

SPECIAL REPORT

40 years of (modern) tertiary education

INTERVIEW

NEW HEIGHTS

AS THE UNIVERSITY OF MACAU CELEBRATES ITS 40TH ANNIVERSARY, RECTOR YONGHUA SONG LOOKS TO TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL: TO BE AMONG THE WORLD'S TOP 200 UNIVERSITIES AND PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER AND SPIN-OFFS

CONSTRUCTION

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

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WHO'S KIDDING WHOM IN MACAU'S ENGLISH PERFORMANCE?



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In January, the 2021 winner of the prestigious PROSE award in Language and Linguistics from The Association of American Publishers was 'The Handbook of Asian Englishes', edited by Kingsley Bolton, Werner Botha and Andy Kirkpatrick. It is a monumental, comprehensive volume (over 900 pages) of immense, formidable scholarship.

The editors note that 'the popularity of English is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future' (p. 10). In the chapter on 'English in Macau', Werner Botha and Andrew Moody comment that English 'has become a requirement for most employers in the private economic sector, specifically for those seeking employment in Macau's prolific gaming (casino) industry' (p. 530). English, though not an official language in Macau, is 'a de facto additional working language in the territory, especially in the city's business, government, and education sectors' (p. 532) and 'media, international business, and tourism' (p. 534). Out of the 20 Asian countries/territories included in the book, Macau ranks 12.5th equal with Vietnam on a TOEFL ranking (p. 66).

Macau's universities have a duty to improve graduates' English. That is not new. The University of Macau's website claims to use 'English as the main medium of instruction' and Macau University of Science and Technology's website states that it cultivates students who are 'bilingual in Chinese and English'.

So far, so good. Or is it?

With the press for quality assurance (QA) in Macau's higher education, one would expect the standards of English teaching, learning and student performance to be high. QA moves from a concern solely for inputs and processes, to impact and outcomes, in terms of improvements to programmes, courses and student performance, with transparency of standards.

How is it, then, that the standard of English in Macau's higher education students demonstrates what inspectors call 'unacceptable variation' (perhaps euphemistically to disguise low standards). How come that Macau's university graduates are incapable of uttering or writing a simple sentence in English without making basic, primary school errors, and yet they 'pass'? How do they pass their English language courses, allegedly benchmarked to

international standards or awarded by external agencies, or by reaching an internal, institutionally set standard, and yet they simply cannot communicate in English; their English is grotesque or virtually nonexistent? How can this happen, unless there are improper assessment practices taking place and/or remarkably, unacceptably low standards being applied?

How is it that, in courses in Macau's universities in which English is supposed to be the medium of instruction, lecturers predominantly use Mandarin or Cantonese (except for those subjects in which this is permitted)? As a chapter in 'The Handbook of Asian Englishes' notes, for one of the universities mentioned above, although it 'claimed to be English-medium, the reality was that Chinese was also widely used throughout the university, and that Putonghua was regularly used as a co-language of instruction' (p. 151). For the two universities above, there was 'a gap between the requirements stipulated for the use of English as medium of teaching and learning, and the actual use of English' (p. 535), with students and teachers 'simply not proficient enough in English to confidently learn or teach content courses through the medium of English' (p. 535).

I ask myself 'Where are honesty, transparency, validity, reliability, high standards, QA, externality and accountability here?'

Unsurprisingly, Macau's universities push the blame for low standards onto schools, and, with some 1,600 to 2,000 hours of English before students enter university, there is some substance to this; universities cannot make a silk purse out of an inherited sow's ear. But that is a lame excuse. The need is long overdue for honest, transparent practices, accountability and adherence to massively higher standards of teaching, learning, assessing and qualifying English in Macau's universities. This message perennially rears its head in Macau. Where is the action? Where are the results?

If, as the book notes, Macau's business, government, media, internationalism and tourism are to flourish, then its universities must be more demanding, with greater honesty, externality and transparency in matters of English. For the other higher education institutions in Macau, if the cap fits, wear it. ■

40 years of (modern) tertiary education



Rising to the Challenge

Forty years ago, on March 28, 1981, the era of modern tertiary education was inaugurated in Macau with the opening of the then privately owned University of East Asia, the predecessor of the city's publicly owned University of Macau.

Over the course of these four decades, higher education witnessed a staggering growth and transformation in line with the city's development.

Since 2000, and even earlier during the Portuguese administration, public and private higher education institutions have been receiving generous support from the Government.

At this juncture, one can argue that higher education in Macau is at a turning point. The changes that are set to take place are not only the result of the recently released Long-Term Plan for Tertiary Education (2021-2030), but also of the Chief Executive's approach to higher education financing and development.

