



respect, the HKU tenure system has become more similar to that at universities in North America. Beyond awarding tenure, we also have a system of performance review and development to evaluate our faculty annually. For non-clinical staff, we look at teaching, research and community service; clinical staff are also evaluated by their clinical service.

How does the university decide who to recruit?

We look at publications, but that is just one of several important factors. For example, we look at whether the candidate's areas of expertise complement what we already have. And during an interview, we evaluate communication and interpersonal skills. We need to find out whether this candidate is the one we really want and will enhance us in the years to come.

What is the system like in mainland China?

The mainland system has evolved over the years. When I left Sun Yat-sen University 30 years ago, performance reviews for tenure and promotion were run by local researchers, who might be influenced by personal connections. After many years of criticism, the system became more modern and international. One of the improvements was to weigh journals' impact factors when assessing the value of a researcher's publications. This encouraged faculty members to publish papers in top international journals. However, the system went too far and placed too much emphasis on impact factors and not enough on international peer review. The abuse of impact factors is out of proportion now, and that is the main weakness of the current system in mainland China.

What brought about these changes in the Chinese system?

The main driver was that many Chinese scientists based in the United States criticized the Chinese system and suggested a change from rule-by-people to rule-by-merit. They found that funding and faculty promotion are decided in the US in a merit-based way, which they felt is superior to the system in China. The Chinese government finally took some of their advice. Unfortunately, the Chinese evaluation system has gradually evolved into not a merit-based but a metrics-based one.

Is Hong Kong's research system still better than mainland China's?

Yes, our system is more advanced and fairer because we are much closer to the international standard. Also, on the mainland there is still too much interference in research by the government. That is not what scientists need when they are trying to do good research. Mainland China is making progress to improve its system, but there is still miles to go.

INTERVIEW BY FELIX CHEUNG

Q&A Jin Dong-Yan

The global view

Jin Dong-Yan is a virologist in the University of Hong Kong's department of biochemistry. With a bachelor's degree from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, a PhD from the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine in Beijing and a postdoctoral stint at the US National Institutes of Health, Jin benefits from the experience of working in vastly different research systems.

Why did you decide to go to the United States?

Twenty years ago, China had well-equipped facilities, especially in my field at my institution. The infrastructure to support fundamental research in biomedical sciences, however, was not well developed. I decided to do my postdoctoral research in the United States because the country was more advanced and had more world-class research opportunities than China.

What brought you back to Hong Kong?

First, I am Cantonese, so Hong Kong was a natural choice for me and my family. Second, when I joined the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in 1998 [a year after it officially reverted to Chinese rule], the city had already developed an advanced infrastructure to support basic research. I believed that Hong Kong was the best place to do science in Asia, and that I would do well. Third, HKU approached me with an attractive offer.

What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of Hong Kong's research system?

The greatest strength is international peer review. All proposals submitted to Hong Kong's Research Grants Council are subjected to a rigorous review process handled by a panel comprising world-renowned, independent experts. Unfortunately, because of limited resources, researchers in Hong Kong seldom have the chance to propose big projects. They have to be realistic and their projects tend to be more conservative.

What is the tenure system at HKU like?

HKU did not have a well-developed tenure system before I joined, but it was in the process of setting one up. Before that, people would be tenured immediately when they joined the university. That is no longer the case: today, people are given tenure only after the satisfactory completion of two three-year contracts, and there is no automatic promotion. In this