

Older and wiser

Carrie Lam says to meet the collective challenge of an ageing population, Hong Kong must pull together to groom a workforce that is not only bigger, but also fitter and more diversified

Yesterday the Steering Committee on Population Policy started a four-month public engagement exercise to collate views on Hong Kong's population policy. It seeks to bring the city up to date on the population challenges we face, deepen public understanding about the issues involved, and seek community consensus on broad policy strategies to manage the challenges.

The latest projections show that our population will age faster than previously expected. By 2041, almost one in three of Hong Kong's population will be aged 65 or above. Life expectancy at birth will increase to 84.4 years for men and 90.8 years for women.

Our labour force will peak at 3.71 million in 2018 and start to decline. The labour force participation rate will drop from 58.8 per cent last year to 49.5 per cent in 2041.

Our total fertility rate, despite an encouraging uptick from the trough of 0.9



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children per woman in 2003 to 1.3 last year, will remain low. Taken together, the higher life expectancy and low birth rate will mean an upward trend in our total dependency ratio, from the current 355 dependent persons for every 1,000 working-age persons to 712 per 1,000 by 2041.

The government is very alive to these demographic challenges. Two reports, released respectively in 2003 and 2012, have highlighted some issues of concern and recommended measures to tackle part of the problem.

This year, the Working Group on Long-Term Fiscal Planning was set up to explore ways to make more comprehensive planning for public finances to cope with a range of challenges, including an ageing population. The Commission on Poverty is looking into how we may improve our retirement protection arrangements, while plans for meeting people's housing needs are set out in the Long-Term Housing Strategy.

For its part, the Steering Committee on Population Policy considers that a sustainable population policy should seek to promote economic and social progress and

aim at finding a balance between creation of economic wealth, equal opportunities for all and better quality living. To this end, it proposes five policy strategies.

First, we should expand the labour force by drawing more people into the labour market. Female homemakers and early retirees are among our key target groups. We could also provide more job opportunities for young people, while helping new arrivals from the mainland, persons with disabilities and members of ethnic minorities to join the job market. Gainful employment is also conducive to their social integration.

Second, we should enhance the quality of the labour force by improving education and training and minimising skills mismatch, to ensure our young people have the right skills needed by our economy. We should widen our economic base and encourage businesses to move up the value chain and increase job diversity. We should also revive the promotion of vocational education as an alternative route to a career.

Third, we should align our talent admission regime with our broader economic development strategy, and target specific groups of talent who can facilitate Hong Kong's development in key industries, while taking a more active approach to market Hong Kong as a place of opportunities for global talent. We should also bring home Hong Kong people living or studying abroad or on the mainland. Further, we need to consider a more effective system of hiring foreign workers without jeopardising the interests of local workers.

Fourth, we should foster an environment that supports people's aspirations to form and raise families, though the government should not interfere with their childbearing decisions.

Fifth, we should gear up the community to embrace the positive opportunities of an ageing society, as future generations of the elderly will be better educated, healthier and financially more independent. These include building an age-friendly environment, promoting active ageing and developing the "silver hair" market.

In the consultation document, you will find open-ended questions to facilitate discussion of how these policy directions, if supported, can be put into practice.

Of course, some of these population issues have already attracted some debate. Our stance is clear on three topical issues of public concern.

One, a population cap is undesirable. Hong Kong needs population growth to cope with a rapidly ageing population. This is especially relevant when our annual average population growth, which has



been declining steadily since the 1950s, is now at a low level of 0.6 per cent. A population cap would only compound, not resolve, the challenges we face.

Two, the one-way permit scheme should be preserved. The scheme, designed primarily for family reunion, has a firm constitutional basis. When cross-boundary marriages are making up 35 per cent of our locally registered marriages, there is clearly a continued need for an orderly arrival of spouses and children of Hong Kong people for family reunion via the scheme. About 48 per cent of the working-age new arrivals are economically active. With proper training and support services, more of them can provide relief to our tight labour market.

Three, children born to mainland women whose spouses are not Hong Kong permanent residents are not a solution to our demographic challenge. Instead, the birth of some 200,000 such children in Hong Kong prior to the implementation of the "zero delivery quota" policy has presented some transient, multifaceted problems. For example, it has exacerbated the demand for kindergarten and Primary One school places in the northern New Territories. This calls for enhanced planning and preparation in order to ensure that the needs of local residents are being taken care of.

A well-educated, hard-working, flex-

ible and enterprising workforce has always been one of Hong Kong's greatest strengths. But we can only hope to remain ahead of the game if we can nurture our home-grown talent as well as attract the best and the brightest from around the globe. We should strive to be the most sophisticated and efficient platform for the world to do business with the mainland and for Chinese enterprises to be connected with the world.

A less outward-looking or less international Hong Kong will cost us our economic vitality. And only if we remain competitive will we create the financial ability needed to deal with our social challenges. This should form a core consideration of our population policy.

