

# Fueling the knowledge economy

## INTERVIEW WITH THE HON EDDIE NG, SBS, JP

SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION, GOVERNMENT OF THE HONG KONG SAR



### EDDIE NG

has been Secretary for Education since 1 July 2012. Prior to his appointment he was a member and then Chairman of the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) from 2006-12, and Deputy Chairman of the Council of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) from 2002-07. Mr Ng has a wealth of experience in human resource management, having held prominent positions in such leading multinational corporations as Macquarie Securities Asia, JPMorgan Chase, Jardine Fleming, Lucent Technologies, AT&T, Citibank and Motorola.

During his 2014 policy address earlier this year, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, CY Leung, reiterated the need for the city to further enhance its competitiveness if it is to sustain the growth of its knowledge-based economy and maintain its status as a world city.

Proponents of that goal have often criticised Hong Kong's education system for its exam-focused, rote learning approach, which has been seen as focusing more on academic achievement rather than personal growth.

In 2009, a new educational structure was introduced: the so-called 334 Scheme. Under the new senior secondary syllabus, all students now study a broad and balanced curriculum, including four core subjects: Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies, along with two to three elective subjects and other learning experiences.

Education Secretary Eddie Ng says the four core subjects will "enable students to develop biliterate and trilingual fluencies and enhanced literacy in mathematics. They will also develop critical thinking, inquiry skills and multi-perspective thinking through exploring contemporary issues and positive citizenship in Liberal Studies. Other learning experiences, as one of the three components that complement the core and elective subjects, aim further to widen students' horizons, to develop their lifelong interests and more importantly, to nurture positive values and attitudes."

He adds that the idea is also to change the way children think about their education. "The question is how best to shift the focus to quality learning and unleash our children's potential," he says, adding: "it is also important to help children understand that education is now a lifetime project; they will have to develop new skills as they go through their careers, so they have to be flexible and adaptable."

At post-secondary level, measures are being introduced to subsidise higher education in healthcare, architecture and engineering, testing and certification, the creative industries, logistics, and tourism, says Mr Ng, adding that there is to be a greater focus on providing opportunities in vocational education in industries where there are labour shortages.

"Education in Hong Kong has entered a new era. The new system is more aligned with other academic systems worldwide, and allows more opportunities for student exchanges with other parts of the world. Taking

the opportunity of an additional year at university, our higher education institutions have revamped their curriculum with a view to nurturing global citizens with academic excellence and an international outlook through inter-disciplinary studies, service learning in local and global settings, exchange programmes and enriched learning experiences," says Mr Ng.

### International schools: admission impossible?

For Hong Kong's growing middle classes and ex-pat community, the private sector's so-called international schools are proving an increasingly popular choice.

As a result, Hong Kong faces a critical shortage of spaces at its 49 international schools. International schools in Hong Kong haven't kept pace with the record numbers of applicants as companies expand offices to tap growth in China, and the lack of space may hurt the city's competitiveness by keeping executives with families from relocating. The leading schools are already at full capacity and many have waiting lists.

Earlier this year Mr Ng warned that demand for primary-school places at international schools will rise 23 per cent to 29,281 by 2016 from 2011, creating a forecast shortage of 4,203 places and leading to concerns that planned expansions won't meet demand from local and expatriate families seeking an English-medium education for their children in the next few years.

In response, the Education Bureau is promoting new schools. Three sites were allocated last year to private operators, including New York Stock Exchange-listed Nord-Anglia Education (NORD). The school has capacity for 660 pupils aged between five and 12 (Year One to Year Seven). It opened its doors in September, with 400 places for Year 1-7 students, with Years 8 and 9 to be added next year. The school says it will also explore options for Years 10 to 13.

Rebecca Merrett, Nord Anglia's head of admissions, is generally positive about Hong Kong's education system in general: "The private sector has responded positively in providing a choice for parents who want an alternative, but I believe that Hong Kong should be doing more to attract international schools. As educators, we believe that there is no 'right fit' for everyone. Instead it's about looking the best fit for your child's needs and what kind of teaching will inspire and motivate them, leading them to be academically successful."

There are some 25 nationalities attending the school, says Ms Merrett. “We adhere to the 70:30 ratio set by the HK Education Bureau in that 70 per cent of our student population are foreign passport holders and 30 per cent are Chinese passport Holders,” she says, adding that Nord Anglia will be training students from Hong Kong’s Institute of Education and providing opportunities for work placements for interns from 2015.

In total, five new locations have been set aside for international schools. Harrow International, a branch of the UK institution that educated Sir Winston Churchill, opened its Hong Kong campus in September 2012 in Tuen Mun, in the New Territories. The extra supply should reduce the projected shortfall of primary places to less than 1,500, says Mr Ng.

### Regional education hub

By aligning its education system with others worldwide, as well as by opening up the city to international schools, Hong Kong is further strengthening its position as a regional education hub, says Secretary Ng.

“We aim to nurture talents for other industries and attract outstanding people from around the world, boosting Hong Kong’s competitiveness and facilitating the city’s long-term development,” he says, adding that to promote internationalisation, the Education Bureau has doubled the non-local student admission quotas of publicly-funded institutions to 20 per cent; it will also provide government scholarships to outstanding non-local students; has relaxed employment and immigration restrictions for non-local students; and implemented the PhD fellowship scheme offering a monthly stipend plus travelling sponsorship for top research students from around the world.

“We will build on these measures and endeavour to attract more quality non-local students to study in Hong Kong, as well as welcoming overseas institutions to set up campuses in the SAR. We will work with our post-secondary education institutions to step up exchange and promotion efforts overseas so as to encourage more students to regard Hong Kong as a destination for education,” adds Mr Ng.

Last year, more than 26,000 non-local students came to Hong Kong from over 70 countries to undertake post-secondary education in Hong Kong.

Mr Ng points out that Hong Kong has many world-class institutions, and that of 18 local degree-awarding universities and colleges three were ranked within the top 50 in 2013 by Quacquarelli Symonds, and another two within the top 200. Hong Kong universities also host some of the world’s best executive business management programmes.

“Our goal is to promote the internationalisation, mobility and employability of the talent pool in Hong Kong,” says Mr Ng, who earlier this year met with

senior officials in Belgium to strengthen Hong Kong’s education ties with European Union member states.

### Looking to the future

Despite the many changes and improvements that have occurred since 1997, much more still has to be accomplished, says Mr Ng, pointing to the need for increased use of information technology, still more highly-trained teachers, and increased access to education for all.

While there is much uncertainty in the market, the highly discerning nature of students and their parents, coupled with ambitious reforms, will continue to drive competition and higher standards: the recent education reforms have brought Hong Kong’s curriculum into line with international standards, with their focus on more student-centred learning and establishing a broader, more diversified school curriculum.

At the same time, there has been a significant rise in the number of students progressing to higher education in recent years. The relatively low cost of studying in Hong Kong will undoubtedly increase the appeal of programmes to students from the region, although it is important to point out that local students will not find themselves in competition, as subsidised places have been set aside for them. Nevertheless, private education is set to play a bigger role, particularly at the secondary and higher levels.

Interest in Hong Kong from the Mainland has also grown in recent years as Hong Kong institutions have climbed in international rankings. Mr Ng says competition for places will continue to drive policy and greater recognition of Hong Kong qualifications, while at the same time creating further opportunities for providers in the dynamic, diverse and internationally-minded Hong Kong education market.

**Hong Kong’s educational institutions have revamped their curriculum with a view to nurturing global citizens with academic excellence and an international outlook**

PolyU’s Jockey Club Innovation Tower, designed by Zaha Hadid