A new paradigm may emerge now with a stronger

focus on ties between universities and the business sector, forging a model not only less reliant on public funding but also capable of further involving higher education institutions in the wider push for economic diversification, through spinoffs resulting from transfer of technology.

Against the backdrop of higher stakes, we review the development of the city's higher education sector and delve into the future direction of tertiary education, taking into account the Greater Bay Area regional integration process.

P.S.: Some local government departments have a tendency not to be particularly responsive when it comes to questions sent by journalists. In this context, one should acknowledge and highlight the valuable and effective feedback and collaboration provided by the Higher Education Bureau (which has meanwhile been integrated into the newly renamed Education and Youth Development Bureau). ■

INTERVIEW

“We aim to be among the world’s top 200 universities in five to ten years”

The Rector of the University of Macau (UM), **Yonghua Song**, is keen on taking the institution to new heights.

As UM celebrates its 40th anniversary, the goal is to climb to the ranks of the world’s best 200 universities this decade through an improved focus on research, teaching and internationalization. Yonghua Song also sees a stronger role for UM in the city’s push for economic diversification while highlighting the importance of further promoting transfer of technology to the real economy.

New partnerships with universities and companies in the Greater Bay Area are taking shape

You have been in this position for three years. Tell us about your experience so far at the helm of the University of Macau.

Yonghua Song – I have been fully enjoying the working in Macau and at the University of Macau. It is a young, dynamic and international university with a beautiful campus. I

pretty much enjoy the local culture and environment. Over

these three years, I believe we have achieved some significant progress in some areas as well.

What would you highlight in this respect?

Y.S. – In order to meet the demands of the talents in Macau, Greater Bay Area (GBA) and beyond, we have launched a number of new programs undergraduate, master and PhD in the fields, which are of great interest for the society and students. For example we launched undergraduate programs in data science, health sciences, master and postgraduate level

校訓 University Motto

澳門大學創校時將中國聖賢提倡的五種美德「仁、義、禮、智、信」奉為校訓，為儒家思想的核心，也代表澳門大學致力培養具備這五種崇高品格學生的使命。

At the time of its founding, UM decided to adopt the five traditional Chinese virtues, namely Humanity, Integrity, Propriety, Wisdom, and Sincerity, as its motto. It also reflects UM’s wish to produce graduates who possess these virtues.





data science, we are also launching master programs in Fintech, microelectronics, chip design and we successfully launched our DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) program two years ago.

In the era of research we established a state key lab in smart cities (State Key Lab in the Internet of Things for Smart City), we have received approval to set up a centre in cancer research and we launched a Zhuhai Institute to integrate in the Greater Bay Area, the Zhuhai UM Science and Technology Research Institute (ZUMRI). So both in education and research we have made significant progress as well.

Forty years after the creation of what was then the University of East Asia, what is the identity of the University of Macau?

Y.S. – The University has grown in both recognition and reputation. We originated from the University of East Asia, a private university, which was the first modern university in Macau. We grew in many aspects, in size, from just several hundreds to over ten thousand students, academic programs from a few to a fully comprehensive university and from a local, to some extent, community college, teaching university to a research-led comprehensive university. The distinctive features of UM it is its international, multicultural environment, which is largely due to Macau's history itself, English as the medium of instruction and our internationalized faculty. We are an international research-led university enjoying not just recognition locally, in mainland China and but also international reputation among the top 400 worldwide.

You mentioned international recognition and since 2015 UM entered the annual Times Higher Education World University Rankings, being among the world's top 300 universities. The latest ranking places UM among the top 400 universities. Are you satisfied with this?

Y.S. – We celebrate our achievement but we want to reach new heights. With the opportunities offered by the Greater Bay Area and the support given by the Central Government and Macau Government and with the hard work of our faculty and students, our dream, we want to be one of the leading universities not just the Greater Bay Area but also internationally. So in terms of ranking our aim is to be among the top 200 universities in five to ten years. And we are very confident that we are on the way in terms of education, research and service.

What is your roadmap to reach that level?

Y.S. – I believe we have to work on several areas. One of course is education. We are pretty unique; we have the largest residential college system in Asia. We will further improve and enhance the learning environment for our students, by providing more attractive programs. We are going to grow the student population, particularly in postgraduate programs, from just over 10 thousand to reach about 15 thousand in five years time. And to attract more students from

outside of Macau in postgraduate and PhD programs.

Secondly, we have our research strategy and our blueprint, which focuses on working with several universities across the world on producing research outcomes and technology transfer to contribute directly to the economic development of Macau, Greater Bay Area and beyond.

Those who cast a critical eye on focusing on international rankings and research, argue it comes at the expense of teaching. They say international rankings have become a sort of obsession. What's your view on this?

