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Urgent need for more government-funded undergraduate quotas

Hong Kong's post-secondary education is lagging far behind on the global scale. Recently, an international survey revealed that only 26.2 percent of Hong Kong's workforce has tertiary qualifications (about 20 percent hold a first degree or above). This put Hong Kong far behind the majority of developed economies (e.g. Finland 37.3 percent and South Korea 35 percent).

This level of attainment does not address the needs of a burgeoning knowledge economy and global competition for talent. If Hong Kong wishes to enhance its international competitiveness, social equality and mobility, and social and cultural values, it urgently must review and re-position its university admission and funding policy.

Over the past 15 years, the SAR government has nominally increased the ratio of students pursuing post-secondary education from 18.5 percent in 1996 to 40 percent in 2011. However, the number of UGC-funded first-year, first-degree quotas has been largely frozen at 14,500 since 1994 (only 18

percent enrolment of the age-group). Due to the double-cohorts under the new 3-3-4 system in 2012, the number was extended to 15,000, but it remains far from able to satisfy local needs. The growth of post-secondary education over the past 10 years has mainly been in the self-financed sub-degree programs.

In 2012, over 74,000 Form 6 students took the new Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) examinations, and 26,000 met the minimum requirement for entering first-degree programs. However, only about 12,000 can be admitted to UGC-funded first-degree programs (another 3,000 places are given to non-JUPAS applicants). In other words, about 14,000 students were held back from entering UGC-funded universities for first-degree studies despite passing the DSE examinations. Such stiff competition and inadequacies for funded degree studies breeds high stresses, disappointment and frustration for many parents and students.

Those some 60,000 students who are not admitted to UGC-funded first-degree pro-

grams can only consider studying overseas, enrolling in local off-shore programs of variable quality, or entering local self-financed sub-degree (about 12,000 places) and first-degree (about 4,500 places) programs. These programs are offered largely by accredited local private institutions, the Vocational Training Council, or continuing education schools affiliated with UGC-funded institutions. However, less than 15 percent of associate degree graduates will ultimately be admitted to a local top-up degree program (and only a total of 4,500 places are UGC-funded).

In any case, the roughly 25,000 new self-financed students must pay very high tuition fees, about HK\$65,000 for first degree and HK\$50,000 for sub-degree (compared to HK\$42,100 and HK\$31,575 respectively for UGC-funded programs) per year. This creates a heavy financial burden for many low-income families, although many of these students can apply for government grants or loans.

Instead of increasing the UGC-funded

first-degree quotas, the government in recent years, as part of its plan to promote the "education industry," has committed to giving lands at nominal prices and development loans for new private institutions to significantly increase the number of self-financed undergraduate quotas. These private institutions principally offer business and other practical subjects in order to attract enough students at minimal costs, thus lacking a well-balanced liberal arts education exposure.

According to the government, by 2014-15, about one third of the age group will be able to receive first-degree education (including first year and final year admissions). Together with associate degree program placements, two thirds of the age group can receive post-secondary education. However, the extra placements will be mostly self-financed without extra public funding. Therefore, many of the above mentioned problems will exist for some time.

This 18 percent age group funded-admission ratio policy (versus the world's average

of 30 percent) is clearly not consistent with the global trend for developing a knowledge society and ensuring equal post-secondary education opportunities.

The government has been urged not to rely too heavily on the development of the private institutions, but also to increase the number of public-funded first-degree and top-up degree placements urgently. As the government's financial situation has grown increasingly healthy, it is strongly suggested that the percentage of UGC-funded first-degree placements should be increased from the current 18 percent to at least 28 percent by 2020.

If we see funded undergraduate education as a basic right of young people to learn and an obligation of a society to sustain its culture, university admission is far from being excessive. The more immediate concern is how to maintain the quality of university education and the quality of graduates.

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