

HO SHUN-MAN

Increasing social mobility, education opportunities in HK

It has been said that Hong Kong is “downstreaming”, i.e., that the quality of life of the middle class has been deteriorating. In recent years, there have been occasional media reports suggesting that many youngsters are dissatisfied with their employment, income and upward mobility, and are losing their self-confidence.

A study by the Hong Kong Professional and Senior Executives Association (HKPSEA) in 2010, (for which this author was one of the investigators), found that 21 percent of the post-80s generation had experienced downward mobility and 74 percent had experienced no mobility over the past five years. Over half of them believed that social mobility was worse than 15 years ago.

Many social leaders argue that social equality and mobility should be a major agenda item for the current administration. Higher social mobility is usually associated with more equal opportunities for all, great-

er recognition of personal effort and higher work motivation. In contrast, insufficient social mobility is associated with negative consequences, such as greater dissatisfaction over the gap between the rich and poor, lower social harmony and lower personal motivation to work hard.

Many factors can affect social mobility and career achievement, such as personal attributes, family background, demographics, economic growth, the education system, labor market structure and other public policies. Slow economic growth after the global financial crisis clearly affected employment, incomes and social mobility in the short run. Stable economic growth is the most important external factor in improving social mobility. Recent studies have also found that a higher education level and a wealthier family background are associated with the likelihood of being in the middle class.

In the HKPSEA study, over half of the

respondents felt that the most significant obstacle to their social mobility was a lack of educational qualifications. Only about a third of the respondents blamed the economic situation or government policies, and only 17 percent attributed their lack of mobility to their less fortunate family background. About two thirds of these post-80s respondents agreed that pursuing post-secondary education can increase social mobility, and 77 percent agreed with the statement that “personal hard work and other non-family factors are more important than family background”. Over two thirds of the youngsters still regarded Hong Kong as a fair place with plenty of mobility opportunities. They indicated a willingness to pursue further education to raise their academic qualifications and enhance their career prospects. Such a positive attitude is somewhat different from what is sometimes reported in the media.

Fair or equal educational opportunities

can be seen as the minimum assurance for greater social mobility. Although educational equality may not necessarily lead to social equality, educational inequality can deepen social inequality. Therefore, we need to ensure maximum education equality, especially for lower-income families.

In terms of educational equality, the minimum the government can do is to ensure educational resources are invested fairly. Unfortunately, the quotas of UGC-funded first-degree places has been frozen at 14,500 since 1994 (only 18 percent of the age-group versus the world average of 26 percent), and this is far from being able to satisfy the need of some 26,000 applicants who meet the minimum university entrance requirements (with another 24,000 students who did not meet this requirement).

Most students who are not admitted to UGC-funded first-degree programs are forced to enter high-cost self-financed sub-

degree (or some first-degree) programs with little or no government subsidies (except loans). This creates a heavy financial burden for many lower-income families. Furthermore, only a small percentage of those associate degree graduates can ultimately be admitted to a funded top-up degree programme.

In fact, only 26 percent of Hong Kong's workforce has tertiary qualifications, and this has put Hong Kong far behind the majority of developed economies. To ensure more equal opportunities for post-secondary education and to sustain Hong Kong's international competitiveness, many Hong Kong people have urged the government to increase funding substantially and urgently to allow more young people to pursue funded first-degree studies.

The author is a senior university professor and administrator.