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Hong Kong Aims to Attract Foreign Campuses to Its Shores

By Mary Hennock

Hong Kong

In a former courthouse here, jail cells have been converted into offices and a courtroom adapted into a lecture hall. The unusual changes are part of the Savannah College of Art and Design's transformation of the North Kowloon Magistracy into its first Asian campus, which opens to students this month.

While the 1960s building is in an area where land prices are among the most expensive in the world, Savannah College paid the government the equivalent of 13 cents, or one Hong Kong dollar, for a 10-year lease.

The sweet real-estate deal is part of the Hong Kong government's effort to turn the Chinese territory into a global center for higher education. While Savannah's case was somewhat unusual, as it is restoring a historic building, Hong Kong is offering cheap land and other incentives to attract foreign colleges and universities to its shores. And it is relaxing visa and enrollment restrictions to bring in more international students.

The hope is that an influx of higher-education institutions and undergraduates can bolster Hong Kong's image as a sophisticated, globalized city that is the gateway to China—a status increasingly challenged by Shanghai.

Michelle Li, Hong Kong's deputy secretary for education, says the push to internationalize will also benefit local students, broadening their education and making them more appealing to employers. It will provide "exposure to different cultures, which will allow our students to prepare themselves without going abroad," she says. "We want a diversified culture so our university students will benefit from working and playing in an international environment."

Hong Kong's Education Bureau says education should be a "global passport."

Competition to Create Branch Campuses

As part of the changes, visa laws have been eased so foreigners can

stay in Hong Kong and work for a year after graduation. And quota limits on international students attending public universities are being raised to 20 percent from 10 percent.

But perhaps Hong Kong's most ambitious plan is offering land to entice new branch campuses.

"We have six pieces of land in our pocket," says Ms. Li. "I'm sure all of them have bidders, and some of them have more than one bidder."

Starting in the fall, the Hong Kong government will officially offer the largest plot, of more than 100,000 square meters, or nearly 25 acres—enough space to teach roughly 8,000 students—at the bargain price of \$1,000 HK, or \$129 U.S. The site, known as Queen's Hill, once housed a British military barracks near the border with China. Two more locations will be available in late 2010 or early 2011.

Hong Kong officials are careful to point out that Queen's Hill will not automatically go to a foreign campus or even to a single bidder. They are looking for reputable, self-financing, private colleges. "We don't have a wish list as such, but we really want to attract quality providers," says Ms. Li. "We want to assess the level of interest, both local and nonlocal."

Queen's Hill will be marketed to interested parties around the world by Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices, which operate essentially as the embassies for this "special administrative region" of China.

Savannah College is the first to test that opening market, although not the first American institution to open a campus or offer degrees in Hong Kong. Upper Iowa University, for example, opened a site nine years ago. Savannah College's deal with Hong Kong is somewhat of an outlier, however; Hong Kong's development bureau was searching for partners to conserve historic buildings, and the college won the bid to restore the court.

Hong Kong conservation officials "wanted art or education, and we're both art and education," says John Paul Rowan, vice president of Savannah College in Hong Kong, who is in charge of setting up the new campus.

Mr. Rowan says Savannah wanted to move to Hong Kong because the college already attracts a large number of Asian students and sees the potential to attract more. Hong Kong is its second foreign location; it has another campus in Lacoste, France.

The college is investing \$250-million HK, or \$32.1-million U.S., in its Hong Kong site, of which \$100-million HK, or \$12.9-million U.S., will pay for building restoration.

Cells Into Learning Spaces

Hong Kong requires that the new branch campus retain the court's distinctive features, including its jail cells, tiers of public benches, the witness stand, and the prisoners' dock. Even the iron-grilles on cell doors and white-tiled latrine cubicles for prisoners must be preserved.

While maintaining the old building's outward appearance, the college is turning it into a state-of-the art digital-media training center. The college has installed "miles and miles of optical cables" to support more than 200 computers, says Robert Dickensheets, a professor of historic preservation at Savannah College, who has moved to Hong Kong to supervise the overhaul. One former courtroom has a wall-sized green screen for animation, and digital sound booths have been constructed in another part of the magistracy.

As a private institution specializing in digital media, with alumni who work at animation studios like Pixar and DreamWorks, Savannah College has a focus that dovetails nicely with Hong Kong's ambitions.

"For creativity, you really need people with that kind of international network," says Amy Wong, a senior officer at the Hong Kong Education Bureau.

Ms. Wong, who oversees the accreditation of nonlocal courses, says Hong Kong already has 1,200 such courses offered through its eight public universities in partnership with foreign institutions.

Foreign colleges wishing to operate in Hong Kong have two routes to get their courses approved. They can get each course individually approved or apply to be recognized as a local institution.

Savannah College took the first route, as its priority was to get the Asian campus open quickly. It took a year to get approvals for all eight majors, including animation, advertising, interactive design, and game development, but "it's actually a fairly easy process," says Mr. Rowan.

Now that its campus is established, Savannah College is considering whether to apply for local status. "It'll allow the accreditation of the university as a whole instead of the one-year, per-course process," says Mr. Rowan.

Substantial financial benefits come with local status. Colleges registered as Hong Kong institutions are eligible for 10-year interest-free loans from the government; funds are available for start-ups, improvements to existing colleges, and one-off projects. Recent rule changes make it easier for private institutions to qualify.

What's more, students at locally accredited colleges can apply for scholarships from a \$1-billion HK, or \$128.6-million U.S., scholarship fund.

"If SCAD goes through local accreditation, it will be a big thing for them because their tuition fees are frankly quite high" for local students, says Ms. Wong. Savannah charges \$28,000 U.S., or \$217,835 HK, a year.

The scholarship opportunity—as well as the available land and other incentives—will probably mean that Savannah will be joined by other foreign institutions. The Queen's Hill site, say Hong Kong education officials, will help them gauge the level of interest around the world.

While the government wants to bring new players into Hong Kong's higher-education system, it wants the changes to be gradual, says Ms Wong. "We don't want to overwhelm the market," she says. "If we proceed too fast, there's a risk of quality being at risk."

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