Asia's Burgeoning Higher Education Hubs

BY ALAN DESSOFF

To become more competitive in the international higher education market, several Asian countries are establishing themselves as "education hubs."

ROM SINGAPORE TO SOUTH KOREA, HONG KONG TO MALAYSIA, and elsewhere in the region, higher education hubs are emerging across Asia. Driven to become more international in their policies and practices, many countries are seizing on higher education as a way to do it, and are moving aggressively, if not always successfully, to make it work.

An Asian education hub policy and model of higher education internationalization that "seems to have come of age" in 2010 as formal policy and not just an "aspirational" strategy of going global has been embraced and adapted by governments and nations not just throughout Asia but also the Middle East, says Cameron Richards, a professor at the Perdana School of Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Even Western countries, which have long led the way with higher education internationalism, are looking to learn new strategies and tactics from a model that views higher education as "a product that can be marketed like any other" to provide "a focus of national development harnessing the international mobility of students and globalized credentialism," Richards asserts.



Development of the hubs, a phenomenon largely of the last decade, has engendered a competition of sorts among the countries involved. The stated vision of the Ministry of Higher Education in Sri Lanka is "to be the most cost-effective education hub in Asia."¹ But some higher education authorities involved in or otherwise familiar with the development of the hubs question whether they all will be successful, and some hint that they might constitute more of a fad likely to fade than a trend likely to continue.

For now, though, "everybody is jumping on the ship because 'education hub' sounds snazzy. They demonstrate to the world that they are interested in progress and in making changes in their educational systems," says Jason E. Lane of the State University of New York (SUNY) Albany, where his positions include senior researcher in the Institute for Global Education Studies.

"There seems to be somewhat of a frenzy in trying to do this. I think it's more of a global prestige thing, the desire to be seen as an intellectual leader in their region. They're trying to bid for the top intellectual minds. I think ultimately this is going to be a growing source of movement of students from Anglophile countries to these destinations. In some ways, it's a relatively easy transition. It's part of the overall phenomenon of the growth in transnational students," suggests Jason Schrott, a global education consultant in Phoenix, Arizona. Also, "Asia is the region of the future. It's a strategic growth area," and education hubs are "good environments" in which students from the United States and other countries can become integrated into the region, Schrott says.

Lane believes the surge of recent hub development is "all about economic competitiveness and international reputation." When Asian countries import colleges or universities from countries with well-respected education systems, the foreign institutions "directly or indirectly are legitimizing the efforts of the host nations as they emerge into the world economy," he explains. Bringing in foreign institutions that already have "a great deal of history, administrative oversight, and a respected quality of education" allows the countries to "build their education systems a lot faster than they could by investing in their own institutions," he says.

He adds that "when you look at where plans for these hubs are coming from, it's from economic development agencies, not education agencies. They want to foster their own workforce development. They have seen the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia build themselves up by importing the best and brightest from foreign countries, and now they are working to reverse that trend."

SINGAPORE STARTED WITH THE "GLOBAL SCHOOLHOUSE"



In Singapore, for example, the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) is the most publicly prominent among several other

organizations, including the Ministry of Education, in developing the city's "Global Schoolhouse" initiative. In Hong Kong, the Songdo Global University Campus is under construction in one of six Free Economic Zones (FEZs) in the country. "It's about signaling to the world that they are modernizing their economies, putting more globally competitive workers out there, all in the hopes of attracting more business down the road," asserts Lane.

Jane Knight, adjunct professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, questions what entitles a country to designate itself as an education hub in the first place. Some countries are "adopting the label and primarily using it as a branding exercise," as in other products and services like transportation, wine, fashion, communication, and many more. Others, "where we are seeing significant investment and some strategic planning," are positioning themselves as "innovators" in developing three types of education hubs: student, education and training, and knowledge.

