

New approach to innovation

Asian academic likens his way of getting quick results to working on several jigsaw puzzles simultaneously

By Paul Mackintosh

Freddy Boey is president of the City University of Hong Kong (CityUHK) and a distinguished professor. He was deputy president (innovation & enterprise) at the National University of Singapore from 2018 to 2022, and before that, provost and chair of the School of Materials Science and Engineering at the Nanyang Technological University.

Under Boey's watch, the standing and international rankings of the schools and projects he was involved in was transformed, with a particular focus on fostering cultures of innovation. He took up his position at CityUHK in May 2023.

Boey was at the United Nations climate change conference or COP29 in Azerbaijan recently for the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Hong Kong university and the United Nations Trade and Development. He shares his perspective about sustainability and innovation in an interview with *Asia Asset Management*.

Please tell us about innovation at City University of Hong Kong and how this is serving sustainability priorities.

One thing we learned in all these matters is urgency. It also means that you can't do the things you used to do at that pace because you will not even catch up with the aggravated situation. At CityU, we have espoused a very new approach to innovation to make it move a whole lot faster. That involves putting several jigsaw puzzles together at the same time rather than back to back.

Traditionally, you do research out of curiosity, and thereafter start thinking about what problems the solutions you have found could resolve, and then afterwards look for investment and finances. You might spend a couple of years; we don't have a couple of years.

One thing the Covid-19 taught us was exactly that. It was during the pandemic

that I realised you have to do things very differently. When I came to CityU, I started to reorganise research institutes.

A typical research institute starts life with several stakeholders: researchers, investors, industry people, government authorities. This triangle of university using relevant research, industry moving it to applications and products, and government authority that helps to sharpen and focus on what regulatory approval is needed – when you put these three together, it's very powerful.

It should have happened long ago. It was Covid-19 that triggered me, because it was literally life and death. I was tasked by the government to set up a research team to mitigate [the pandemic], and I said there's no way I'm going to do it the usual way.

Since then, I've started several research institutes in CityU that have such a model. The moment we started the institute, all the stakeholders were in place. I also instituted an Academy of Innovation in CityU in January [2024]. This already has four unique programmes.

It's not enough to talk about incubators, accelerators: you have to come up with a totally new approach, which I did when I was in Singapore. I coined it as venture creation.

You don't have a facility to accelerate startup companies: you actually give birth to startup companies. You build up enough numbers, and you sustain numbers. The aim is not just to get successful companies, but to produce entrepreneurs that have very high technological understanding, and then nature takes its course. The companies may fail, but the entrepreneurs continue, and then in a relatively short time you have a sizeable number of new entrepreneurs that have become better because they have failed.

I started this in Singapore about three or four years ago. Last year, the Singapore government made it a

national programme. It's now recognised as the way and the approach for a city like Hong Kong, and for that matter, why not Hong Kong or other cities in the world?

How is innovation working towards sustainability priorities?

Sustainability is a big word, and there are different areas that can be addressed. But in every one of these areas, it behooves scientists to move it to a column where it can be applied sustainably, whether it's pollution, sustainable food, energy, etc.

The commonality is, is there a way where it can be moved faster? Here I'm going to say something that may be slightly controversial: I don't think that the world as a whole is a good model to solve these problems. The worst enemy of innovation is politics. It massively gets in the way.

What are the alternatives? My answer is: go for a particular city. That city has only one jurisdiction, the local government. Go for a particular research institute, credible and sizeable enough, and the industries. You put the three together, it will move and do what needs to be done. Other cities can duplicate it. And sooner or later you will have a very big effect, at the global level.



Freddy Boey