

Hong Kong Remains an Attractive Destination for Global Talent

The population trend is a newsworthy topic anywhere in the world, and publication (February 28, 2022) of the Summary results of the 2021 Population Census and Year-end Population Estimate for Hong Kong is no different.

The latest provisional estimates show that Hong Kong's population at end-2021 was 7,403,100, representing a decrease of 23,600 or 0.3% from 7,426,700 at end-2020.

A net out flow of 9,400 people was recorded during this period.

No doubt, some western media will see this as another opportunity to bash Hong Kong with sensationalist yet unfounded headlines that somehow suggest people are leaving in droves.

The facts tell a far more accurate and rational story.

The year-on-year decrease in Hong Kong's population in 2021, which has in fact narrowed as compared to 2020 (-1.2%), is predominantly due to a natural decrease (more deaths than births). It's also likely that the severe interruption of cross-boundary travel caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic prompted some people to delay plans to come to Hong Kong.

Natural Decrease

The number of births in Hong Kong has been declining over the past five years, and remains at a low level. In 2016, 60,900 babies were born in Hong Kong, compared to 43,000 in 2020 and 37,000 last year. This is a significant decline, which may be partly attributable to the pandemic since early 2020.

At the same time, the number of deaths edged up gradually from 46,900 to 51,200 over the same five-year period, in tandem with the ageing trend of the population.

As for the net outflow, 17,900 One-way Permit holders arrived and 27,300 departed Hong Kong. This is hardly a surprise given the current circumstances and the reduction of over 34,000 foreign domestic helpers in

Hong Kong during the same period due to the epidemic situations in their home countries and restrictions on international travel and local movement. Hong Kong does not require people to state their reasons for leaving the city, but we can assume that some will have departed for personal reasons. At the same time, it is likely that others have been unable to return, taken up temporary residence elsewhere or delayed plans to come to Hong Kong until the pandemic situation stabilises and travel restrictions have eased.

Population fluctuations are a natural phenomenon for any economy, and governments are acutely aware of their potential impact on long-term growth and development.

Quality Education

We believe that quality education and skills upgrading are vitally important to overcoming Hong Kong's challenges, not least an ageing population and, hence, a shrinking workforce.

It is encouraging that the 2021 Population Census shows that the educational level of our population has generally improved. Of the population aged 15 and over, the proportion having attended post-secondary education increased from 27% in 2011 to 35% in 2021.

The findings echo the fact that with our various policy measures in place to provide multiple and flexible pathways for our young people to pursue post-secondary education, nearly 80 per cent of the relevant age cohort at present have access to post-secondary education, including about 50 per cent who have access to degree education.

And our universities continue to compete with the best in the world: four local universities are ranked in the World Top 100 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2022 (HKU [30th], CUHK[49th], HKUST [66th]; PolyU [91st]. Separately, three of the above universities are named among the World Top 10 most international universities in the same survey (HKU [1st], HKUST [3rd] and CUHK [9th]).

In recent years, the government has been implementing new initiatives to raise the quality of our workforce and maintain Hong Kong's competitiveness

and attractiveness to talent from the Mainland and overseas.

Launched in 2006, the Quality Migrant Admission Scheme (QMAS) targets skilled individuals and entrepreneurs who wish to live and work in Hong Kong. In 2020 the annual quota was increased to 2,000 and last year we further doubled it to 4,000 to meet demand.

It is encouraging to see that, in 2021, there were 5,365 applications received under the QMAS with a record 2,004 quotas allocated.

To further expand the technology talent pool, the Global STEM Professorship Scheme, launched last year, has received a good response. InnoHK research clusters, Hong Kong's flagship platform for global research collaboration, has also been welcomed by universities and research institutes around the world. Meanwhile the Technology Talent Admission Scheme provides a fast-track arrangement for eligible technology companies to admit overseas and Mainland R&D talent.

To better target people who have skills that are in high demand in Hong Kong, the Talent List currently identifies opportunities in 13 professions, including waste treatment specialists, asset management professionals, marine insurance professionals, data scientists and cyber security specialists, to name just a few.

City of Opportunity

Hong Kong remains a highly-attractive destination for Mainland and global talent due, not least, to our liberal immigration policy, global links and exciting East-meets-West culture and lifestyle.

Even during challenging economic times such as the present, unprecedented business opportunities continue to emerge thanks to Hong Kong's close proximity and links with the Mainland, the world's second-largest economy, including the fast-emerging Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

One needs only to look at the National 14th Five-Year Plan to see where the future directions lie. This latest blueprint for national development, announced by the Central Government last year, pinpoints priority sectors for Hong

Kong's closer integration with the Mainland economy. These include a total of eight sectors, including four traditional sectors where our city has a well-established reputation and good opportunities to develop into international hubs, namely for international finance, transportation and trade as well as for international legal and dispute resolution services in the Asia-Pacific region. Together with four emerging sectors identified under the 14th Five-Year Plan (aviation, innovation and technology, regional intellectual property trading hub, and East-meets-West centre for international cultural exchange), Hong Kong will continue to provide ample opportunity for local and overseas professionals.

Being an international city, Hong Kong's population has always been mobile. In most of the past 10 years, net outflows of Hong Kong residents, other than One-way Permit holders, were recorded.

While we are committed to fighting the pandemic as an overriding mission at present, one should not lose sight of the longer term prospects for our city as we strive to get Hong Kong back on track as a vibrant and attractive international city for the 21st century.

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