There is no lack of contentious issues in the consultation document. We advocate rational discussion on these issues to seek common ground.

I encourage all Hong Kong people to think in terms of real longer-term benefits for this city, in the interests of our future generations. Public views received will form the basis for the steering committee to formulate an actionable agenda covering short- and long-term measures. Please share with us your thoughts on or before February 23 next year.

Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor is Hong Kong's chief secretary

Gender agenda

Helene Fung and Su-Mei Thompson say our universities should offer studies that address the need for gender perspectives in social issues

Despite having scholars who have distinguished themselves in women's gender and sexuality studies, Hong Kong's universities are glaringly deficient in their support for 21st-century gender studies, as demonstrated by the fact that none of them offer such courses as a full undergraduate degree programme.

Questions about sex and sexuality colour every aspect of our lives. They determine the toys we gravitate towards, the friends we make, the subjects and occupations we choose, the lifestyle decisions we embrace, how we interpret culture, media and history, as well as the policies and services that affect social development. Although gender studies owes its beginning to feminism, it has developed into an interdisciplinary inquiry that embraces voices from different perspectives, both within and beyond the walls of the ivory tower.

World-class gender studies programmes at institutions like Cambridge and Barnard equip students with the knowledge to critically evaluate the complex issues of income inequalities between women and men, the expression of sexuality, the sexual roles men and women play, and more.

Hong Kong currently stands at the crossroads on major social issues, including integration challenges for ethnic minorities, mainland immigrants and sexual minorities, as well as rising incidents of sex discrimination and sexual harassment. To help us chart the path ahead, it is time for our leading universities to introduce undergraduate programmes that afford a broad, critical view of gender issues related to contemporary social life.

At The Women's Foundation, we are particularly concerned about gender inequality in the allocation of resources and the impact this has on the welfare and livelihood of women. A highly visible example is the Mandatory Provident Fund, which has been criticised for ignoring the one million or so women-housewives, part-time workers and older adults who are ineligible for pension protection.

To determine where gender inequities lie, the government needs to adopt gender responsive mechanisms that measure the difference in impact on men and women and more accurately assess the demographic impact of budget decisions and policy changes. This is currently not happening.

Having a talent pool of graduates trained in gender-based analysis would make a difference. Their expertise would be needed not just in government, civil service and statutory bodies such as the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Women's Commission, but also private companies that care about the management and training of their diverse workforce, and non-governmental organisations offering services in mental and community health, and youth and family service.

If Hong Kong can move quickly to establish a flagship gender studies programme, there are significant opportunities for cross-border collaboration, particularly with the mainland where rising expectations among urban women, the gendered segmentation of the labour market and the gender imbalance stemming from the one-child policy are emerging as key issues for policymakers.

Helene Fung is a professor in the psychology department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Su-Mei Thompson is CEO of The Women's Foundation

University rankings should only be a guide for discerning Hongkongers

Recently, many local papers prominently published the news that the University of Hong Kong was ranked 43rd in the latest World University Rankings, put together by Times Higher Education. This was a substantial drop from the previous year, when it was rated 35th.

The reports caused a lot of anxiety in local academic circles, with many sympathising with HKU's "demise".

In fact, HKU chiefs shouldn't fret over the drop in ranking, as it is almost impossible to fairly compare universities around the world. The performance indicators cannot accurately provide balanced and fair comparisons to grade universities from country to country.

Furthermore, these annual rankings are published by the British magazine *Times Higher Education*, with data supplied by Thomson Reuters, which means the assessment may be biased towards Western institutions. HKU chiefs shouldn't take the ranking so seriously.

The rankings have also raised eyebrows among other top universities in the United States, with many prestigious American educational institutions being given quite low rankings, surprisingly. The picture painted by this annual assessment is rather unrealistic, to say the least.

It's widely known that the most prestigious American university rankings are provided by the US News & World Report. The latest top 10, including Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Stanford, are all familiar names to Hongkongers.

Albert Cheng says the disparities thrown up by comparing different rankings show why students must do their homework before applying



Strangely enough, one of the Ivy League universities, Dartmouth College, which is ranked No 10 by the US News & World Report, stands at 126 in the Times Higher Education list. Another Ivy League institution – Brown University – is placed at No 52, but is ranked 14th by the US News & World Report.

These universities are ranked even lower than HKU in the Times list, which is hard to believe.

The picture painted by this annual assessment is rather unrealistic

Honestly speaking, if you were a parent and your child had been accepted by both Ivy League universities and HKU, which one would you choose? We all know the answer.

When choosing a university, Hong Kong people often focus on the popular ones and overlook the prestigious universities that are not as well known in Hong Kong.

In fact, some really good ones are overlooked by Hongkongers. For example, Tufts University is

ranked 28th by the US News & World Report, but 80th by Times Higher Education.

