Neighbour’s long shadow casts Hong Kong in sharp relief

While China’s intensification puts regional rivals in the shade, it casts a spotlight on progress in the special administrative region

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China’s surge in global university rankings has come largely at the expense of its neighbours, with competitors shunted backwards by the momentum of the world’s most populous nation. But for its diminutive half-sibling, China’s hulking presence signifies a launch platform for new opportunities.
Hong Kong’s university leaders said that the benefits of living next door to China far outweighed the drawbacks, luring top academics from around the world. Blessed with a familiar working environment, British-style institutional autonomy, a widespread grasp of English and a plethora of top 200 institutions, the territory offers a natural base camp for East-West collaborations.

Mainland China now ‘irreplaceable’ as Hong Kong research partner

Just a short train ride from some of China’s biggest and fastest-growing finance and technology hubs, Hong Kong universities also have unparalleled access to research partnerships, industry investment and an almost inexhaustible supply of foreign students.

“Many universities would like to be sitting exactly where we are,” said University of Hong Kong vice-president Ian Holliday. “Students around the world can see that China is going to be part of their future, their personal story. We’ve been in the right place at the right time, in a sense.”

Hong Kong’s top universities have experienced continuous improvement in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings over the past three years. Since 2017, the territory has claimed five top 200 institutions, a total equalled only by London.

Professor Holliday said that inclusion in what is known as the Greater Bay Area – a development strategy encompassing Guangzhou, Shenzhen and seven other Chinese cities clustered around the Pearl River Delta, as well as the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau – promised to accelerate the progress.

“The rest of the world is looking at the Greater Bay,” he said. “We would be foolish to ignore it.”

Hong Kong metro stations are emblazoned with posters of the Greater Bay, China’s answer to Tokyo and San Francisco bays. Professor Holliday said that, as the region’s top-ranking institution, the University of Hong Kong could harness the Greater Bay to attain global university status in the same way that Stanford had leveraged its proximity to Silicon Valley.
As a hotbed of entrepreneurship and innovation fuelling a gross domestic product of about $1.5 trillion (£1.2 trillion), the region offers enormous business opportunities. And with a similar population size to the UK, it is a boundless source of international students – not only for subsidised undergraduate places, which are tightly rationed in Hong Kong, but also for self-financing master’s programmes.

“As more people from all over the world come into the Greater Bay seeking employment opportunities, some may want to upgrade their skill sets by coming to HKU for an MBA,” Professor Holliday said. “But I don’t think that’s going to be the main significance of the Greater Bay Area.

“It’s going to be the kinds of partnerships we can make with the Oxfords, the Cambridges, the Harvards, Yales, Princetons and Stanfords, who see what’s going on and want to have some kind of presence. The easiest way may well be a partnership with an already implanted institution.”

The University of Chicago Booth School of Business has premises in Hong Kong. But with space limited in the territory, much of the action is taking place on the Chinese mainland, where Hong Kong universities have forged partnerships with companies, district authorities and universities, including China’s prestigious C9 League – the equivalent of the US Ivy League or the UK’s Russell Group.

HKU has a teaching hospital in Shenzhen, just on the other side of the border, while Hong Kong Baptist University runs a college in nearby Zhuhai in conjunction with Beijing Normal University. Hong Kong’s second oldest university, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, also has an outpost across the border – a joint venture with Shenzhen University – with aspirations to cultivate it into a stand-alone research university with strong Chinese cultural influence.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong was created to connect tradition with modernity and to integrate China and the West, according to its president Rocky Tuan. “That’s our model, and that’s exactly what we do.” He said that as the only local institution bearing “Chinese” as its first name, the university could help bridge misunderstandings between China and the West.

“It is particularly important now for the university to assert that role both ways – to connect our students with the Americas and Europe, but also to give students
from universities all over the world opportunities to come here and learn about things that are very much part of Chinese culture," Professor Tuan said.

“This place can play a very important role, because we’re that bit different from your traditional university. We have given ourselves a mission to connect the world.”

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, ranked just five places below HKU despite being 80 years younger, also leverages its proximity to China through mainland partnerships. Positioned as Asia’s answer to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and specialising in a similar range of disciplines, it invested strongly in commercialisation and knowledge transfer “from the very beginning”, according to president Wei Shyy.

Professor Shyy said that HKUST’s founding academics had given it a “different trajectory” from other Hong Kong institutions, harnessing experience in overseas institutions to forge a “mainstream US-style university”. Inaugural president Chia-Wei Woo, a Shanghai-born and US-educated physicist who had previously run San Francisco State University, had been the first Chinese American leader of a major US higher education institution.

That Western flavour had lived on, with about 10 per cent of HKUST’s undergraduates recruited from outside China and Taiwan, and close to half of domestic bachelor’s students spending a semester abroad. This generated a rich harvest of overseas exchange students, Professor Shyy said. “We have a large number of non-Chinese students on our campus at any given time,” he said.

City University of Hong Kong has also surged into the top 200 after being accredited just 25 years ago, outgrowing its original mandate as a polytechnic. President Way Kuo, a Taiwanese-born nuclear engineer, said that 70 per cent of his faculty hailed from elsewhere – including a Hungarian head of chemistry, a Korean head of accounting, an American head of English and a German Australian head of veterinary medicine.

Professor Kuo said that the diverse leadership made City “more open” than many other universities. “It’s conscious,” he said.

Jacob Huang, executive director of City’s Institute for Advanced Study – a magnet for star international researchers, modelled on a Princeton University centre that housed Albert Einstein – said that the foreign flavour and ubiquitous use of the English language made visiting scholars feel “very
comfortable here. Hong Kong’s like a bridge between outside and China,” he said.

Joshua Mok Ka-Ho, a comparative education policy specialist and vice-president of Hong Kong’s Lingnan University, said that the territory’s academic standards had been buttressed by constraints on student entry and rigorous assessments of teaching and research quality. Boasting fewer than 4,000 students and 750 staff, Lingnan has been rated by Forbes among Asia’s top 10 liberal arts universities.

“We command respect from our peers,” Professor Mok said. “We are given a very free environment for academics to do whatever research topics they like, and this is also good in terms of international networks.”

He said that Hong Kong universities could benefit from more government funding. “But I don’t think this is only about money. It’s about the whole environment – academic freedom, institutional autonomy, collaboration. Hong Kong is well placed as an international education hub.”

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The Times Higher Education Asia-Pacific Rankings will be released during THE’s Research Excellence Summit: Asia-Pacific, at the University of New South Wales, on 21 February.