

# False promises

Neven Sesardic says if the wondrous benefits of a university education – beyond teaching basic skills for employment – sound too good to be true, it's because, in many cases, they are

Are universities selling people a bill of goods? Are they engaged in false advertising? If your answer is "Of course not!", this is for you. Students go to university mainly because it promises to teach them something that will give them the necessary qualifications for interesting and desirable jobs. For some jobs, this is really true. For example, one cannot become a doctor without studying medicine nor go into bridge construction without studying civil engineering.

But there are many areas of study (the "liberal arts" subjects such as cultural studies, history, philosophy, sociology) where most of what students learn does not immediately appear to be very useful for what they will typically do later in their careers.

Furthermore, even students of medicine and engineering have to take a lot of courses about topics that are neither connected with their narrow field nor readily associated with the acquisition of specific marketable skills. Among them are so-called "general education" or "core curriculum" courses, or "cluster courses" and "free electives". They usually take up a huge part of university studies.

When universities in Hong Kong recently switched from the three-year to the four-year system, out of the large number of the additional slots thereby created for new courses, all went to these "generic" (non-major) items.

Understandably, universities deny that this kind of knowledge is useless or irrelevant for employment. They claim that the study of liberal arts subjects and of general education courses also brings palpable practical benefits to students and increases their employability. But how? This is where things get murky.

Employers do have a preference for university graduates (including those with liberal arts degrees) over those who only finished high school. Doesn't this in itself demonstrate that there is important "added value" of higher education for purposes of employment?

Not necessarily. It is safe to say that those who enrol in university are on average already smarter than others to begin with. Perhaps it is mainly this pre-existing difference that gives them a critical advantage, rather than any knowledge or skills they acquire during their studies. On that assumption, the value of a university



degree would consist largely in its signaling to employers the presence of those personal characteristics which are necessary qualities in a good employee but for which university could claim little credit.

I am not arguing here that this "signaling hypothesis" is true. My point is merely that many prominent scholars defend it and support it with empirical evidence. Hence, it is irresponsible to proceed as if this alternative explanation did not exist at all. And it is intellectually dishonest to play up the job-related skills that liberal arts education supposedly produces, when the increased employability of bachelor of arts holders may be due to something much less exciting.

One of the main selling points of universities is that they will enhance their students' critical thinking ability, teach them to avoid fallacies, engage in rational

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discussion about controversial issues, and so on. Presumably these skills would be valuable in all jobs.

The problem with these promises, again, is that they are extremely dubious. A cursory look into relevant literature shows that prospects for systematically boosting critical thinking are either uncertain or bleak. After all, psychologists cannot confirm that even studying logic significantly improves people's reasoning. Clearly, then, it must be much harder to demonstrate wonderful improvements of human thinking in all those other courses that often do not even focus specifically on inference or reasoning.

Indeed, attempts to enhance critical thinking either fail or have very limited success. And, in those cases that happen to give encouraging results, it is not clear how long the effects will last after the training period is over. All in all, contrary to what you can read in university promotional materials, the current state of knowledge does not justify optimistic and sweeping assertions about the great impact of higher education on critical thinking. Therefore, if you are a critical thinker, you should be highly sceptical about the alleged wonders of teaching critical thinking.

Other frequently declared goals one can find on university websites – such as providing "whole person education", "life-

long learning" and making "responsible citizens" – are even more problematic because they are so fuzzy and nebulous that it is unclear how the success in achieving these goals could ever be verified (or falsified).

Let me say in the end that I have loved teaching at various universities and I always considered myself extremely lucky to have such a rewarding and hugely satisfying job.

Just think about it: talking regularly to many bright young people, having lively discussions with them, occasionally opening their minds to new ideas and then seeing their fascination with these issues and desire to know more. What a feeling. But is it really necessary to corrupt this magnificent enterprise by publicly and repeatedly promising to do something that we must know is exaggerated, unrealistic, poorly defined, hard to test, or simply impossible? Is it necessary to live a lie?

In recent years, I have often gone into this kind of rant in conversations with colleagues, and once also in the presence of top administrators of a local university. The usual reaction of my interlocutors is to shrug and look for a good moment to switch to another topic. This is my last try.

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## Warped ideal

Michael Chugani says with their blatant double standards, Hong Kong's so-called democrats have distorted the meaning of democracy



This is the last time you'll see me in this space. Time for a change – for this space and for me. Change – a small word that can mean so many things. American President Barack Obama used it to win the world's most powerful political office. People say I have changed. One long-time friend, who was somewhat intoxicated, even chided me in public. We exchanged heated words, apologised, and still remain friends.

