

## Bureaucracy is stifling education

By Chuing Prudence Chou 周祝瑛

This year witnessed an unprecedented drop in the number of students applying for a majority of the universities in Taiwan. As a generation born in the Year of the Tiger — traditionally believed to be a bad year to have a child — turn 18 years old this year, the number of first-year college students is estimated to hit a record low of about 250,000.

On Wednesday last week, National Chengchi University and National Taiwan University of Science and Technology announced that they are planning a merger.

The two universities are very different: Whereas National Chengchi University is known for its programs in law, business, liberal arts, communication, education, foreign languages, international affairs and social sciences, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology excels in engineering, information technology and applied sciences.

The reason the two schools are discussing a merger may have been prompted by the government's policies on higher education, which tend to give more funding to departments of agriculture, medical science and other sciences rather than humanities, making it increasingly difficult for universities without these favored disciplines to survive.

As a result, there has been a growing trend among tertiary institutions to reform their departments in the hope of receiving more funding. However, the effects of such reforms remain unclear as the government has not taken any measure to address the issue.

In 2002, when the number of higher-education institutions in the nation reached 135, the Ministry of Education announced a plan to promote the integration of such institutions to help universities streamline their resources and facilitate collaboration. The plan gave birth to the formation of university systems to enable the sharing of academic resources across schools.

Among the systems established were the University System of Taiwan, which comprises National Tsing Hua University, National Chiao Tung University, National Central University and National Yang Ming University; the Taiwan University System, which is composed of National Taiwan University, National Cheng Kung University, National Sun Yat-sen University and National Chengchi University; and the Taiwan Comprehensive University System, which includes National Cheng Kung University, National Chung Hsing University, National Chung Cheng University and National Sun Yat-sen University.

There is also the Taiwan Normal University System, which aligns 10 schools nationwide, with the exception of National Taiwan Normal University.

Supported by a budget of NT\$2.8 billion (US\$83.6 million at current exchange rates), the system not only encouraged universities to form groups, but also rewarded universities that did so with considerable funding.

In 2011, the government passed the seventh amendment to the University Act (大學法), enabling the ministry to assume a decisive role in the planning of school mergers. Previous plans to promote university collaborations were then replaced by plans to merge universities either in the form of statutory mergers or statutory consolidations.

To address the issue of a shrinking student population, the ministry earlier this year announced that it would promote university mergers and help schools improve their global standing. Under the plan, universities are to be divided into five categories, and each is to be evaluated based on the disciplines it covers and whether it has developed distinctive features according to its categorization.

The government is expected to distribute NT\$100 million to the top 90 to 100 universities with the best evaluation results on a yearly basis from next year to 2021.

While this plan promotes the same idea of integration of higher education that the ministry announced years ago, it made no mention of the previous plan to build university systems.

For years, the ministry has been making the same policies and giving out funding in the same way, and yet little has been achieved: Universities and colleges still lack creativity and momentum.

The ministry should consider exactly what kind of “world class” university the nation really needs. Should the nation adopt the education model of an advanced country such as the UK or the US, or a country more like Taiwan in terms of population, geography and resources, such as Japan, South Korea, Israel, or other Western countries?

The real problem undermining the nation’s higher education is the government’s controlling and bureaucratic approach to education, as well as poorly designed laws that provide little flexibility to higher-education institutions.

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