The student hub is the most focused and prevalent type of education hub, says Knight, who defines its key aspect as "the recruitment of international students to the country for the purposes of internationalization of domestic higher education institutions, revenue generation, and building an international profile." In an education and training hub, foreign universities are invited to establish teaching centers or branch campuses, and international private training and education companies also are encouraged to offer academic programs and professional development opportunities aimed at



international as well as national students, Knight explains. The mandate of a knowledge and innovation hub extends more broadly, encouraging foreign research institutes and companies with major research and development activities to establish a base in a country and collaborate with foreign and local universities and training companies to create "a critical mass of talent and expertise," Knight says.

"We have to be careful" in labeling a country as an education hub, she concludes. But she points to Singapore as "the furthest along" in developing as a knowledge and innovation hub. Singapore is "ahead of the game," agrees Schrott, who says other countries look at Singapore and exclaim, "Wow, these guys have done it, why can't we?"

As Singapore's Ambassador to the United States, Chan Heng Chee, puts it, Singapore is "a city with a buzz," and its "Global Schoolhouse" initiative has become a model of sorts for higher education hubs that other countries are establishing or aspire to. It was launched in 2002 "to further enrich Singapore's education scene by introducing a diverse mix of top tertiary institutions and programs that complement EDB's industry development efforts," explains Angeline Leow, senior officer of marketing and communications, in the EDB.

A year later, the Singapore government created "Singapore Education" as a brand name to establish and promote Singapore as a premier education hub and encourage international students to study there.

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In the years since, Singapore has drawn a number of leading foreign tertiary institutions and more than 30 pre-tertiary schools offering international curricula. The University of Chicago's Booth Graduate School of Business and the Technical University of Munich have set up Asian campuses in Singapore, while Duke University's School of Medicine, Yale University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Britain's Imperial College are among foreign institutions that are collaborating with local Singapore universities to offer joint academic programs, Leow reports.

As Lane has suggested, economic values underscore Singapore as an education hub across the region. As it continues to diversify its educational offerings, the emphasis is on "building industry-relevant capabilities," and as top foreign institutions complement local institutions growing in scope and stature, the education system created is "aligned with our varied economic sectors," says Leow. According to EDB promotional materials, Singapore plans to attract even more students, faculty, researchers, and professionals from all over the world to make the citystate "a global talent hub."

WAS MALAYSIA FIRST?



While Singapore "is typically lauded as the originator and exemplar" of the Asian education hub policy and model that has been for-

mally adopted or is currently projected in some form or another now throughout parts of Asia, there is evidence that it may have originated first in Malaysia, says Richards. In a paper he delivered this year at the International Conference on University Education (INCUE), he cited a reference in a 1990 Malaysian Ministry of Education policy document to developing "a world-class quality education which is flexible and innovative that in turn will make Malaysia a regional educational hub and a centre of educational excellence."² In short, Richards concluded, "there is verifiable as well as anecdotal evidence that not only did Malaysia come up with the concept of an education hub policy before Singapore did, but that Singapore actually 'borrowed' the concept from Malaysia."

The September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 were a "critical factor" in Malaysia's renewed interest in education hub policy, Richards maintains. While Singapore in the early 2000s was the first to concentrate on attracting foreign universities, mainly from the United Kingdom and Australia, to operate offshore campuses in Singapore and in turn attract students from other countries, many students from the Middle East, who found the West, in general, and the United States in particular, less accessible, became interested in Malaysia as both "a gateway to the West and as an alternative and also more economical option for overseas education," Richards asserts.



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Separated from Singapore only by a maritime border crossed by causeways, Malaysia is striving now to become a leading education hub of its own, with two developments underway, although details of their current status are not clear. One, Kuala Lumpur Education City (KLEC), in Malaysia's federal capital and most populous city, was launched by the Malaysian government in 2007 as a project to be privately led in its development over 15–20 years. Envisioned in some reports as a regional education hub and in others as international in scope, it reportedly will bring foreign and local universities together, along with primary and secondary schools, in a 500-acre KLEC Academic Park with an expected student population of about 30,000.

The other Malaysian education hub—EduCity at Iskandar, a special economic zone in the Malaysian state of Johor, bordering Singapore—also is being privately developed with a principal objective to create "a best-in-class higher education destination with superior urban environment academic institutions, students, and guests to live, work, study, and play," according to a posting in March on iProperty.com, a Malaysian Web site. Its second objective, according to the site, includes contributing to "the nation's aspiration to become a regional hub for education."