Have I really abandoned the democratic cause? Not if I separate Hong Kong's so-called democrats from democracy. I no longer blindly support the former but still cherish the latter. Supporting our so-called democrats is not a prerequisite to be defined as supporting democracy. No one has a monopoly on democracy. I voted for Obama and Al Gore, not that I need to prove my democratic credentials.

If supporting democracy means applauding those who demand the right to be heard but who hurl drinking glasses or shout down others who speak, then it's not for me. I cannot bring myself to support those who disrupt a school debating contest to heckle political foes in the name of democracy.

It is not democracy but double standards when our so-called democrats cry political persecution after one of their own is fired as a radio host but say nothing when one of their own fires a radio host who is not one of their own. What else but "hypocrites" do you call those who say it is free speech to expose dirt on others, but call it white terror when others dig up dirt on them?

Not giving a free-to-air TV licence to Ricky Wong Wai-kay is a muzzling of the media but demanding the closure of ATV is not. The Hong Kong Journalists Association, which now behaves like a political party, raised hell over the firing of radio host Li Wei-ling but said nothing when so-called pro-government columnist Chris Wat Wing-yin received death threats and when ATV failed to pay its reporters. If pointing out such hypocrisy makes me a democrat turncoat, I'll proudly wear that label.

Am I a Beijing stooge for saying it is folly to combine the fight for Hong Kong democracy with opposing the Chinese Communist Party? If I am, then so are many of the students who fronted Occupy Central. Here's why the Hong Kong University Students' Union will hold its own June 4 vigil this year instead of joining the one in Victoria Park: students want to pay tribute to victims of the crackdown, not use the anniversary to oppose Chinese communism.

They believe what I believe: we must fight for Hong Kong democracy for its own sake, not as part of an attempt to democratise China. It is up to mainlanders to democratise China, not Hongkongers.

Legislators Lee Cheuk-yan and Albert Ho Chun-yan said this week fighting for Hong Kong democracy and against Chinese communism is one and the same thing. I suggest they find wisdom from the students.

No, I have not changed. It's the current crop of so-called democrats who have warped the true meaning of democracy. Waving the flag of genuine democracy doesn't make them true democrats.

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## Modi has shown real star power abroad. Now he needs to shine at home

Kevin Rafferty says India's leader, elected amid hope a year ago, must focus on domestic challenges

A new star, potentially a superstar, hit the world stage in the past year. India's new prime minister, Narendra Modi, abandoned the shrinking violet pose of his predecessor Manmohan Singh in touring the world to put India on the map.

India became the flavour of the week in Kyoto, Tokyo, New York, Washington, Sydney, Berlin, Xian (西安) and Beijing, as Modi came calling, on first-name terms with leaders of the world, and best-tweeting buddy with Japan's Shinzo Abe.

The only place where Modi's popularity is less certain is at home. Having swept New Delhi in general elections a year ago, he lost it convincingly in local assembly elections in February to the Aam Aadmi party, which took 67 of the 70 seats.

Using the stock market as the acid test, a year of Modi in power saw the benchmark Sensex index rise by 13 per cent, so he is ahead, but underperforming Singh after his first year in office, when the Sensex rose 31 per cent. So much for Modi's bold capitalist promise of getting business moving.

Modi put the relationship with neighbour China on an apparently friendlier footing. He hosted President Xi Jinping (习近平) in his home state in India, then went to visit China, where he was frank and open with Xi. He had the temerity to tell his hosts face to face that China "should take a strategic and long-term view of our relations".

Modi does not have the same self-assured mastery as Xi.

Indeed, Modi sometimes comes across as an uncomfortable mixture of showman and salesman trying too hard.

Was Xi listening? It was surely not a coincidence that when Xi was visiting India, Chinese troops intruded across the disputed line of control in the Himalayas. It was certainly not a coincidence that, as Modi was feted in Beijing, CCTV was showing a map of India shorn of Jammu and Kashmir (disputed by Pakistan) and Arunachal Pradesh (disputed by China).

**Modi lacks a team of ministers with a get-up-and-go attitude, which India badly needs**

India is back on most leaders' world map. But Modi needs to spend time in India before time runs out on him. This may seem harsh. For the first time in years, India's economy is outperforming China's: growth will be above 8 per cent. But India has far to go. Temperatures rising in India to nearly 50 degrees Celsius have already killed more than 1,100 this year, and people have been warned to stay indoors.

More worrying, meteorologists warn that the heatwave may presage a poor monsoon, wretched news for the

65 per cent of rural Indians who depend on the rains and the crops that they irrigate for their livelihood.

Modi has the satisfaction that his opponents are in disarray. Rahul Gandhi, of the opposition Congress Party, took an unexplained break of almost two months away from India, but has come back, without any noticeable difference.

Politics is a remorseless business. By October, Modi will face state elections. At best, they will distract him; at worst, they will begin to whittle away his power.