Y.S. – There are two views here. One is that education, undergraduate and postgraduate programs are always the core of the university. Because our number one job is to educate, nurture talents, the leaders of tomorrow. That is always the core business of the university. Whatever we do we have to keep that in mind.

Secondly as a university we are not just passing the knowledge to our students. We want our students to be creative and innovative. So research is a very important aspect to produce research outcome which have an impact, not just academically but also contributing to the economic development. Actually, in our faculty our academic staff by being research active they can do the teaching in a more updated way, not just passing the old existing knowledge but the newly created knowledge. And teaching students how to be innovative and creative in solving problems, by generating new knowledge and technology. Education is our number one job while research is a way to push the quality of our teaching and education. It's a win-win situation rather than a conflict between education and research.

In recent years, there have been some voices raising concerns over academic freedom. How do you approach this matter?

Y.S. – There are two aspects here. One is that academic freedom in our university is crucially important. We are educating the next generations to solve the future problems, so we have to encourage our faculty students to conduct research in a free manner, so academic freedom is written into the higher education law of Macau and also in our charter. Like in any leading university around the world, academic freedom is a core value of our university.

The second aspect is a confusion between academic freedom and a sort of more political involvement. We have to distinguish these two. Not to use one to argue the other. We have academic freedom and research. At the same time an education establishment is not a ground for political and other

We need to attract more international students apart from local and mainland students

Education is our number one job while research is a way to push the quality of our teaching

businesses, so have to make a clear distinction and at the same time guarantee our academic freedom.

You mentioned the centrality of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area for the future development of the University of Macau.

Y.S. – The Greater Bay Area initiative offers tremendous opportunities for Macau because we are small in population and land. We express our gratitude to the One Country Two Systems Policy and integration into mainland China. The construction of this campus was completed in 2014 and we benefitted from this cooperation even before the GBA initiative was announced. In order to further take advantage of the cooperation and opportunities offered by the GBA, UM has to go beyond the campus. We established the Zhuhai UM Science and Technology Research Institute (ZUMRI) as a transfer platform to be able us to cooperate with companies, governments and universities in the GBA. This allows us to elevate our research output to transfer it to the industry of GBA and elsewhere. We have already successfully received 20 joint projects in about two years and we already have spinoff companies in Zhuhai and beyond. It is the first step for the University of Macau to go to the GBA.

It is the first step, meaning that there will be additional steps. What's next?

Y.S. – Yes. There will be more opportunities in Zhuhai, Shenzhen, which the centre of the world in IT and microelectronics, an area where UM has a strong role.

Secondly, in addition to research and transfer of technology, we also focus on nurturing talents. We are doing joint programs with universities in Guangdong province and also for our students to have internships in companies in the Greater Bay Area.

What's in the pipeline?

Y.S. – We have successfully launched some joint research laboratories, five last year, with universities, institutes and companies in GBA, so we are going to further explore opportunities with institutes and companies in Shenzhen and Guangzhou. We will also work more on joint programs, by offering dual degrees such under the "2+2", with two years here and another two in a university in the Greater Bay Area. This is to encourage student mobility.

There's cooperation but also competition in the Greater Bay Area, which is home to many top-level universities. What will be the division of labour accommodating the UM in this competitive environment?

Y.S. – There is surely competition for talents, students and faculty members. In addition to opportunities there are also challenges as well because of the needs for talents and new technology. And it is not only the existing universities, as a number of new universities will open in the GBA. There is always competition in terms of attracting the best students, faculty staff, and research grants. But as UM, we have our unique and distinctive features. If we take advantage of that, inherited by us, if we do that well, competition will push us to dream bigger. Competition is way to push yourself while cooperation is a way to create a win-win situation.



We have academic and research freedom. At the same time an education establishment is not a ground for political and other businesses

If we look at the UM campus, we can see that there is of room for growth. Tell us about the university's plans for the coming decade.

Y.S. – We position UM as serving first and foremost the local needs. The number of high school students is decreasing in Macau and 75 per cent of our undergraduate students are local students. We will keep the number of undergraduate students steady but are looking at a significant increase in the number of postgraduate, master and PhD students, by offering new programs. Three years ago we had less than 10 thousand students, now we have 11,500 and our plan is to reach 15,000 students: half undergraduate, half postgraduate. The campus infrastructure was design for about 15,000 students so we are

on the way to reach that figure. As a result of our growing reputation, the number of applicants has been increasing year by year.

We have ability to attract the best-qualified students to enrol in the master and PhD programs.

When we look at UM's non-local student population the lion's share comes from mainland China. Would like to see a more diverse situation? What the strategy to attract more students from outside the Greater China region?