Last February, according to a Malaysian news report, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Khaled Nordin said the country was becoming a key destination for foreign universities, with applications received from 25 institutions to establish campuses there.3 Although not identified, the applicants reportedly came from the United States, Britain, Australia, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, China, India, Nepal, and even neighboring Singapore. Khaled said he expected to receive more applications, especially from Europe and West Asia. According to a Malaysian news report, the Ministry of Higher Education aims to attract at least 200,000 international students to higher education institutions in the country by 2020. Malaysia currently attracts more than 90,000 international students annually.4

With the KLEC and Iskandar hub developments, Khaled said the higher learning sector was poised to be the key engine of growth as Malaysia moves toward a developed and high-income status, with a reputation for quality higher education on a par with developed countries, and becomes Asia's leading education hub. Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin has noted that Malaysia's strategic position "forms a melting pot of confluence that allows cross-fertilization of ideas, cultures, and civilization dialogism." In a speech at an education conference in Kuala Lumpur, he said: "Through cooperation with established and renowned institutions abroad, the government intends to make the education sector an economic endeavor by attracting more foreign students."⁵

BURGEONING SOUTH KOREA



Seen by Knight as an "emerging" higher education hub, South Korea also has ambitious plans that are beginning to become reality after being

hindered for two years by the global economic slowdown. Now, projected hub campuses are in stages of development or planning in two of the country's six free economic zones, underscoring again their relationship to the country's economic development.

Furthest along is the Songdo Global University Campus in the IFEZ, which already has attracted several universities from the United States and other countries, although construction still is underway. "The whole campus is not completed yet," reports Minkyung Park, an assistant professor in the School of Recreation, Health, and Tourism at George Mason University, one of the U.S. institutions that has expressed interest in locating there. "We target the spring of 2013 to open our program there," says Park, who has been actively involved in the development of Songdo.

"It has to do with global competition in everything, and education is part of it. The final product will be a whole new city that includes a residential area, business section, research park, open space, and the Songdo campus in one corner. They are recruiting knowledge-based industries, including information

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technology, some international financial institutions, and hospital systems," Park says.

Part of the role of the Songdo campus is "to provide top-quality education for residents and employees, from all over the world," but the principal objective is to help Korea retain its own students and stem "the brain drain that happens when they send their own high-quality students to foreign institutions," Park says. Also, Korea wants to recruit foreign students, primarily in China and Southeast Asia, as well as Russia and Mongolia or other Eurasian countries, she says. She acknowledges that Korea will be competing with Singapore for many of those students.

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While the United States is not a primary recruiting area, George Mason and several other U.S. universities have identified Songdo as a location of interest, and some are moving quickly to set up shop there. In March, Stony Brook University, through the State University of New York (SUNY) Korea, became the first foreign university to have a permanent physical presence within Songdo when it launched classes there for 34 Korean students seeking graduate degrees in "technology and society" as well as engineering.

SUNY's partnership with Songdo "makes us the most visible American university in the Republic of Korea and our substantial presence here serves as a model for higher education around the world," SUNY Chancellor Nancy L. Zimpher said at the opening celebration. Stony Brook itself will benefit from the partnership because "it places the university on a world stage, and further builds upon our reputation as an internationally renowned institution of higher learning," added Dennis N. Assanis, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs.

A month earlier, George Mason's academic initiatives committee recommended that the faculty Senate endorse a proposed Songdo initiative that was prepared by Park and Anne Schiller of the university's Office of Global and International Strategies. Park says George Mason has filed an application with the Korean Ministry of Education to provide initial undergraduate programs in management, economics, and global affairs. "We feel that those are popular ones in Asia," she says.

