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Focus HK: The brain drain

By Hazel Knowles



Thousands of parents and students attended the British Council's Education UK Exhibition last month to check out the 100 universities and schools exhibiting there.

A growing number of local students are choosing to study overseas — but is it because there are advantages to having a foreign education or because Hong Kong is failing to provide enough education opportunities? Hazel Knowles reports.

Jacob But has strong opinions about the higher education system in Hong Kong.

"I think it is collapsing. It is so competitive to get into Hong Kong universities because of the growth in population," he said. "And I think the way of teaching in England is better."

This is why, says But, he joined scores of other parents at the British Council's Education UK Exhibition one weekend last month.

His mission was to find a university for his son, Ambrose, who will graduate from school this summer after sitting the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) exam.

If Ambrose succeeds in getting a place at a UK university, he will join the thousands of Hong Kong students already attending higher education institutions overseas.

According to an Education Bureau survey of Form Six students who had taken the DSE in 2012, more than 5 percent had headed overseas to further their education, with the UK being the most popular destination, followed by the Chinese mainland and then Australia.

In 2013, 13,065 Hong Kong students were studying in the UK according to figures released by the British Council on the opening day of the Education UK Exhibition. A further 8,600 were in Australia, predominantly in further education, and around 8,000 in the United States.

In 2012, there were 3,816 Hong Kong students with study visas in Canada, although the real number is believed to be higher because of those who have a Canadian passport and do not need a visa.

This year will see more Hong Kong students than ever moving to the UK to study with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. UCAS, the organization responsible for taking applications — already has recorded 6,781 applications for the 2014-15 academic year, a rise of 6.7 per cent over the same period last year and almost double the figure of 2009.



Education exodus

According to Professor Darryl Jarvis, an associate dean in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, there are multiple reasons behind the student brain drain. “First, in terms of the job market, an overseas degree still goes a long way towards giving students a competitive advantage,” said Jarvis. “This is Asian phenomenon which you also see in places like Singapore. Despite the fact that Asia has risen and put a lot of money into the higher education sector, a degree from a well-regarded western university still carries a lot of weight back home in terms of job opportunities.

“The other thing is that students, quite rightly so, want to move away and be independent and experience a completely different culture.

“The style of overseas institutions is very different from what we get in universities in Asia, which are not particularly diverse in their student composition.

“That’s not the case in a classroom in Australia, Canada or the US or the UK these days where there is a greater diversity with students from 20 to 40 different countries. That makes for a very exciting classroom and a stimulating student environment, which is a great way to learn.”

Unfortunately, despite some international students from places like Australia and the UK who come in under student exchange programs, Hong Kong universities do not offer that kind of cultural diversity with students being mainly Hong Kong or mainland Chinese, said Jarvis.

Cultural mix

Charles Létang, of the Consulate General of Canada in Hong Kong, said it was exactly this multi-cultural mix that made Canadian universities appealing to Hong Kong students.

Canada’s safe living environment and the high level of accountability, teaching standards, the cutting edge technology and research laboratories at education institutions were also a draw, he said.

“What’s more, tuition and living costs are very competitive when comparing top ranking destinations for study abroad,” he said.

However, there is also another reason, say experts, which suggests Hong Kong is failing to provide further education opportunities for young students: Quite simply, there are not enough university places to go round in Hong Kong.

According to the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, last year 28,418 students gained the minimum requirements to get into university with the new DSE.

However, with only 15,000 subsidized first-year places available, 13,000 of the students who achieved satisfactory grades were left out, leaving them facing the choice of paying full-tuition, opting for a sub degree course or looking overseas.

The British Council’s Sophia Chan-Combrink said a survey conducted at last year’s exhibition found that for most Hong Kong parents, the first choice for their children was a Hong Kong university. However, the shortage of places meant they had to look at other options.

“There is a hierarchy of preference for parents and Hong Kong universities and public-funded places are number one for various reasons such as economics and allowing students to stay close to family,” said Chan-Combrink.

“Their second choice is overseas. We (UK universities) fill the gap because there are not enough local places.”

