A time of turbulence in global higher education

CHANGES IN THE status quo in the international scene have cast a cloud of uncertainty over not only the world economy, but also higher education. The impact of a Trump presidency, and an impending Brexit, is now being felt in both the United States and the UK, and new anti-immigrant policies are slowly creeping into the minds of students who want to study abroad.

In the United States, a headline from The Chronicle of Higher Education reads: “Prospective International Students Show New Reluctance to Study in the US.”

The introduction of immigration control policies, the rhetoric of “America First,” and the recent order of reforming the H-1B visa program to limit its sponsorship to the most skilled and highest-paid applicants in order to promote the hiring of Americans, have all been received kindly abroad.

A recent report on higher education found that, given the current state of the country, more than one-third of international students interviewed have shown their interest to study in the United States wane, with many raising concerns over immigration control, security, tuition and racial discrimination. While many have thought that Trump’s policies would only affect those from the banned Muslim states, the truth is much of the rest of the world is now reeling as well.

In the UK, Brexit poses a strong threat to the country’s higher education sector, with many students now worrying about their future prospects. EU students, in the future, will have to pay as much tuition as other international students (up to £35,000, or HK$349,100). In contrast to £9,000—something which they currently enjoy as local students, inevitably, this will have an impact on the students’ minds when they choose schools. In fact, experts have pointed out that the UK’s immigration control policies and high financial requirements have already deterred many international students from even applying to study in the UK, with the number of applicants from India dropping near 50 percent. In the past five years, the United States and Italy have always been top destinations for international students, but now changes in their national policies are threatening their status as world leaders in higher education. Schools in both countries have always relied on international recruitment for talent and to help university finance. In the long term, losing their international appeal will be costly, as research standards and competitiveness will suffer from a drop in international talent.

What does the future for Hong Kong? In many ways, our higher education system has enjoyed a similar stature as the United States and UK, at least in the Asian region, for many similar reasons.

Our universities are international, high quality, competitive, and being part of China’s Pearl River Delta’s economic powerhouse makes career prospects in a region with growing economic importance. In addition, our higher education tuition fees are inexpensive by US and UK standards. Optimists like myself think that the SAR is the perfect destination for disenchanted international students.

But Hong Kong runs the risk of losing these advantages if somehow, a version of the US immigrant ban or UK Brexit takes place here.

For example, there has been recent news in our local media about universities having too many non-local students, to the detriment of local ones.

If such sentiment develops into a policy of making Hong Kong less welcoming to non-local students, then we run the risk of losing our competitive advantage of being a global city in China, and also losing our desire for global talents. While being mindful of our responsibility to provide for qualified local students, we should also be careful about the long-term effects of short-term knee-jerk reactions.

Will the situation in the United States and UK encourage more mainland and international students to come to the SAR? Are we welcoming them with open arms? While we look at the United States and UK’s policy in dismay, we must also make ourselves a case of the pot calling the kettle black.