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University Autonomy-Governance-Accountability (大學法人化) : Taiwan's New Era of Higher Education?

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Ever since September of 2007, when I became associated with National Cheng Kung University (NCKU,) one of the two comprehensive and research intensive universities in Taiwan, I learned about a novel (to me, that is) Chinese term 大學法人化. The direct translation in English of this term is quite awkward. It is “**University Legalization of Persons.**” After spending much effort in understanding its meaning in totality, the closest English translation I can come up with which sounds less awkward is the combined meaning of three words: autonomy, governance and accountability. For brevity, I shall refer to this term throughout as ULP.

In the summer of 2008, nearly after a year since I arrived at NCKU, I became palpably aware that ULP was more than a concept; it was Taiwan’s Ministry of Education (MOE) “marching order” for all national universities. MOE expects within a reasonable foreseeable future that all national universities shall be operating under the ULP status, which means that national universities in Taiwan will undergo a metamorphosis. Not only will there be fundamental structural alterations of the manner of how national universities are to operate, there will also be profound paradigm shift of how they will be perceived within the society at large.

As it turns out, the perceived urgency of this “transformation” is even more acute for NCKU because it is expected that one of the first, if not the first, universities to reach ULP status is NCKU. With that, one can imagine the pressure felt by the NCKU’s leadership team, led by Academician Michael Lai, President of NCKU. Among the multitude pressing issues facing the leadership team in guiding and operating one of the two leading and massive research intensive comprehensive universities in Taiwan, the transformation into ULP status must be one of the highest, if not the highest,

NCKU priorities. Indeed, as the first university to assume ULP status, “failure” is simply *not* an option.

It must be underscored that beyond just impacting “a single university,” such as NCKU, President Lai and his leadership team felt that the success of NCKU’ s ULP can and will have significant implications throughout Asia Pacific.

In the last several decades of the 20th century, the world saw an explosive growth of quality and quantity of Asian Pacific universities. However, this explosion was not accompanied by ULP transformation. Nearly all national universities in Asia Pacific region are tightly regulated by their respective governments. Yet, suddenly in the 21st century, ULP somehow became a major issue. For example, in recent past, public universities in Japan and Singapore were “corporatized” their nomenclature for ULP status. As a good friend of mine who is well connected to Korean national universities told me, they are also discussing with the government about some form of ULP status in the foreseeable future. Although in Mainland China with close to 2000 universities, all of them in one form or another “national” in characteristic, there appears to be no movement as far as one knows in rendering them to achieve ULP status. However, one can envision that within the foreseeable future, with Mainland universities wanting to become intimate part of the global academic landscape, they too may have to face this reality. Hence, by being the first university in Taiwan to achieve ULP status, the success of NCKU in making the transition will not only have implications and impact for all national universities in Taiwan, it can also have implications for Korean universities, and especially because of cultural similarity, for the massive number of Mainland universities.

While there are and must always be “local” flavors embedded, cultural and/or economic, in the definition of ULP, there must be generic lessons learned. To this end, as President Lai has often emphasized, there is no doubt that United States, Canada and Great Britain, the three countries which harbor some of the most outstanding public universities, have practiced ULP for a very long time, some as long as many centuries. This must mean that there are valuable and generic lessons learned from their ULP practices.

It is interesting that if one were to type “university governance autonomy” in a Google search, one of the first articles, and there are not many, one would find was a speech delivered at the 2004 Asia Development Bank conference on university governance in Indonesia by President Michael Stevenson of Canada’ s Simon Fraser University. Even though the speech was delivered nearly five years ago, it is still in depth and comprehensive. In the speech, President Stevenson made it clear that the “...*most important problem arising from funding pressure is the challenge to quality. There also are challenges to autonomy, to accountability and to good governance...*” This comment clearly and succinctly underlines challenges confronting NCKU in its ULP transformation.

With the aforementioned preamble, President Lai and his leadership team felt that in the preparation for NCKU’ s ULP transformation, the establishment of an NCKU Presidential Blue-Ribbon Panel is a must. Indeed, for such a Blue-Ribbon Panel to achieve its aim, it must consist of individuals with extensive leadership position, known to have been reflective and have intellectual depth about these issues and, last but not least, possess significant international flavor and strength. In addition, there must be extensive and intensive homework done before the final gathering of the Panel. Indeed, in order for each and every Panel member to contribute in breadth and depth, it is important that NCKU provides as much as possible the “local” conditions to all members. Only through such an intensive effort can the Blue-Ribbon member not be superficial in assisting NCKU in developing a thoughtful strategy.

With the above mentioned principles as the underpinning, the following outstanding NCKU Presidential Blue-Ribbon Panel was formed. The members are

- **President Mark P. Becker**, President of Georgia State University and former Provost of University of South Carolina.

- **Chancellor David Chang** (校監張鍾濬,) Chancellor of Polytechnic Institute of New York University and former President of Polytechnic University. Dr. Chang is one of the three Chinese Americans who is president of a major research university in United States. Dr. Chang is also a distinguished alumnus of NCKU.
- **President Haydn Chen** (程海東校長,) President of Tunghai University (東海大學,) and former Chairman of Department of Materials Engineering and Assistant to the Vice President of Administration of the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana.
- **Chancellor Steve Sung Mo Kang** (姜城模校長,성 강, 재 성, 본물 모), Chancellor of University of California Merced, former Dean of Engineering of University of California Santa Cruz and former Chairman of the Department of Electrical Engineering of the University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana. Dr. Kang is also familiar with the operations of Korean universities. Chancellor Kang is one of the two Korean Americans who is president of a major research university in the United States.
- **Professor Chuan S. Liu** (劉全生校長,) former President of National Central University (國立中央大學,) former Vice President for Research and distinguished professor of physics of the University of Maryland.
- **Professor Tom I-Ping Shih** (石怡平系主任,) Chairman and Professor of the Department of Aerospace Engineering, Iowa State University. Dr. Shih is also an outstanding alumnus of NCKU.
- **President Michael Stevenson**, President of Simon Fraser University and former Provost of York University.
- **Minister Ovid Tzeng** (行政院政務委員 曾志朗,) Minister without portfolio and former Minister of Education. Minister Tzeng is also a well known cognitive scientist and an academican of the Academia Sinica.
- **Professor Randy Woodson**, Provost and former Glenn W. Sample Dean of Agriculture of Purdue University.
- **Chancellor Fujia Yang** (校監 楊福家院士,) Chancellor of Nottingham University, former President of Fudan University and member of Nuclear Threat Initiative (Co-chaired by Ted Turner and Senator Sam Nunn.)

I think the concluding remark in President Stevenson' s Indonesian speech, which states that “...the long history of universities built on a culture of autonomy has produced a great deal in the history of the western world and increasingly in the history of the world entire. I believe there is no reason to doubt that our universities will continue to make significant contributions if they are able by the means I have suggested to defend their autonomy and to avoid becoming victims of repoliticization and control” should and must be the NCKU ULP goal.

President Lai and the leadership team firmly believe that through this effort, however arduous, NCKU' s ULP transformation can and will have lasting impact on higher education throughout Asia Pacific in the 21st century, a century which appears to be more and more dependent on higher education, especially the research intensive universities, such as NCKU, to produce farsighted and visionary leaders and workforce for global preservation.



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