Farewell HKUST

I'll be leaving HKUST soon to join King Abdullah University of Science and Technology as its third president. As the council meeting I attended last week was my last as president, the council had arranged a luncheon in my honor. Below is an excerpt of the speech I gave at the occasion.

Nine years is not a short time in anyone’s career. The average tenure of a US university president has gone down from 8½ years in 2006 to 6½ years in 2016. So I am very gratified to be able to see HKUST through such a process of development.

A lot has happened in the past nine years at HKUST under my leadership. I am very proud of my contributions to HKUST on its path to achieving greatness. Our global standing is widely recognized. Just last week, Times Higher Education named us as the best university in the world under 50 years old.

I would not have bet money on that when I came, but we did it. When I meet leaders of Hong Kong society, they not only compliment us on our achievements, but I can also sense a feeling of pride in them. We are their “miracle university.” When I travel around the world, people hold HKUST in high regard.

I am especially proud of those achievements in which I have taken a direct role in, such as strategic planning, articulating a vision for the future, fund-raising to enable us to do otherwise unaffordable initiatives, and engaging stakeholders and supporters.

But an institution is more than just its people. The most valuable asset of an institution is its spirit. Each stakeholder, be it the council, management, faculty, staff, students, alumni, all play a critical role.

Teamwork is what makes an institution great. In this regard, I have been fortunate to have a great team of talented people to work with. During my tenure, I have worked with three council chairs, many council members, nine vice presidents, more than 10 deans, three directors of the office of the president, and three University Grants Committee chairs. I have been involved in the recruitment, retention and promotion of hundreds of faculty members. Each one of them has made their own indelible contribution.

But success is not guaranteed and HKUST faces many challenges. The world changes at an ever-more rapid pace and competition is everywhere.

Opportunities abound but risks are also waiting around the corner. A university is a microcosm of society and our society is getting more politicized. Each of the university’s stakeholders want to have more say, but often only on issues that they care or know about. The dangers for HKUST are, first, not to lose our innovative spirit and become too risk-averse and, second, not to let its mission be compromised by any group’s demands.

That is, not to let the whole be lost over concerns about the parts. Political concerns should not drive a university’s direction. That is in essence the most difficult challenge facing any university president today.

I’d like to thank the many friends and supporters who have sent their good wishes after they have learned that I’m going to KAUST. KAUST is in some sense a younger version of HKUST, with a similar focus and vision but in a different societal context.

HKUST was, and still is, one of KAUST’s models and inspiration. For me, the opportunity at KAUST is both exciting and challenging. Saudi Arabia is going through a transformation to modernize, diversify its economy from oil to innovation and technology, as well as liberalizing culturally. Externally, it is pivoting from the West toward Asia.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Yuet-ngor told me that she knows my board chair at KAUST, who happens to be Saudi Arabia’s minister of energy, in her effort to try to bring the Aramco IPO to Hong Kong.

I am sure there will be plenty of opportunities for collaboration between the two institutions.