Y.S. – The international dimension is always important for leading universities and it is also very important for the education our local students, so internationalization is very important for the University of Macau. When I joined the University of Macau in 2018, I proposed to the University Council to appoint a Vice Rector for Global Affairs and we have Um's first Vice rector for Global Affairs, Professor Rui Martins. This is a core strategy for us. We have the advantage to attract more international students and also have exchanges with overseas universities. First a multicultural environment and English being the medium of instruction and work language.



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Our faculty recruits internationally and largely they are graduated and worked overseas.

This creates an opportunity to go global. What do we need to do? First we need to attract more international students apart from local and mainland students. It is easier to do through mast programs. That's why we have been increasing the postgraduate programs. The target for recruiting students is Southeast Asia, Portuguese Speaking countries and even from Europe and America, as we are in the GBA a centre for innovation and entrepreneurship.

You referred to Portuguese Speaking countries. In the past there was this view that UM was not doing enough to play an important role in the function of Macau as a platform for relations between China and Lusophone world.

Y.S. – Macau has a History of over 400 years of relations with the Portuguese Speaking world and as a result of the national policy of Macau as trade cooperation platform with Portuguese Speaking countries. Since I arrived I embraced this concept put forth by the Central Government. It tops our global affairs strategy.

We have the largest Portuguese Language Department after Portugal and Brazil with full programs from undergraduate programs to PhD. First, for the past several years we sponsored our Portuguese language students to go to Portugal and Brazil for one semester to learn the language and culture. Secondly, we have a bilingual and trilingual law program where students will also go to Portugal in the first year also to learn the language and culture.

We also attract Portuguese Speaking university students to join PhD programs.

With regards to training and culture, we have established the Confucius Institute and the Chinese-Portuguese Bilingual Teaching and Training Centre.

Third, we are strengthening cooperation with universities in the Portuguese Speaking Countries. In 2018 and 2019 I personally travelled to Angola, Mozambique and Portugal to establish cooperation and scholarships for students to come to Macau and faculty members, by also offering joint research programs.

The Central Government and the Chief Executive have been calling for economic diversification. What is the role of the University of Macau in this process?

Y.S. – We need to diversify our economy to achieve sustainability. The pandemic further highlighted this issue. There are areas in Macau, which offer opportunities. We can offer our role in several areas. One is nurturing talents. To move forward with high technology as a drive

We can contribute to economic diversification by providing the talents and transfer of technology to the real economy

We also have to diversify our sources of income to support our activities

for this, we need the University to produce the talents as well as financial services. That's why quickly created a master program in fintech (financial technology). We have a data science approach. That's one way we can contribute by educating the talents in those sectors that can help diversify the economy.

Secondly, we can a major player in terms of patents and technology transfer. This is another areas where we can support the Government and we are working very closely with Government Departments. We have established a Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship to help our faculty members and students to establish start-ups. Currently we have over 30 companies under our Centre. As a comprehensive research-led university we can contribute to economic diversification by providing the talents and transfer of technology to the real economy, for example, through spinoff companies.

The last 12 months have been challenging for the whole world and also for the local society and institutions. The crisis has taken a toll on the city's finances. How has the University of Macau been coping with these financial constraints?

Y.S. – It has been challenging year, but fortunately for the University of Macau we have to be thankful to the Central Government and Macau Government. The pandemic has been under control in Macau so our students came back to the campus, so apart from some precautions we are operating normally now. Of course there was a big impact on our local economy and as a public university we work with the government and as any Government department we implemented a 10 per cent cut in our budget. This had an impact on the operations, but in our case we maintained the quality of our programs and maintained our research. We have some difficulties, but on the other hand because of the increase in the number of students and also as we increased the fees in recent years, the share of government funds in our budget went from 70 per cent three years ago to 60 per cent now. And even during the pandemic last, we managed to increase the number of students by over 500 and this year we plan to increase by 800. Also by integrating into the Greater Bay Area, last year the income received through our Zhuhai Institute by cooperating with industries, Guangdong and Ministry of Science and Technology almost tripled compared the year before. We also have to diversify our sources of income to support our activities.

Do you see a good prospect of having more private companies contributing to the University's finances through partnerships?

Y.S. – For research that kind of contribution is already sizeable. The income we generated last year during the pandemic from our Zhuhai Institute is a big portion of the total amount spent in research. It is very significant. And we are now working on two new big projects related to the maintenance Hong Kong Zhuhai Macau Bridge. We are cooperating with companies and universities in the Greater Bay Area, funded by the Central Government and Guangdong provincial Government. It's not only the funding that is important; it is also the direct impact of our research locally and in the Greater Bay Area. ■

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