George Mason's interests are spelled out in the 21-page initiative. "The Songdo campus project further implements Mason's longstanding strategic emphasis on East Asia. It strategically and intentionally establishes a visible presence for Mason in a prestigious East Asian location and enhances Mason's reputation nationally abroad," the initiative states. It adds that the Songdo campus "would expand Mason's potential to recruit internationally and provide new global opportunities for domestic students and Mason faculty," and also "will expand Mason's alumni base in East Asia, opening the way to future opportunities in the region."

The document points out that no investment of either George Mason or Virginia state funds is required to establish and operate the Songdo campus because Korean government subsidies "will support the operation as enrollments build." Also, the use of facilities, including faculty housing, will be free for at least five years, and dependents of faculty will get discounts on their own tuition expenses, the document states.

In addition to Stony Brook and George Mason, Alfred University, and the University of Utah in the United States, and Ghent University in Belgium are among other institutions planning to open programs at Songdo, according to Park. But Alfred University President Charles M. Edmondson, acknowledging that the institution had signed a memorandum of understanding a year ago that could lead to its offering degrees at Songdo, said in April that capital costs threatened to derail those plans. He said it would cost "tens of millions" of dollars that Alfred would have to raise itself for the equipment it would need to present a full range of programs in material science, glass science, and ceramic engineering-programs that are "what we feel they want from us" and in which "we are among the best in the world."

"Korea is obviously a place where anyone who wants to be an active participant in international education and research would wish to be. We were flattered to be invited to participate in Songdo, but we have to be sober and prudent about how we assess our participation. We are not abandoning the project yet, but if we are unable to find a funding source, I fear we will have no choice but to either withdraw or at least ask for a significant extension of time," he said.

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Meanwhile, Jeju Global Education City is emerging as another educational hub in the Jeju Free International City Development Center on Jeju Island off South Korea's southern coast, with a principal objective, like Songdo's, to curb the number of Korean students studying abroad, especially for language education. That has "a negative economic impact" on Korea, according to a promotional document for the project.⁶

It also is the project's aim "to strengthen our global competitiveness in the education sector," the document states, with a commitment to attracting "prestigious schools" from other countries and providing "world-class" educational services in order to attract "as many foreign students as possible" from non-English-speaking countries throughout the world. Beneficiaries of the education that Jeju will provide, in addition to Korean residents, are identified specifically as students from China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other parts of Asia.

Modeled on Dubai's "Knowledge Village," Jeju is early in its development but reportedly plans to host up to 15 leading global universities by 2016, as well as a number of private primary and secondary schools from abroad. While several U.S. and other foreign schools have been approached about considering establishing campuses there, at least one of them has withdrawn because of costs. St. Albans School, an independent school for boys in Washington, D.C., spent two years working with the Jeju Development Corporation as it "seriously explored the possibility" of opening a school at Jeju, says Assistant Headmaster David Baad. "We wanted to open a true 'brother' school that would be closely tied to our school in Washington and our way of education," but "in the end, the realities of increased construction costs and economic constraints" made such a model "unfeasible," and St. Albans' governing board decided late last year not to go forward, Baad reports.

HONG KONG'S AMBITIOUS GOALS



Hong Kong's hub aspirations are largely "to nurture talents for the region," says Donald Tong, Hong Kong commissioner for economic

and trade affairs in the United States. While Hong Kong welcomes students from around the world as well as from within Asia, the objective is to keep them close to home. "We offer quality education to retain talents for the region," Tong emphasizes.

Michelle Li, Hong Kong's deputy secretary for education, cites the values the territory offers as an education hub to its own students and others from its region as well as more distant countries. She says they include a "cultural blend" of East and West, Englishspeaking tertiary institutions, an "open and vibrant" economy, and a strategic location that makes it the "premier international gateway" to mainland China.

To support its objective and enhance internationalization of is education efforts, Hong Kong has doubled quotas for nonlocal students at publicly funded institutions from 10 percent to 20 percent since 2008. With about \$160 million (U.S.) in a scholarship fund, the Hong Kong government will offer up to 10 scholarships, starting in the 2012–2013 academic year, to first-year students from member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as well as India and Korea, who enroll in publicly funded degree programs in Hong Kong.

