

The most important thing about a university is its spirit.

Human civilization began with intellectuals and literati exploring the meaning of life. Their efforts opened new possibilities and led to social progress and the development of humanity's relationship with nature. The spirit of universities is based on independence and freedom.

A university should be more than a vocational school. It is not a business or an escape from society — nor should it be a sanctuary for the powerful.

As independent institutions, universities should be the leaders of societies and nations, beacons of wisdom and compasses that always point toward progress.

However, the majority of universities in Taiwan have become no different from vocational schools or diploma mills.

Due to this focus, many five-year junior colleges have turned into technical colleges and then into universities of science and technology. This obsession has also led to an overabundance of bachelor's degree holders.

Shortly after World War II, many Taiwanese who graduated from vocational schools under the Japanese educational system — with specializations in business, industry or agriculture — became the backbone of the nation's economy in every sphere.

While there are now more universities, many bachelor's degree holders appear to be poorly educated and lacking in skills; they often have to go through additional training when joining a company — a sign that the education system is deeply problematic.

In the past, only privileged people, such as members of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT),

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government officials, high-ranking military officers, special agents and people close to them, were granted permission to open private schools.

It was not until later that such permissions were extended to people outside these groups.

Today, there are universities everywhere. Due to a declining birth rate, many public and private universities have become diploma mills, prioritizing profits.

As a result, academic standards have dropped. Universities are no longer like universities. There are master's and doctoral degree holders in every street corner who lack any particular skills. All signs point to serious problems in the nation's education system.

To increase enrollment numbers, many universities have signed humiliating contracts with the Beijing government in the hope of gaining more Chinese students.

More than half of all private and public universities, including Shih Hsin University and National Tsing Hua University, have reportedly signed such contracts.

These contracts not only degrade universities, but also shows a lack of respect for the nation. That such a slavish, self-degrading, shameless contract would become the norm only goes to show that many Taiwanese have a serious problem with how they define their national identity.

This is both a political and a cultural problem.

Universities lacking academic spirit can be found everywhere and education is all about diplomas and degrees, suggesting not only an educational crisis, but also a national crisis.

In the face of growing Chinese pressure, Taiwanese must be rid of the habit of self-degradation.

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If not, how will Taiwan be rebuilt, a nation that has been ruled by the authoritarian KMT for decades and that is still trying to build a national identity apart from the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China?

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