

Editorial

University Autonomy - Governance - Accountability

(大學法人化)

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A funny thing seems to be happening seven-thousand kilometres to the nor'-nor'-west. The **National Cheng Kung University** (NCKU) in Tainan City, Taiwan has been designated to lead an experiment by the Taiwanese Government to allow universities increasing autonomy. And indeed an international panel of ten has been selected to develop the model a transformed NCKU will take in which it is to have greater autonomy from the national government and increased control of its governance, but with sensible accountability to the people of Taiwan.

Last week in describing the new direction that is being contemplated, the university's Senior Executive Vice President, Da Hsuan Feng said of the university's president: "...as President Lai has often emphasized, there is no doubt that the 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 to be learned from their ULP practices."

In explaining "ULP" Dr Feng writes: "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."

Dr Feng also makes a point of referring to an address Professor Michael Stevenson, president of Canada's **Simon Fraser University** gave in 2004: "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 the challenges confronting NCKU in its ULP transformation."

And he went on to conclude in his statement: "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 entire world. 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."

Furthermore, "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".

It remains to be seen what the panel of ten will produce in the way of a ULP "roadmap" and just how and when it will begin to be implemented not only at NCKU but the other Taiwanese universities. And will other Asian nations undertake to redefine the relationship between their universities and governments.

What should concern Australians is the increasingly direct intervention by our federal government on how our universities and their academic staff function because it is the antithesis of the experiment the Taiwanese government appears to be contemplating. Despite the spin the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Kim Carr, places on his intention to introduce ill-defined "hubs and spokes" to university research, concealed micromanagement in government-university "compacts" and a byzantine ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia) for universities with which to cope, the object is to reduce university autonomy, increase the federal government's hand in governance and increase the red tape with which university administrations will be bound.

And all the while our neighbours to the North are beginning to move in a diametrically opposite direction. Da Hsuan Feng says: "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 the 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 the 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.

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