

Bringing the Children Back Home: Overseas Hongkongers become Target Talent Pool

The city must try harder to improve its labour and living environments in order to appeal to children of migrated Hongkongers, stakeholders say

Fanny W. Y. Fung and Olga Wong

South China Morning Post, 15 January 2015

Second-generation overseas Hongkongers have become the target talent pool in the government's latest population blueprint aimed at overcoming the ageing demographic and shortage of skilled labour. But relaxing immigration restrictions alone will not be enough, according to these people, born in foreign lands to Hong Kong parents.

They share the view of population experts that, while the city appeals as a career destination because of its global edge, the education of their young children, limited housing supply, labour benefits and pollution may be drawbacks.

The reactions appear to temper the government's hopes that a new scheme will attract more of these people to return to their parents' hometown and contribute to the workforce, which is expected to start shrinking in 2018.

Under the pilot scheme, announced in Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's policy address on Wednesday, children born to permanent Hong Kong residents who have emigrated can apply for a one-year visa to look for work in the city. Applicants must be aged 18 to 40, have a university degree, understand English or Chinese and prove they can afford to live in the city.

Their right of abode became a matter of legal dispute after the 1997 handover. In a judicial review in 2012, the High Court upheld the government's refusal to issue a permanent Hong Kong identity card to such a child on the grounds that his parents had settled abroad and he himself had acquired foreign nationality at birth.

Last year alone, about 3,000 second-generation overseas Hongkongers had their applications for identity cards rejected. Ironically, this is the group of people that the newly unveiled measure is now targeting.

Alex Chow from London, 27, was one of those whose applications failed. He plans to move to Hong Kong some day and is happy to hear about the scheme.

"A few years ago, I tried to get my Hong Kong ID card so that I could apply for a home return permit and go to Beijing. I thought that would be very easy and I filled in all the forms," he said yesterday. "But after almost a year, they told me I couldn't get an ID card."

That did not stop Chow from getting a job in Beijing as a financial investigator. But he still has his eye on Hong Kong, where, because of his family roots, he has always wanted to live at some point. "Growing up in the UK with Chinese parents is a slightly different culture. Hong Kong parents always try to push you back, so it has been a goal for me to go back ... It feels like where I grew up. I think Hong Kong is culturally between London and Beijing."

But the daunting rents could be an issue. "You may live in Tuen Mun for lower rent, but then it's too much commuting."

Samantha Tsang from Dublin, 28, also a child of Hong Kong migrants, received her Hong Kong identity card before 1997. Yet she dropped the idea of moving back to her parents' home after comparing local employment benefits to those in Ireland.

"The economy where I am living is really bad. So I thought of looking for a job in administration or teaching English in Hong Kong," said Tsang, who previously worked in retail management and is now seeking a job.

But the long working hours and stressful lifestyle in the city put her off, she said, and she could not think of anything the government could do to rekindle her interest.

"I compared the benefits of working here and there and found that I would be better off working [in Ireland] ... We have 22 to 24 days [of leave] a year, on top of bank holidays and public holidays. In Hong Kong, I would not have enough personal time."

Professor Paul Yip Siu-fai, an expert in demographics at the University of Hong Kong, suggested the city could learn from Singapore when it comes to retaining local talent and making itself attractive to overseas talent.

"Singapore is very strategic in engaging foreign talents by making it a home for them," Yip said. "For [Hong Kong] we still only make it as a city to work in, without much long-term vision."

"We need to have a more specific understanding of our position and our vision into the future. Then we can know more what sort of talents and skills we need for Hong Kong to remain sustainable and competitive."

Apart from refining the immigrant admission schemes, the Security Bureau is studying the feasibility of coming up with a "talent list" to ensure applicants match employers' demands. The bureau chief, Secretary for Security Lai Tung-kuok, has cautioned that the study will be complicated as it requires large amounts of data and analysis to identify which sectors face a shortage of skilled labour.

Yip urged the bureau to make the list dynamic and responsive to the city's changing needs in the coming years.

Dr Leong Chan-hoong, a migration policy expert at the National University of Singapore, thought Hong Kong should be looking at Singapore's experience of facilitating education needs. "The government guarantees school places for the children of overseas Singaporean returnees," he said.

The country also made curricular requirements more flexible so that these pupils might not have to take mandatory classes in the mother tongues of their parents. This had helped the children of the target returnees adapt to life locally, the scholar said.

Citing examples elsewhere, Leong said Taiwan showed the way in upping its appeal when the government offered financial incentives for companies hiring returnees in the 1980s and '90s.

India, in contrast, had "room for improvement" in providing benefits other than job incentives, he noted. "When people consider whether to move back, it is not just about employment. They will also consider the socio-political climate, pollution, and whether their children can adapt to the local school system."

The population expert found the move to attract returnees might prove a palatable option for Hong Kong society itself. And their acceptance is important. He said: "It is socially less controversial as opposed to drawing people from mainland China."