

16 November, 2021

The Editor
University World News

Dear Editor,

The article titled “What is the fate of Hong Kong’s universities under Xi?” published in University World News in early November, 2021 has shown a profound misunderstanding of the higher education system in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR).

The HKSAR Government treasures the important social values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which are the cornerstone of our higher education sector. In particular, Article 137 of the Basic Law of the HKSAR specifically and clearly states that educational institutions of all kinds may retain their autonomy and enjoy academic freedom. These safeguards have not been altered in any way and remain in full force.

The eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities are independent and autonomous bodies established under their respective ordinances. While the Chief Executive of the HKSAR is the Chancellor of the UGC-funded universities, this arrangement mainly serves the function of providing a linkage between the Government and the universities in the best interests of society and demonstrating the Government’s support for the higher education sector. The powers and duties of the Chancellor are clearly defined in the respective ordinances of the universities, and the Chief Executive has been exercising extreme caution in performing the statutory duties, constantly taking due consideration to preserving academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

With regard to the governing councils of universities, their size and composition vary between universities, comprising members nominated by relevant bodies, representatives of the staff, students, and the management team of the universities. Government-appointed members only constitute a small portion and appointment is made based on the merits of the candidates, and having regard to the need to ensure a balanced

composition, the strategic directions and development needs of the universities, as well as the needs of our higher education sector as a whole. With their strong expertise in different fields, these community leaders help enhance the governance, accountability and development of our universities.

In line with the well-established principle of institutional autonomy, university councils as supreme governing bodies of the universities are responsible for making decisions regarding the operation of the universities, such as the appointment, promotion and retirement of academic staff members as well as top management positions including their Presidents. The allegations made by the article that the Government interfered in the selective dismissal of controversial academic figures, the promotion and appointments including that of the university Presidents, and the extension of contracts, are utterly untrue.

Likewise, the allegation that the Government has methods for influencing tenured faculty is simply false. Again, decisions regarding tenured academic staff members of the universities can only be made by the university Councils alone.

As regards the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong, safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests is an indisputable duty of a responsible national around the world, and the HKSAR is no exception. That said, the allegation made by the article that a Mainland-induced reorganisation of the management of universities as a result of NSL is totally unfounded. In addition to the safeguards on institutional autonomy underpinned by Article 137 of the Basic Law as mentioned above, Article 136 of the Basic Law also stipulates that the HKSAR Government shall, on its own, formulate education policies. Universities in Hong Kong continue to attract top talent from around the world.

The promotion of national security education in universities with a view to raising awareness of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law is a statutory obligation stipulated in NSL, and is an integral part of carrying out the above-mentioned duty of safeguarding national security on the part of the universities.

With the restoration of order in the community and the unprecedented opportunities presented by the developments of our country and the region, Hong Kong's higher education sector remains as attractive, if not even more attractive than in the past. In the meantime, the HKSAR Government spares no effort in stepping up support for the sector to enhance its attractiveness to talents overseas with initiatives such as the newly-launched Global STEM Professorship, which helps universities recruit internationally renowned innovation and technology scholars and their teams to Hong Kong, thereby strengthening the teaching and research activities of the higher education sector. The HKSAR Government will continue to maintain close liaison with our universities and assist them in grasping these opportunities and scale new heights, and in turn strengthen Hong Kong's position as a regional educational hub.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Kevin Yeung
Secretary for Education
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region