

A STIMULATING EXPERIENCE

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Two years in Macao as Rector of the University of Saint Joseph (USJ) have been an exhilarating experience, to say the least. My instructions, on being appointed, were to stabilize the university academically and financially. But also to ensure it was deeply rooted in the local Macanese and Catholic communities, faithful to the four hundred years heritage of East-West dialogue in local Catholic education. A tall order at the best of times, especially when combined with the general requirements of excellence in the academic sphere and commitment to not for profit public service, expected of all Catholic higher education.

Coming from Portugal, it was a stimulating experience to find myself in a region undergoing such rapid economic growth where two successive Chief Executives had the vision and the drive to choose education as one of their priorities, and develop local talent. The spotlight of the media has been on the impressive expansion of the leisure, entertainment and casino industries. But, on close inspection, it soon becomes clear that a profound revolution has also been taking place discreetly in the field of education.

Changes are being implemented across the board, from kindergarten to tertiary education and beyond. Incentives abound for lifelong learning and professional training programmes, and funds are available for research and development. The fact that Pisa 2012 ranks Macao among the world top ten regions in its "Snapshot of performance in mathematics, reading and science",

is no quirk of statistics. But time and political will are still needed for the whole education system to mature, as legislation, institutions, teachers and students adapt to international standards and best practices.

Major Changes in USJ

It was in this favourable context that the present management at USJ was asked to restructure the university, bringing it in line with its initial Charter

and local requirements. Years of rapid and creative growth had projected USJ from a small institute for post-graduate studies to a full university. The time had come to put a premium on quality and develop a consistent internal organization. To that effect, the Catholic University of Portugal has transferred six of its most qualified academic staff to USJ on a permanent basis, including myself, and has significantly increased the exchange of professors.

Since May 2012, the new management has streamlined the university's administration and organized academic programmes under five faculties. Policies and regulations have been drawn up, tested and published to ensure efficiency and fairness. Programmes are being upgraded and special attention is being paid to students' English so they can reap the full benefits of working with our visiting and resident professors, who come from over 20 different countries.





Where feasible, responsibility has been devolved down the hierarchical ladder, according to the principle of subsidiarity. Resident professors have been brought into the decision making process on academic issues. With the aid of the Office for Student Affairs, students can make their opinions heard directly at all levels of the university, and are represented in an organized fashion

through the Students Association and each faculty's pedagogical council. Gradually we are growing an academic community.

On the financial side, for the first six months of our mandate our Administrator, Mr. Victor Kuan, worked tirelessly to disperse the cloud of suspicion which surrounded the university. Particular

attention was paid to clearing lingering doubts concerning the use of public funds granted for the construction of our new campus. A Project Management Office was set up to deal professionally with all issues concerning external funding, complete outstanding payments and provide the required reports for all funds granted to USJ. Our new campus accounts were professionally audited

by a firm hired for the purpose. No significant issue was identified, though recommendations were made and studiously implemented. The report was presented to our title holder, the Catholic Foundation for Higher Education (CFHE), for future reference.

With a slimmed down institution, extensive cost cutting measures in place

and a year's experience running USJ, by December 2013 we were able to provide the CFHE and GAES with detailed information about the state of the university and its short-term prospects. One year later, time has come to ponder our long-term options. They should correspond as closely as possible to the requirements of the local community and be financially sustainable.



Challenges

To understand the challenges we are facing, let me take the financial issue one step further. At present, USJ depends entirely for its running costs on student fees. Our students are, in a very real sense, one of our principal stakeholders. It makes us particularly aware of the attention they merit, and sets us on the path to student-centred learning, which has become one of the important aims of contemporary higher education. On the other hand, however, to ensure a university's status and the quality of its academic life one must maintain a moderate student-teacher ratio, develop a portfolio of programmes ranging from humanities to science, provide conditions for academic research and run an effective administration. These requirements are expensive, and entail either high student fees, which are a deterrent to enrolment, or alternative funding.

A private university, such as USJ, can only expect alternative funding, whether from government or private sources, if it is a recognizable public asset, provides accredited programmes

and adequate campus facilities, is run efficiently, is regularly subjected to external assessment, and is supported by some form of endowment fund, under trustee supervision, to ensure that donations and profits are not syphoned off but channelled back into the institution for further development of its academic activities.

1. On the first count, I believe USJ's profile complements that of our fellow institutions. Our Catholic identity, with its international and intercultural outlook, conforms to one of Macao's most distinguished historical traits. The Catholic theological formation we are providing for clergy and religious from Macao to Korea, Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia and East Timor, is unique and entirely in line with local Jesuit and diocesan tradition running from the 16th century College of Saint Paul to the present day Seminary of Saint Joseph. In the field of Education, after an interlude of some years, we are once again providing teacher formation and in-service training for local schools.



Other programmes are being tweaked to take advantage of our close relation with the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP). A Portuguese flavour and UCP's existing partnerships in Business and Education with Catholic universities in Angola, Mozambique and Brazil, should allow us to usefully contribute our part to Macao as a platform for cultural and economic exchange between China and Portuguese speaking countries. The building blocks for specialized Portuguese language studies are present in the relevant department of our Faculty of Humanities, but we have still to identify the niche we can occupy successfully.

A somewhat different dynamic is present in our Creative Industries. We have been drafting in staff with international experience, and challenging them to interface Western and Eastern sensibilities in architecture, design and communication. Time will tell if Macao's economy is well served by our programmes.

Given the right conditions, we could respond to other local needs by using our own resources and linking with the Catholic University of Portugal in graduate and post-graduate studies associated with age, health and environmental issues.



2. An important topic for the future of the university and its regional and international ranking is the new campus. Work is underway and, if all goes smoothly, we hope to move in at the start of the 2015/2016 academic year. It is worth remembering that for many years the Diocesan College of Saint Joseph (CDSJ) had exclusive use of the site to house its senior section. But land is difficult to come by in Macao, as we well know. So CDSJ generously gave up its campus and the existing buildings were demolished to make way for an innovative design that would allow the Diocese of Macao to provide CDSJ with improved facilities

while, at the same time, housing USJ. The campus will serve one other purpose, as it aims to provide much needed sporting and cultural facilities to the local community.

3. Quality assurance is an area that merits particular attention. It has been consistently highlighted by GAES, as it prepares regional guidelines. Internally, we have started moving along three converging paths: preparing discrete QA mechanisms, embedded in the workflow of the university (gathering statistics and collecting user feedback); initiating the accreditation of a number of our programmes for the professional

recognition of the respective degrees; and analysing the requirements for the institutional accreditation of the university.

It is interesting to note in this respect the recent development of the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) project, whose latest feasibility study was published in 2013. It may soon alter internationally accepted criteria for assessing higher education. The new approach, instead of concentrating on programme design, campus facilities, administration, research and publications, aims to provide

an accurate measurement of the knowledge and skills acquired by students over the course of a degree-granting programme. This would allow for a truer assessment of small institutions such as USJ. For obvious financial reasons, our resident academic staff has a heavy workload teaching and supervising dissertations, with not much time left for publishing their research. The AHELO project would have the advantage of rating success in terms of the learning process as a whole and valuing the overall development of the students.

In short

These last two years have been an intense and at times overwhelming experience. Coming from a different cultural and institutional environment, I have had much to learn. Government and Church authorities have been attentive and helpful, but it has not always been easy to know exactly how to respond. With so much to do, I am sure I have at times misjudged the "when" and the "how". One thing is clear, however, as a Catholic university our mission is to provide the region with an institution which aspires to the highest international standards, but which is also a deeply human and caring community: a university, physically and culturally, at the heart of Macao. ●

