

Excellence and Premiership in Academia: An Interview with Director of CHEPA, Professor William G. Tierney

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Earlier in the year Professor William G. Tierney from the University of Southern California (USC) had three months academic sojourn at IPPTN. The Institute welcomed him for a much needed contribution in an on-going research. Prof. Tierney was en-route to Australia for the next leg of his sabbatical. *Bulletin* caught up and chat him up before he left.

Academics in the know appreciate the whys and wherefores IPPTN and Prof. Tierney came together. His credential as a researcher in higher education is long accumulated and goes as far back as the 80's. Prof. Tierney is currently the Director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Analysis of USC, a position he has held since 1994. USC, in the heart of Los Angeles, lives the accolade of one of the world's leading private research universities. Do visit their website.

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Malaysian academics would find Prof. Tierney's productive three months experience here exciting. With regard to policies, governance and public versus private higher education Prof. Tierney notes two significant areas. As with many other countries, Malaysia is facing significant changes largely due to globalisation. For example, he points out that 20 years ago students in private higher education amounted to only eight per cent. He says that there were approximately 100 private institutions. The current number is, according to him, an almost tie between public and private. Malaysia in his opinion is an excellent example of a worldwide phenomenon in the growth in the movement towards private higher education. The present figure is in excess of 500. He has written a paper identifying and classifying these private higher institutions into roughly eight different kinds. He finds the categorisation confusing, having to reconcile academia with universities under the aegis of an oil company, political parties, and various and

different kinds of franchises. "What happens when the political party goes out of favour" he queries.

He foresees that the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) will come to appreciate the complexity of the various kinds of private higher education institutions and what they signify in terms of funding and in terms of premier universities. Ultimately the Ministry will have to face the question, "What do these other universities do?" In the course of his research he interviewed 50 people. The general consensus veers towards all universities in Malaysia being on the same footing. Amongst other things, what these people are saying is that funding is to be the same, i.e. everybody gets a cut from the one pie. Prof. Tierney thinks that is a mistake. "You cannot have similarity." MoHE has to face the enormous challenge in identifying what it wants of these universities and how it could create more autonomy for these institutions.

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The other point of concern relates to the fact that all these universities are chartered and monitored by the government. These institutions may not be financially tied to the government but a judicious and transparent government would ensure accountability with regard to issues of quality assurance. Thus, the government via the Ministry has to keep tab, "Are these institutions providing what they say they are providing?" The issue of autonomy is also a real dilemma. He uses his experience of having to travel via the national carrier as opposed to a cheaper rival because governmental directive says so. If the university has a say in this, the university could save a lot of money. He notes that in this instance "there is something larger at work in the nation rather than in the interest of the institution."

Our typically Malaysian not so *Hardtalk* with him on his impression of higher education in Malaysia was in the immediate aftermath of the recent general election. He raised a sensitive issue in terms of the election and the university. Admittedly it appears that the outcome of the

election underlines that political election works in the country. He notes that Malaysians have “voted to themselves.” In Malaysia, he argues, the formal organs of a democratic nation that bring about change, the press and the university, do not work as effectively as in the United States. He says that if we are serious in promoting excellence in higher education, we have “to enable a greater voice to the faculty.” He has encountered scientists who paused in terms of the kinds of research they wanted to do simply because they perceived that the research would not be well received by the powers that be. He quoted an example of a researcher who “hesitated” on researching on the effects of pollution from Indonesia. According to him the researcher anticipated that the government would inevitably argue that the outcome of the research would drive away tourism. That was the end of that potential research. “That is not the condition for excellence”, he underlines.

We need to create a system that focuses on specialisation, which is financially attractive academically, allows for academic freedom and we would have a first class faculty. The faculty, he says, “must feel ownership of the university and is not directed but directs the university.”

That view is not surprising as Prof. Tierney hails from USC, a premier private research university elected into the Association of American Universities (AAU). Located in Los Angeles, USC is very concerned with urban issues. It has the best Schools in the world in Cinema, Communication and Technology. In terms of research, Prof. Tierney says USC is “an extremely busy and a most dynamic and innovative institution ... an exciting place to be.” Hollywood is in Los Angeles and Los Angeles, in USC’s term is the epicentre of the movie industry. It may be of interest to note that USC’s Vice-Chancellor managed to get USD1.2 billion in his last capital campaign. He plans to get USD2.5 billion in the next.

Prof. Tierney appreciates that Malaysians in academia are bound by the Universities Act. As he sees it and if we are serious about moving forward academically then something has to be done. He does not mean faculty demonstrating in the streets and students take over buildings. If the Ministry

were to ask him, “Are we getting the absolute best that we can get from the universities given the current situation?”, he would answer, “No.” MoHE needs academic staff to speak their minds. He points out that in USM, not unlike other universities in the world right now, there is a premise we are educating students in training for jobs. He asserts, “... especially at the best universities you are also educating students to participate in democracy.” Therefore he questions, “How can you participate if you do not participate?”

Yet he did say we can be a top 100 university. Putting the issue of autonomy aside, we need to look into data. As a researcher, Prof. Tierney finds that verifiable and transparent data are difficult to obtain. For example, if a parent wants to assess a university, the same parent might want to know the number of admissions and the completion rate and what jobs the graduates of the university are doing. Data in the forms that he is familiar with are not available. He cited an article giving interesting statistics but the article itself did not cite its resources and he could not find the data to support the statistics. He agrees that this could mean that we are bad at record keeping, either in taking down the appropriate information and/or keeping them. It could also mean we have the information but they are not for consumption and therefore could not be openly cited. He may be too polite to say that we are not terribly academic and veer towards generalisation and unfounded argumentation.

Prof. Tierney acknowledges that Malaysia is quite advanced in terms of technology. Academics need not all be technologically savvy although he personally feels as academics, we may need to change the way we teach. Faculty can further utilise and focus on content areas and skills. Pure specialisation is preferred not multi-tasking. We must not allow ageism to creep into the faculty. Older faculty members tend to be slow with change particularly technological change. This is where younger faculty should be brought in.

Malaysia also needs to look into our desire to grow for international students. International students are mobile and there are competitions opening up in other parts of the world. Prof. Tierney notes that if Malaysia wants to continue to get foreign students then it has to appreciate that international students are a moving target. He questions our willingness in expanding energy and time. He feels that if our goal is to be first class we need to reconcile income with quality. Prof. Tierney reminds that about 50 of the top 100 universities are over 100 years old. In that respect, USM for example is still a *yearling*, but it has good science infrastructure. We need to create a system that focuses on specialisation, which is financially attractive academically, allows for academic freedom and we would have a first class faculty. The faculty, he says, “must feel ownership of the university and is not directed but directs the university.” Malaysia will have a top 100 university.