Tong adds that the government has relaxed restrictions to allow nonlocal students to take part-time jobs while they are in Hong Kong, and also stay there for 12 months after graduation while they look for permanent jobs. With a current unemployment rate of 3.4 percent, "I think we can expect most of these graduates to be able to find jobs within that period," and once they have done that, they can apply for a work permit to stay in Hong Kong, Tong says. And if they spend seven years there, they can apply for permanent residency.

In another initiative to support the internationalization and diversification of its higher education sector, Hong Kong plans this year to invite eligible self-financing, nonprofit-making postsecondary institutions to construct their own facilities to offer full-time programs in the territory.⁷

Elsewhere in Asia, one of Sri Lanka's five key national development priorities is development and transformation of its higher education sector, establishing itself as a regional knowledge and education hub in South Asia by 2015, according to presentations that Sri Lankan education officials made at the British Council's "Going Global" conference in London in March. Higher Education Minister S. B. Dissanayake and Sunil Nawaratne, secretary of the ministry of higher education, spoke of Sri Lanka's changing higher education landscape two years after the end of a devastating three-decade civil war. With rapid development of infrastructure, a stable government, and economic growth signaling Sri Lanka's recovery, the officials talked about macro-level policy and structural changes that were being implemented to enhance higher education in the country, including improving its quality in both the public and private sectors.

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> But an obstacle seemed to emerge two months earlier when Dissanayake temporarily withdrew a proposed bill in the parliament intended to allow private, foreign higher education institutions to establish branch campuses in the country. Local news reports cited student demonstrations against private universities, with dissent also growing among lecturers and within the government. Dissanayake spoke of hoping to present to the parliament a new "quality assurance, accreditation, and qualification framework" bill, with the objective of monitoring and regulating private degree-awarding institutions in Sri Lanka, but some critics contended it was essentially the same as the first bill.

> While the higher education hub movement in Asia seems to be attracting more interest throughout the

Endnotes

- ¹Presentation by Sunil Jayantha Nawaratne, Secretary, Sri Lanka Ministry of Higher Education, at British Council's "Going Global" 2011.
- ² Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020). Available online at http:// info.mohr.gov.my/PTK/notaPTKbaru/wawasan%202020/ WAWASAN%202020%20VERSI%201.pdf
- ³ New Straits Times, February 23, 2012.
- ⁴ The Malaysian Insider, September 13, 2011.

region—China, Taiwan, and Bhutan are among other countries that indicated interest—experts disagree on whether it will be able to maintain the momentum. "It depends on what 'survival' means and what 'success' is. Hubs are politically driven and I think they will survive because there is a lot of political clout behind them," asserts Schrott.

"Interest doesn't always become reality, and we're probably going to see a leveling off. You see all these hubs developing and competing for the same students. There is no way current demand is going to be able to support them all. Some of the major hubs already there—Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong—will continue to develop and focus on the quality of their offerings, while some of the others that are unable to attract institutions and students are going to fade away," concludes Lane.

In a joint presentation at the "Going Global" 2011 conference in Hong Kong, Richards and Mohd Ismail Abd Aziz, director of international affairs at UTM and chair of the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Internationalization Committee, outlined what they termed the critical elements of a sustainable educational hub/internationalization policy. The elements include: the "crucial role" of a postgraduate research market, "often underestimated or taken for granted;" a need by policymakers to also focus on "encouraging wider social awareness and community acceptance" of the link between educational internationalization and national development; and "quality assurance," which policy implementers embrace in its concept and requirements but "not all understand or appreciate" in "deep and sustainable" terms.

While they were speaking primarily about Malaysia, their remarks could apply to other countries as well in Asia and beyond, and the chances that their higher education hubs will succeed.

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- ⁵ Education Nation Conference 2011.
- ⁶ "Educational Hub of Asia: Jeju Global Education City," from Jeju Free International City Development Center (JDC).
- ⁷ From Donald Tong, Hong Kong Commissioner for Economic and Trade Affairs, USA, in phone interview. Also in a document, "Hong Kong as a Regional Education Hub," published by Education Bureau, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, November 2011.

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