

Do We Share a Common University Identity?

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Abstract

The rise of East Asian knowledge economies has driven national leaders and higher education researchers to seek identities for their own universities and higher education systems. This trend may, in the end, lead to a crisis of the identity that universities have in common, as autonomous academic bodies.

Except for Al-Azhar University, all universities in the world share a common origin: they stem from universities in medieval Europe. This famous observation by Philip Altbach conveys a strong message that all institutions claiming to be universities should be autonomous communities of academics, independent from both religious and secular authorities. Unfortunately, anyone familiar with the long and diverse history of universities around the globe knows this claim to be a myth. Universities throughout the world have frequently faced crises when religious or secular powers have challenged their academic freedom and autonomy.

In Search of a Distinct University Identity

Especially in regions far from European traditions of civilization such as East Asia, modern university systems were launched, developed, and transformed after the mid-nineteenth century in close association with nation building. In this process, the articulation of universities as concepts imported from the West, but with Eastern intellectual traditions and identities, has been a constant and central issue. When Japan established its first modern university in 1877, it chose the term *daigaku* 大学 as a translation for “university”—notably, as in *Daigaku-Ryo*, which was the name of a college for training national administrators that existed until the twelfth century. In 1898, the Qing Dynasty in China transformed its traditional institute for training senior administrators into the

modern university *Dà Xué Táng* (大学堂), renamed *Peking Dà Xué* (北京大学) in 1912, just after the establishment of the Republic of China. In 1946, South Korea founded its first university, Seoul National University, as *Daehakgyo* (대학교; 大學校), based on a concept of national university identity distinct from the abolished Keijo Teikoku Daigaku, an imperial university under the Japanese colonial regime. In the nineteenth century, modern East Asian states searched for, and introduced, university models inspired by national higher education systems in modernized Western nation states. These *Daigaku*, *Dà Xué*, and *Daehakgyo* were conceptualized and reshaped differently in their particular national languages and historical contexts, but can all be translated into the common English term “university.”

In recent decades, the rise of national East Asian economies based on science and technology has driven national leaders and higher education researchers to seek identities for their universities and higher education systems that are distinct from the West and present similarities and differences within the region. The emergence of globally top-ranked universities in East Asia has accelerated this trend. For example, the achievements of Singapore’s highly ranked universities indicate that it is possible to establish a world-class university on a strong national basis. In the process, while substantial changes are taking place to decentralize university governance, a clear consensus on academic freedom and university autonomy is still missing.

Today, top universities in China seek to dominate regional rankings, backed by huge national investments and talent concentration driven by national motives. The strategies and profiles of Chinese universities, therefore, are strongly influenced by the connection between university governance and party leadership and by systematic support to both top universities and top disciplines (“Double First Class”) by government projects. Higher education systems within and surrounding Greater China have, to varying degrees, been influenced by regional geopolitics in higher education, including student and faculty mobility within the region and beyond, for example with Africa.

Will Nationalism Lead to a Crisis of University Identity?

In recent years, the rise of nationalism has changed the landscape of global higher education. In particular, growing self-confidence among East Asia’s own university models may ultimately result in the claim that *Dà Xué* and other concepts of leading East Asian higher education institutions are different from the notion of universities originating from the specific political setting of medieval Europe.

History indicates that national demand for science and technology and highly skilled human resources does not always result in supporting universities as autonomous academic communities—as shown by the closure of universities under the French Revolution. The global development of universities is stimulating an “arms race” in terms of knowledge, and close connections with national governments and industry tend to link academic exchange and collaborations with national interests. Even in Japan, whose national constitution guarantees academic freedom, there are occurrences of legal actions to prevent international collaborations with researchers from certain countries.

It is high time for universities around the world to start a dialogue in order to seek a common understanding of the contemporary university, based on a mutual respect for diversity and a need to address common global and regional challenges. This dialogue on a contemporary concept of university may be linked with postcolonial discourses, but, more importantly, it should be led by academics engaging in self-reflection across nations and institutions. Universities around the world can share a common identity only through the willpower of academics working on this exercise together. ▲

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