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Hong Kong Shares Its Plans to Become a Major Academic Hub

By Ian Wilhelm

Washington

Hong Kong's secretary of education traveled the United States this month to discuss how the territory's overhaul of its education system would affect its international programs and the thousands of Hong Kong students who come to America to study each year.

Raymond H.C. Wong met with representatives from several high schools and universities in New York, San Francisco, and Washington, as well as with officials of the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of International Education.

In an interview with *The Chronicle*, Mr. Wong said the education changes—and his whirlwind diplomatic tour—are part of a continuing effort to turn the Chinese territory into a major academic center in Southeast Asia and to forge stronger global partnerships with American institutions and others.

"We want to develop Hong Kong as a regional education hub," he said. "In this globalized world, we need to prepare our students to have a more global outlook."

Moving Toward an American Model

To develop its new academic structure, Hong Kong is revamping both secondary and higher education, moving away from the British-style system it has historically operated to one that is similar to the United States'. It is abandoning a three-year undergraduate model for a four-year one, doing more to attract scholars and students from overseas, and introducing new curricula into its high schools and its 12 higher-education institutions to foster creative thinking.

The changes are meant to develop each student into a "whole person" with a global outlook that will help Hong Kong be more economically competitive, said Mr. Wong.

"We believe it will provide a more broad-based education to our students," he said. "We wish to develop the critical-thinking skills, communications skills, and leadership skills of our students so they

can meet the challenges of the 21st century."

In 2012 the first students will graduate from the revamped secondary-education system. That year universities will begin their four-year curricula.

On his recent trip, Mr. Wong visited the City University of New York, Stanford University, and other American universities that are popular with Hong Kong students. About 8,000 students from Hong Kong are enrolled at American higher-education institutions, and Mr. Wong wants to make sure Hong Kong's new curricula will be compatible with their academic requirements.

Mr. Wong, who is also making similar calls on university officials in Australia, Britain, and Canada, said the response from American educators has been good.

"All of them are very impressed with the education reforms that we have been undertaking," he said. "Of course they need time to digest the material, but so far the feedback has been positive."

Peggy Blumenthal, executive vice president of the Institute of International Education, said the revised education system will better prepare Hong Kong students to study at American universities. "This broader foundation will fit well with the U.S. undergraduate-education emphasis on critical thinking and liberal arts," she said.

Competing for Students in East Asia

As Hong Kong smooths the way for its students to continue to seek educational opportunities abroad, the Asian territory is also seeking to recruit more academics and undergraduates to come to its shores.

Mr. Wong estimates that Hong Kong [needs to hire](#) about 1,000 scholars in the coming years, and that it plans to increase the share of international students from 13 percent of all students enrolled to 20 percent.

To help with the latter goal, the government has established a \$128.5-million scholarship fund; foreign students are eligible to receive double the financial award that is available to their local peers.

As part of those recruitment efforts, Mr. Wong said, Hong Kong is planning to add to the programs and courses the territory operates with overseas partners.

"We are making every effort to collaborate with other places to attract more overseas students to Hong Kong," he said. "In this

respect, our universities have adopted very aggressive programs in terms of student exchange and funding joint programs with overseas universities."

For example, in September the Savannah College of Art and Design will start offering courses at a branch campus in Hong Kong, teaching photography, digital media, and other fine arts. The campus is the institution's first in Asia.

Mr. Wong said the Hong Kong government has set aside land for higher education and will accept proposals from outside universities about how to develop it. Ideas could include building a branch facility for a major university or a compound similar to Education City in Qatar, where several institutions have set up shop.

Although Hong Kong is seeking to build ties with others, Mr. Wong questioned a recent effort to link the university systems in China, Japan, and South Korea. The project, dubbed [Campus Asia](#), is meant to explore ways to increase student mobility, assure academic quality control across the three countries, and forge other connections.

"Theoretically that has a lot of attraction, but it's not an easy thing to achieve," he said. "Various institutions, various jurisdictions have different curricula, different requirements, different standards."

Mr. Wong acknowledged that East Asia is experiencing something of a gold rush as governments there [spend billions](#) on higher education, with places like Singapore also trying to become major academic destinations.

Hong Kong has a "competitive edge," he said, because of its urban setting, its use of English to teach at the university level, and its mix of Asian and Western cultures. He said the race to recruit students and scholars is "natural" and ultimately will benefit the region.

"Each jurisdiction has its own attraction," he said. "We all want to grab the best talent."

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