

'Disillusionment' driving Hong Kong's record dropout rate

Administrators unalarmed, noting more applicants could come from mainland China, especially Greater Bay Area

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For the second year in a row, Hong Kong's university attrition rate has hit a new record – causing some academics to blame “disillusionment” with academia in the city.

More than 2,700 students have dropped out of Hong Kong's eight public universities over the past year, marking a 3 per cent year-on-year increase and a 19-year high, according to the University Grants Committee.

Among these students, roughly 2,300 were undergraduates – 4 per cent higher than last year's figure – out of a total cohort of 87,300. Administrators at top universities have attributed (<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3207453/hong-kong-public-universities-log-new-high-number-students-who-leave-early-lecturers-quitting-higher>) the increase to various reasons, including personal and family matters.

But academics say that emigration out of the city in the wake of more restrictive laws and limitations on academic freedom is likely to be a significant factor.

Ed Vickers, an associate professor at Kyushu University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/kyushu-university>) studying education in Chinese societies, said the rate of leavers was telling.

“It reflects a quite widespread disillusionment in the higher education sector in Hong Kong now,” he said, adding that “the declining attractiveness of higher education there is saddening”.

He believed that “universities will deliberately downplay emigration and will certainly be reluctant to discuss the reasons for it, since this could be seen as indicating ‘disloyalty’ to the authorities”.

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Dr Vickers said the dropouts were linked to both “push” and “pull” factors – blaming the government’s National Security Law (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/discreet-chats-quiet-defiance-tactics-hong-kong-campuses>) as well as schemes by countries including the UK to offer Hong Kongers permanent residence (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/bno-visa-holders-hong-kong-bridge-asia-uk-told>).

Carsten Holz, a visiting professor in the School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/princeton-university>), who is on leave from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said that while attrition rates were unlikely to affect university functions, bigger problems will.

“Much more important is a decline in the number of annual applications by highly qualified Hong Kong students to Hong Kong university programmes. That lowers student quality in the long run and impacts on teaching,” he said.

Most academics speaking to *Times Higher Education* expected the number of dropouts to plateau in coming years.

“The trend might continue for a while, but it will eventually return to normal when the strict pandemic control is gradually relaxed and the political situation is stabilised in Hong Kong,” said Jing Vivian Zhan, a professor in the department of government and public administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/chinese-university-hong-kong>) (CUHK).

So far, administrators appeared unruffled.

Ka Ho Mok, vice-president of Lingnan University Hong Kong (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/lingnan-university-hong-kong>), said he didn’t find the attrition rate “alarming”. He noted that it is common in universities around the world for some portion of students to leave before finishing their degree.

Professor Mok suggested that Hong Kong-based institutions could look outside the city (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/concern-hong-kong-admits-record-student-intake-mainland-china>) to make up the difference.

“When facing the dropouts of students, universities in Hong Kong can reach out to other countries [and] regions...in order to attract more non-local [and] international students,” he said.

Kun Dai, an assistant professor in the department of educational administration and policy at CUHK, agreed.

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"While the recent dropout rate becomes higher than before...that will not be a big challenge if universities could take advantage of many national strategical development opportunities, eg, the Greater Bay Area."

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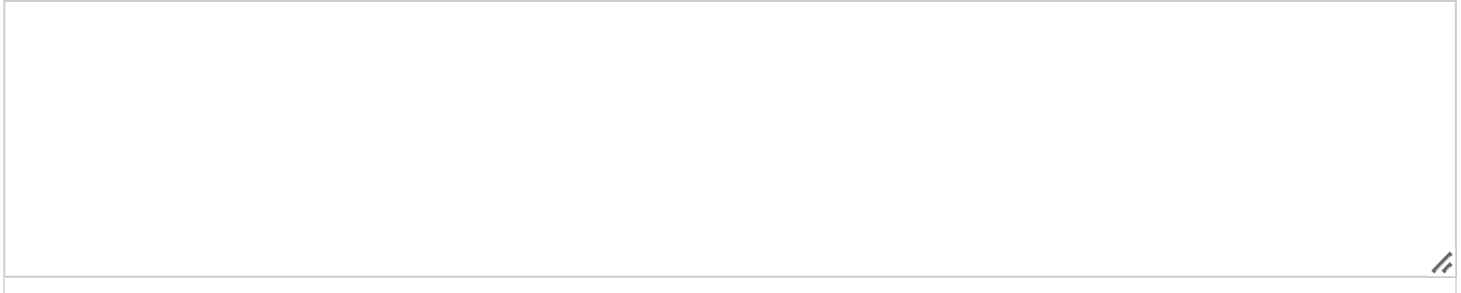
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