possibilities for Australia's downtrodden Aboriginal people, but it could well also apply to me as I go about living and working in Hong Kong. It has not got to that stage yet, of course, but unless we moderate behaviour and spare a thought for one another, we could easily one day find ourselves missing the bus.

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Beijing plays by international rules, but on its own terms

Paul Letters studies its low-key action to join others in exerting pressure on Iran

Multilateral sanctions were a rarity until the 1990s and it has taken time for Beijing to support the trend. China is now playing in the spirit of the new rules of the game – including penalising its oil-rich ally, Iran – but keeping it quiet.

Being a responsible member of international society traditionally meant adhering to the now outmoded principle of non-intervention in other nations' affairs. But during the period when Dengism led China towards embracing international society, new requirements for gaining international acceptance were taking shape. These new norms became central to the Western-dominated international agenda.

Nuclear proliferation became an elevated issue and interference in the affairs of sovereign states became the norm – including economic sanctions against transgressors. Of course, China's qualms are logical – it does not want to invite meddling in its own affairs. For this reason, China's decision not to veto the UN Security Council approval for action against Muammar Gaddafi's Libya surprised many.

With the end of the cold war and the greater possibility of consensus-building within international institutions, economic sanctions became in vogue. Yet it's only in the last five years that China has shown interest in the new rules. Following decades of sitting conspicuously on the sidelines, from 2006 onwards China began quietly supporting a series of sanctions against both North Korea and Iran.

Last week, the International Atomic Energy Agency's board of governors met in Vienna, where director general Yukiya Amano stated for the first time that he was "increasingly concerned" about the possible military bearing of Iran's nuclear programme. Further action is needed by the international community – and China is the linchpin.

Western businesses bailed out of Iran decades ago, due to domestic instability and international pressure, and Chinese energy firms have been bolstering the Iranian economy ever since. Although Beijing follows UN resolutions aimed at restricting Tehran's nuclear programme – resolutions which do not explicitly outlaw energy investments – the US, European Union and others have gone further, curtailing their trade with Iran across the board.

China doesn't value sanctions – as the Chinese saying goes, "the powerful get away with arson, but the weak are not allowed to have a light at home" – but it is looking to avoid confrontation. Thus, China is quietly renewing its efforts at international co-operation, such as through bridge-mending rhetoric regarding the South China Sea. On Iran, more definite action is feasible as it is not such a central interest for China.

To the frustration of Iranians, and Chinese nationalists in the know, China is slowing the pace of its investments in Iran – a move Washington has long called for. Election year looms large in the US and the embattled Obama administration is under political pressure to take a firmer line not only against Tehran but also against Chinese firms trading with Iran. China's officials privately draw the attention of American counterparts to their consciously unfulfilled contracts and deliberately overlooked new opportunities – in return for US inaction against Chinese companies for their past investments in Iran.

Hence, Chinese energy firms are on a "go-slow" – not that Beijing will declare as much. As a senior US congressional aide told Reuters recently: "The Chinese are quietly taking credit with US officials for being co-operative" on Iran. "I really date it back to mid-to-late 2010", said the aide, "when they began to signal to us very clearly: 'We can't say it publicly, but you will notice that we're not proceeding with these new contracts'."

Chinese nationalists expect to see China rising unwaveringly – not kowtowing to Western rules. So while international society's most valuable recruit is quietly playing ball in Iran, there's no need to blow the whistle.

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Human rights not the only concern in Burma

David Steinberg says US policy must also address the wider strategic interests at play in Asia

A decade ago, Georgetown University sponsored a conference on Myanmar, designed to encourage the Bush administration to consider the strategic importance of that country as an element of US foreign policy. It did not accomplish its goal. US policy continues to be focused primarily on democracy and human rights, which are important but not the sole elements of foreign policy.

Myanmar is now the focus of three strategic thrusts that will profoundly affect the region.

China had a decade earlier begun a drive to ensure its varied interests in Myanmar were pursued. After billions of dollars of military and economic aid, and tens of billions of dollars in investment and infrastructure development, this year China declared that the two countries had a "comprehensive strategic partnership".

India recognised that extensive Chinese penetration of Myanmar was not in its own interest, and in around 1993 reversed its negative policy towards the military regime.

Two legs of the strategic tripod were thus in place. More recently, the third leg has appeared. This is the major US$8.6 billion Italian-Thai Development project in Dawei, close to the Thai border. This will be a major industrial development zone. The interests in this development are not simply Thai; the project involves Singapore and there's a possibility of Japanese participation.

So we are witnessing the development of a set of diverse but targeted strategic interests centred on Myanmar. The government's careful manipulation has provided massive financial support: in 1988, Burma had foreign exchange reserves of some US$30 million; today they stand at around US$5 billion, largely from the sale of natural gas to Thailand. When two Chinese pipelines for Middle Eastern and African crude oil and Burmese offshore natural gas come on stream in the next two years, the resources available will vastly increase.

How these extensive resources will be used, and whether effectively for the benefit of the diverse Burmese peoples, are important questions. For the US to continue to call for isolation of that country seems counterproductive. To continue to foster Western and US economic isolation raises serious questions of the relevance of US policy to that vital region.

In the 1950s, then Burmese prime minister U Nu said Burma was a tender gourd surrounded by barbed cacti. With the cold war over, Myanmar has embraced its prickly neighbours – but to what effect on the well-being of the Burmese people and regional security?

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The tortuous birth of a credible opposition

Gwynne Dyer looks at a Russian tycoon's failure to offer voters a limited alternative to the ruling party

"He took off the Kremlin dog collar," explained a friend of Mikhail Prokhorov, Russia's third-richest man, as the political party Prokhorov had founded to run against Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in the December elections blew up in his face. Prokhorov spent millions setting up the new party, Right Cause, and the Kremlin stole it from him, he claims, though he never blames President Dmitry Medvedev or Putin personally.

Putin & Co allegedly encouraged Prokhorov to launch Right Cause to provide a safe repository for the votes of businessmen and intellectuals who just couldn't bring themselves to vote for Putin's own United Russia party any more. It wouldn't be a real opposition party, of course, but it would improve the optics of the situation. Such opposition is sorely needed, because many people in the Russian elite are getting fed up with Putin's rule.

So if you belong to the more intelligent wing of the ruling elite, then you try to create a place where disgruntled intelligentsia and businessmen can park their protest votes. Perhaps a centre-right party that will defend their economic interests, but offer an articulate critique of the regime's policies. It's entirely possible that some people around Putin – perhaps even the great man himself – thought that cogent criticism from a loyal opposition might do them and the country some good.

Putin doesn't need to control the political system as tightly as he does. Even after 11 years in power, he is immensely popular, for he has given Russians back their self-respect and a modest degree of prosperity. He would win a free election hands down.

So in Russia's interest, he should lighten up and allow the political system to evolve towards a genuine democracy. Only slowly, of course – and maybe that's what he had in mind in allowing the creation of Prokhorov's party. So what went wrong?

There are undoubtedly elements within the Putin regime who think no opposition should be tolerated. According to Prokhorov, the name of the chief villain is Vladislav Surkov, Medvedev's top aide. "We have a puppet master in the country, who long ago privatised the political system, and who for a long time has misinformed the leadership of the country about what is happening in the political system, who pressures the media … and tries to manipulate public opinion," Prokhorov claimed.

Who knows? It could have been Putin changing his mind. It could have been Surkov circumventing his wishes. But this is not going to be the year when a credible non-communist opposition party emerges in Russia.

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