

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Survival in the global economy requires a constant honing of corporate and national competitiveness. One of the main ways of accomplishing that is through continuous investment in education and training at all levels. The central and local governments in Taiwan have made great strides in recent years in improving the country's educational infrastructure. The foreign business community applauds these improvements, but also calls on the government to consider several remaining areas of needed change and investment.

Considering its goal of becoming a regional investment magnet, especially in the high-tech and service sectors, Taiwan needs to further improve the competitiveness of its public and private universities, the quality of its university graduates, and the depth and breadth of the private-sector organizations that provide education-related services. Taiwan has lagged behind such regional hubs as Singapore and Hong Kong in developing a world-class education and training infrastructure. We believe that this gap, which has produced graduates with insufficient English-language communication skills and job qualifications, especially for the service sector, has kept the level of foreign direct investment from reaching its potential.

The Education & Training Committee hopes to work with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other educational authorities in the coming year to foster changes that would improve the environment for investment in the education and human-resource training sectors. Better foreign language skills and an even more highly trained work force would benefit the local economy by strengthening Taiwan's international business competitiveness, stimulating greater foreign investment and tourism, and attracting more overseas professional talent.

Issue 1: Prepare to adopt English as a semi-official language.

An overarching theme touching on all the issues brought up by the Education & Training Committee is the importance of English proficiency in Taiwan. Currently the level of English proficiency is below that of many other countries in the region, as shown by scores on the TOEFL and IELTS examinations. Weak English skills ultimately affect Taiwan in key areas such as international competitiveness, the quality of human resources, attractiveness to foreign investment, and the ability to become a regional center for financial services, research and development, and other fields requiring sophisticated knowledge workers.

What is needed to overcome these deficiencies and open new horizons for Taiwan's development is visionary thinking and a dramatic action plan to match it. At the core should be a concrete plan for English to be adopted as a semi-official language, as suggested in 2002 by then-Premier Yu Shyi-kun. That plan should be revived, with a clear-cut timeframe and a carefully thought-out, step-by-step approach to implementation.

Moving to adopt English as a semi-official language would focus and strengthen the efforts of the MOE and the educational establishment at all levels at improving lagging English proficiency. A concerted, national campaign to improve English skills would raise Taiwan's global competitiveness in ways that would have a broad impact on the economy and society. It would be a decisive step forward to meet the many challenges facing Taiwan, and would directly and significantly improve the lives of Taiwan's 23 million inhabitants.

Issue 2: Liberalize regulations governing foreign universities and degrees.

U.S. universities face greater problems in gaining access to the education market in Taiwan than in most other World Trade Organization (WTO) member countries. Other nearby markets including Malaysia, China, Hong Kong, and Singapore allow foreign universities to set up branch offices and bring in faculty to deliver courses and programs. In Taiwan, however, the law stipulates that foreign

universities may apply to set up full-scale campuses but not branch offices – and those campuses must have their own separate budget and a board of directors with a majority of ROC citizens. Those conditions appear to have no basis in any sound public policy. Although a welcome revision was made in the law last year, removing the stipulation that the board chairman must be an ROC national, the Law as now written still means that foreign universities would lack full and direct control over the institution created, thereby removing any interest the foreign universities might have in entering the Taiwan market.

At the same time, the Taiwan government is encouraging local universities to establish branch offices in other countries. This violation of the principle of reciprocity and of the WTO spirit of market openness has caused many upscale U.S. universities to bypass Taiwan and set up branches in other Asian countries – to the detriment of Taiwanese seeking first-rate educational services. The improvements made last year in the Private School Law have not gone far enough to motivate greater participation in the Taiwan market by high-quality U.S. universities. The Committee calls upon the government to adhere to the WTO spirit by making it possible for bona fide foreign universities to operate legally in Taiwan without undue restrictions.

In addition, we would encourage the government to recognize the credits earned and degree programs taught in Taiwan or through distance learning from all accredited U.S. universities. In this age of globalization, students do not have to sit in a classroom in a foreign country to gain the benefits of the foreign institution's instruction. Foreign faculty members can travel to the students' home country to give classes, or they can meet in a third country or interact online.

The government should recognize foreign degree programs based on their quality only, regardless of where the instruction is given. Further, the MOE is urged to sign agreements with ministries of education in other countries allowing for the continuous, automatic recognition of new degree programs as they emerge in both countries. The current practice of issuing printed lists of recognized institutions and programs once every several years means that the available information is far too often out of date.

Issue 3: Increase transparency in the employment of foreign nationals as foreign-language instructors.