It's a similar picture in Canada. For example, the University of Western Ontario, the alma mater of both noted financial columnist Tony Tsoi Tung-ho and World Health Organisation director general Margaret Chan Fung Fu-chun, did not even make it to the top 200 in the Times Higher Education rankings. Does it sound reasonable?

In fact, choices should be made by assessing a school's local reputation because each school has its strengths and weaknesses. Students should choose a school according to their own academic standards rather than just chasing prestigious institutions.

There are endless examples of outstanding universities, but one stands out – the University of Notre Dame. It's ranked 18th by the US News & World Report and was voted as one of the top five dream schools by American parents in a survey conducted by the consulting company Princeton Review.

Notre Dame is famed for its pre-med school, with a majority of its graduates being able to get into top US medical schools. It's definitely a top choice in the US when it comes to studying medicine.

Its other strengths include business, law and architecture. Its business school has been

ranked No 1 in the US for four consecutive years by Bloomberg *Businessweek* magazine.

To local students, Notre Dame may be a much better choice than a number of Ivy League institutions.

Notre Dame also has a highly flexible admission approach, which allows students to have first and second choices, so that they can switch to their secondary choices in their second year. The goal is to provide students with wider choice.

It may be lesser known to Hongkongers, but Notre Dame is the alma mater of many local luminaries, such as property and trading entrepreneur Christopher Cheng Wai-chee and his brother Edgar Cheng Wai-kin.

The Cheng family helped set up an exchange programme between Notre Dame and HKU and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The Li Ka Shing Foundation has also helped to boost admissions from the Greater China region.

Even with its prestige, Notre Dame is still easier to enter than other famous institutions because it is hoping to boost the ratio of its international students.

Albert Cheng King-hon is a political commentator, and the parent of a son who graduated from the University of Notre Dame, and another son who is currently attending it. taipan@albertcheng.hk

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Recompense for our loss in Manila tragedy will come

Lau Nai-keung says Hong Kong should leave the negotiations to Beijing

Three years after the Manila hostage tragedy, the issue resurfaced when Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying met Philippine President Benigno Aquino at the Apec Summit in Bali. Survivors of the crisis and relatives of the deceased have demanded compensation and an apology from Aquino.

The meeting was perceived here as a humiliation for Leung, who was also reported in the Philippine press as pledging to put the incident behind them. This misreporting was subsequently denied, but it added insult to injury, resulting in a general uproar in the city.

Seizing the opportunity, our dissidents proposed all sorts of sanctions against this common enemy, with the side effect of pressuring the central government to get involved.

Things has turned downright ugly, especially given that the Civic Party, which not so long ago vowed to fight for the right of abode for Filipino domestic workers, has now been advocating a general boycott of everything from the Philippines, presumably including its workers.

Yes, the Manila police bungled the hostage rescue operation but – as politically incorrect as it may sound – I don't think the nature and magnitude of this tragedy calls for a presidential apology. Turning down such a demand is an appropriate response. First and foremost, Aquino has to be accountable to his people.

So, an apology from the Manila mayor may be acceptable but what good is it

when it comes three years too late? Compensation is another matter; this is a lot more substantial than just words.

During any negotiation, it's advisable not to make threats if you do not seriously intend to follow through. Any economic boycott by a small market of seven million people is not going to be very effective. But what would happen to our proud tradition of being a free port?

And don't expect the central government to be drawn in by our irrational moves. Diplomacy is never conducted this way; otherwise, we would have had



Bear in mind China has a lot more chips on the bargaining table than the Philippines

many more wars instead of just war cries.

In fact, what is the point of punishing the innocent banana farmers and domestic helpers just to extort an apology from their political leader? Just to show the world that we Hong Kong citizens can be uncivilised and unreasonable?

International relations, by their very nature, take place between nations. Hong Kong, as a special administrative region of China, has not been empowered in this area. Article

13 of our Basic Law says so. Like it or not, in the final analysis, this is an issue between China and the Philippines, not between Hong Kong and the Philippines, not even between Hong Kong and Manila.

Now that Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) has taken this matter up with Aquino, using very strong words, Hong Kong has to step back and play a supporting role. In the big picture, there are a number of issues to be resolved between these two countries; the hostage incident is just one of them, and definitely not the most urgent or the most strategic.

Those who advocate nativism may not like it, but it's a fact that you win some and lose some. We will have to learn to live with that.

China has a tradition of resolving international disputes through negotiations. Bearing in mind that China has a lot more chips on the bargaining table than the Philippines, ultimately we will get what we reasonably demand – but not more; China abhors hegemony and we don't want to end up being a bully like our dissidents.

We also shouldn't underestimate Aquino. He knows his country has sold a lot less bananas to China in the past three years and it is beginning to hurt. We should just be patient; compensation will come sooner than many people expect.

Lau Nai-keung is a member of the Basic Law Committee of the NPC Standing Committee, and also a member of the Commission on Strategic Development