

Rankings Belie Doubts Over Hong Kong's Universities

BY PAUL DESRUISSEAUX

ALTHOUGH *Asiaweek* magazine has ranked two of Hong Kong's six universities among the region's very best, these days residents of the former British colony might question that finding.

The reason, according to some analysts, is that education at all levels in what is now a "Special Administrative Region" of China is experiencing a crisis of confidence.

"Parents have lost confidence in the system, and they will no longer pick a Hong Kong university as the first choice for their children," said Kai Ming Cheng, pro-vice-chancellor, or vice-president, of the University of Hong Kong, at a recent international scholarly meeting. "Parents now prefer to send their children overseas for higher education, if at all possible."

Compounding the problem, he said, was a new reluctance on the part of Hong Kong businesses to hire people educated in the territory. "Our employers have lost confidence in our local graduates. They now prefer graduates of overseas universities, and even of mainland-Chinese universities."

Mr. Cheng made his comments last month at the annual meeting in Toronto

of the Comparative and International Education Society. The meeting was sponsored by the Hong Kong Institute of Education and the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and its final session was devoted to Canadian and Hong Kong perspectives on higher education in the next century.

NOT CHINA'S FAULT

Mr. Cheng said the outlook in Hong Kong was not promising because of the loss of faith in the system, for which he had no explanation. "There is no simple answer," he said.

"This is definitely not because of the handover," said Mr. Cheng, when asked if the return of Hong Kong to Chinese control nearly two years ago had precipitated the crisis in education. "Why this is happening now, we are not sure, but it's not because of China."

Many people in Hong Kong had feared a loss of personal freedoms under Chinese rule, but analysts in the territory and elsewhere say China has largely kept its "hands-off" promise. What had not been anticipated was that the territory's once-robust economy would stumble badly.

The economic downturn has led the University Grants Committee, a local agency that distributes government funds for higher education in Hong Kong, to call on institutions to do more with the resources they have. But economics is not why the territory's people feel education is in decline.

Mr. Cheng said he believed the loss of confidence in the system was caused in part by "a mismatch between teachers trained in Western traditions and tradition-bound Chinese parents." The teachers have lost confidence in students, who are not able to cope with the curriculum, he said. As a result, parents feel the education system is letting them down.

'A VERY PLANNED SOCIETY'

"Hong Kong is a very planned society, with a reputation for getting the best of both cultures," he added. "In other sectors of our society, there is a general harmony. But in education, we are having difficulty accommodating the cultures."

Two decades ago, he said, Hong Kong had "one of the strongest education systems in Asia. Now, others in the region are stronger."