Tough choices

This is something Tim Gutsell, director of the International Office of the University of Essex, says he and his fellow exhibitors at Education UK are aware of.

“For some students, the UK is not the first choice and we need to be realistic about this,” said Gutsell.

“A lot of the people I see would much rather go to a university in Hong Kong but they know there is an undersupply of places.”

This undersupply of university places makes it particularly tough for students, says Jarvis.

“There is, on average, a 15,000 shortfall of university places every year for Hong Kong students,” said Jarvis.

“What do these students do when they can’t get a UGC- (University Grants Committee) funded place in Hong Kong?”

“Mum and Dad are forced to put their hands in their pockets or get a loan so they can go overseas where it is ridiculously expensive. For a four-year degree course, you could be looking at costs of few hundred thousand US dollars.

“This is awful. It perpetuates this kind of social inequity about who gets access to higher education to go overseas. It creates a two-class system which does not support Hong Kong’s social objectives.”

Jarvis said it also created a modern-day version of the brain drain in which Hong Kong and other Asian countries were losing their brightest young people in their most productive years.

“It’s a massive problem for a lot of Asian countries,” he said. “A lot of these students go abroad for whatever reason or because they don’t get a university place in their home countries and we lose them to UK, Australia, Canada and USA.

“This is a bizarre and unintended outcome of the system that rations out university places like Hong Kong.”

Old school

Jarvis said the root of the problem was Hong Kong’s antiquated higher education system, which was heavily controlled by the government with universities not given room to innovate like those in Australia and Canada.

“It (the government) wants universities to internationalize and be more entrepreneurial and to make Hong Kong into an educational hub but universities are not given the autonomy and scope to do this,” he said.

“There is disconnect between, on one hand, the lip service paid to making Hong Kong the international education hub and, on the other hand, wanting to control what programs can be offered, how many students you can admit, where these students should come from, and funding given to you to do that.”

Jarvis said, as a result, Hong Kong was lagging behind other countries increasingly and in addition the student participation rate in higher education was embarrassingly low.

“Only 20 per cent of Hong Kong high school students go on to university. This compared with 40 percent in the USA, 54 percent in Australia and 60 per cent in Korea,” he said. “We need to modernize the system.”

Back at the Education UK Exhibition, Form Six student Candy Leung is browsing the various stands.

“I think the UK has a better education system than Hong Kong. It is a good place to study,” she says.

Her mother stands by attentively. “I would much rather Candy stays here close to her family,” she says.

Meanwhile, Jacob But is resigned to the fact that the lack of places in Hong Kong will most probably result in his son studying overseas — a move which will cost him dearly.

“I know how much it costs,” he says. “I think we can just manage the fees. We are not very rich but we are not very poor.”



UK exchange students Arvind Norris (University of Warwick), Zahara Aziz (Manchester Metropolitan University) and Leon Man (University of Nottingham) were on hand at the Education UK Exhibition to give advice to Hong Kong students thinking about studying in the UK.

New exam tops student concerns

The new Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) is one of the main concerns of Hong Kong parents and students, according to one participant at the UK Education exhibition.

Tim Gutsell said this was usually the starting point of conversations with parents and students at the two-day exhibition.

“There is more concern about whether they will get in now after the introduction of DSE because local people and UK universities are less familiar with how it works,” said Gutsell, director of the

International Office of the University of Essex, one of the 100 exhibitors at the British Council's exhibition last month.

"People maybe not so confident about whether DSE grades will be recognized."

Gutsell stressed that such worries were unfounded and that UCAS — the clearing house for university admissions in the UK — had very quickly established what DSE grades were equivalent to A-level grades, after the new exam was created.

"So there is clear structure and framework there for recognition of the DSE," he said.

"Every university has different entry requirement but typically they will ask for 2 As and one B in A levels and two fives and a four in the DSE."

There is also concern about whether it is more difficult to get good grades in the DSE than it was under the old Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) system, said Gutsell.

As a result, he said, people were asking about the foundation program in case their grades were not so good.

The DSE replaced the old HKALE which was phased out with students sitting them for the last time in 2013.