Milan Vaishnav commented, in a report card for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, that Modi's historic mandate still has to be seized. India's people were clearly restless for change because they threw out and almost obliterated the born-to-rule Congress.

"Sloganeering should not take the place of getting implementation and execution right, and in several instances, the rhetoric emerging from the government has far outpaced the rate of change on the ground..." wrote Vaishnav. "The government has tended toward incremental adjustments rather than decisive reform."

Modi, while not quite a one-man band, lacks a team of ministers with a get-up-and-go attitude, which India badly needs. He needs more robust ministers in finance, law and education, as well as someone to promote good governance, which is the greatest failing of India.

Multinational companies,

greedily eyeing the next great global growth story, would love to swarm all over India and have complained – correctly from their point of view – about continuing red tape, indecision and erratic tax policies holding them back.

Indians would rightly complain if Modi sold the store cheaply to foreigners. But much of the economic store is in the hands of domestic oligopolists who know how to spin the red tape with corrupt bureaucrats and politicians to keep out competitors and new ideas.

In another sense, no Indian ruler will ever have enough time, given that there are two Indias, that of the sophisticated, educated metropolitan elites and that of the poor villagers and their brave or desperate friends who have fled to the cities to pick crumbs from the tables of the rich.

As I saw in dusty Uttar Pradesh recently, poor villages have made progress: most now have electricity and mobile phones, some have schools. But they need more than 8 per cent growth to provide 300-400 million new jobs, and they need Modi to show more than star power at home as well as abroad.

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## HK should turn its creativity into an engine of growth

Janet Pau studies the obstacles holding it back in race for tech start-ups

Hong Kong's unseating as the most competitive Chinese city and missed opportunities in the technology sector, notably the failure to support the headquarters of the world's biggest civilian-drone maker DJI, have led to widespread reflection over the city's future position as a place for innovation and entrepreneurship. Hong Kong must not only compete with other Chinese cities, but in a global race for technology start-ups.

Technology start-ups can become an engine of economic growth and job creation. Silicon Valley, for one, is acknowledged for its contribution to the US economy. In Hong Kong, start-ups account for well under 1 per cent of the city's gross domestic product. Employment estimates range from several thousand at registered start-ups to 11,000 at the Science Park, out of a workforce of four million. Start-up venture funding remains minuscule relative to that of other Asian cities.

Hong Kong provides rich soil for idea generation, with its diverse population, high-speed technology infrastructure and reliable intellectual property regime.

However, for the city to become a world-class start-up hub, it must overcome two big obstacles – market size limitations and weak support from established industry.

In order to generate jobs and have an economic impact, Hong Kong start-ups must compete in global, regional and the mainland Chinese markets. To

do so, they must make their businesses work despite differences in culture, distribution networks and customer behaviour. In China, successful start-ups must adopt "internet thinking", referring to the cutthroat, winner-takes-all, and execution-driven culture of the Chinese start-up world.

Only those who can rethink market solutions and ensure customer adoption quickly enough can survive. It is essential for Hong Kong entrepreneurs to find strategic ways to work with mainland Chinese counterparts, who have complementary strengths such as prototype manufacturing and first-hand market knowledge.

Hong Kong also lacks established industry to support a pipeline of future technology talent, with practically no world-class technology companies active in a big way here. As a result, young entrepreneurs lack the training ground in developing successful products and business models.

Such experience is valuable, as many founders of successful Asian start-ups have worked at world-class technology companies at home or overseas prior to becoming entrepreneurs. Hong Kong needs to invest in upgrading its start-up talent, either through attracting world-class companies to come or finding training opportunities abroad.

Hong Kong's fellow Asian Tiger economies have made significant steps to bolster their competitiveness in large markets. South Korean technology giants are already

globally competitive, and Google just set up its first Asian start-up incubator in Seoul. Singapore has launched its "Smart Nation" initiative and transplanted part of its Block 71 start-up ecosystem to San Francisco. Taiwan has long invested in hardware manufacturing and is moving to hardware innovation. Other global competitors include Tel Aviv, whose innovative start-ups and university-based incubators have attracted substantial venture funding from Silicon Valley and around Asia.

Hong Kong's education system needs to better reward collaboration and risk-taking rather than conformity. As other economies move towards embracing adaptive learning and interdisciplinary problem-solving, to better equip their young, students caught up in Hong Kong's achievement-obsessed education culture are in danger of competing in a race to nowhere.

As a high-density city with sophisticated and diverse populations, Hong Kong can be an ideal hub for developing and testing innovations such as urban sustainability technologies and high-bandwidth mobile technologies. But it must address fundamental obstacles to compete in an increasingly crowded global race, so that start-ups can grow into businesses that bring broader economic benefits.

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