The committee urges increasing the transparency, fairness, accessibility, and consistency of the process for employing foreign nationals as foreign-language instructors.

A vital element in any successful language program is the selection of qualified foreign-language instructors. Under the current procedure, a candidate is interviewed, the relevant documents collected, and an application for employment submitted. Only later does the employer learn whether or not the candidate's university is recognized. If the list of recognized institutions could be published, in English, on the MOE website, employers could prescreen candidates, ensuring that only those from recognized institutions are invited for interviews.

In the case of certain countries, for example Argentina, the list of recognized institutions consists of just one entry, which does not reflect reality regarding the number of quality universities and is therefore prejudicial to many applicants. We urge the MOE to review the list on a yearly basis, with input from all foreign embassies and trade offices operating in Taiwan.

Currently the time needed to obtain a work permit can take up the entire 30 to 60 days allowed for most visa holders. The resulting race against time is one that many applicants inevitably lose, forcing them to leave Taiwan to apply for another visa. This may cause considerable expense and inconvenience for both the applicant and the hiring institution, and there is always the risk that the applicant will be unable to re-enter Taiwan. The Education & Training Committee suggests that the

MOE work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to create a procedure under which a bona fide job applicant could receive a visa extension until the application is acted upon. This would reduce costs and uncertainty, ensure greater fairness, and enable hiring institutions to fill positions more quickly.

In addition, once an application has been rejected, the ruling is considered to be final. To avoid unfairness, an appeal procedure should be established, enabling a rejected applicant to present reasonable grounds for the decision to be reconsidered.

Issue 4: Rationalize bushiban (extracurricular school) regulations

The Committee urges the adoption of reasonable, equitable, and transparent policies and regulations covering bushibans operated in both the public and private sectors. The aim should be the continued protection of consumer rights and public safety, while creating reasonable conditions enabling businesses in this field to fully comply with the law.

Current procedures call for an application to establish a bushiban to be presented to the department of education of a special municipality (Taipei and Kaohsiung), or to a local city government, which will then deal with the application based on its own regulations. But the great disparity among those regulations creates an extremely complicated and cumbersome situation for bushiban operators wishing to set up more than one branch in Taiwan.

In the event of difficulties, the MOE has expressed its willingness to contact the local educational authorities to discuss possible solutions to the problem. That is a welcome gesture of good will, but in practice it has not proved to be very effective. Significant differences remain from city to city in the time it takes to receive a bushiban license. In Taipei, for example, the process can take more than a year, while in Taichung or Kaohsiung it is a matter of several months. The Committee hopes that the MOE can streamline and clarify the current bushiban license process and make it more uniform nationwide.

Finally, a bill is now before the Legislative Yuan that would effectively prohibit bushibans from accepting students under the age of six for language instruction. Such legislation, we believe, would infringe on parents' rights to choose what they deem best for their children. It would also be extremely disruptive to bushiban businesses, both local and foreign-owned. The committee is unaware of any scientific studies showing that it is harmful for children under the age of six to participate in extra-curricular learning such as those offered by bushibans in Taiwan. In the absence of such scientific support, the Committee believes that the proposal should be rejected.

Issue 5: Apply fair and consistent regulation to the study-abroad industry.

The Committee requests that the authorities address three areas of inconsistent policy application regarding Taiwan's participation in international education exchanges:

A. Current regulations permit male students to defer their military service if they register in a domestic institution of higher education, including two-year diploma programs, but not if they enroll in a foreign community college for a certificate, diploma, or associate degree program. This preferential treatment given to Taiwanese institutions represents a trade barrier to foreign service-providers that is contrary to WTO principles. It is also unfair to Taiwanese students, as attendance at a community college is often an excellent way to begin an overseas academic career without undue culture shock or financial strain. We request that the MOE consult with the Ministry of National Defense for a change in policy.

B. The MOE continues to adopt unequal treatment toward overseas-education trade shows held in Taiwan, helping to promote or endorse those hosted by foreign trade-representative offices or non-profit organizations but not those run by private companies. In the interest of maintaining a level

playing field, we urge the MOE to determine which trade shows to endorse based on the quality of the event, rather than the status of the organizer.

C. Under current regulations, a Taiwan school must have a formal agreement with an overseas counterpart before credits earned by the student during a one-year exchange program will be recognized in Taiwan. We urge the MOE to establish a system of recognizing the credits based on its evaluation of the quality of the foreign institution, rather than requiring formal agreements. Allowing more students to go overseas to participate in exchange programs would make an immense contribution toward increasing the international consciousness and breadth of experience of Taiwan's students.