

INTERNATIONAL

Hong Kong's Boom in Distance Education May Be a Sign of What's to Come in Asia

BY DAVID COHEN

VISITORS can't help noticing the skyline here, rising out of the harbor like a Manhattan of the Far East. For distance educators, though, the smudge of hills on the horizon and what lies behind them, in mainland China, is a more tantalizing prospect.

At the Open University of Hong Kong, administrators feel that they have good reason to be optimistic about breaking into what will certainly be the world's largest market for higher education. They offer the story of their own institution as a lesson in how this future might come to pass, and suggest that it may serve as a lesson for the rest of East Asia.

When the university opened its doors, in 1989, as many as 100,000 Hong Kong residents turned out for several days in a row, lining up around city blocks for a chance at a college education. In the process, they signaled the beginning of Asia's new wave of postsecondary learning. Until that point, fewer than 3 percent of high-school graduates in Hong Kong had gone on to attend college.

Now, as the open university begins to market itself to mainland China—where access to higher education is limited—administrators hope for a similarly enthusiastic response.

By some standards, distance learning arrived relatively late in Hong Kong—20 years after Britain, upon which the model here is based. "But when it arrived, it arrived with a vengeance," says Tam Sheung-wai, president of the Open University of Hong Kong. "If there has been a problem, it has been keeping up with the demand."

The trend in Hong Kong and the rest of Asia is strongly upward. Vividly diverse in terms of language and culture, Asia is home to the world's most rapidly expanding populations, many of them still rural. During this decade, they represent the world's biggest potential market of consumers for higher education. In Asia, the need for higher education, in one form or another, encompasses an estimated 500 million people at a time when personal wealth, mobility, migration, and Internet usage are also generally increasing.

Analysts say that if Asia were to use conventional solutions to meet current demand, the region would need to increase its spending on higher education by at least 40 percent. That leaves governments no choice but to look for solutions outside of the traditional, elite systems of instruction, which are often hundreds of years old, some of them bequeathed by colonial overlords and others of local origin.

ENROLLMENTS SURGE

Asia already is home to the greatest number of distance learners in the world, says Szarina Abdullah, vice chancellor at Malaysia's University of Technology. The multitudes are apparent in the surging enrollments of distance-oriented universities with more than 100,000 students in China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand, among other Asian nations. The need for postsecondary education over the next 25 years will be impossible to meet without more distance education, she adds.

About 12 percent of the 71,217 students at Ms. Abdullah's own institution are distance learners: "The feedback we continue to get—from students, employers, and the government—suggests that the direction we need to continue in is up."

In Thailand, a new constitution extends the right to a free education from the 6th through the 12th grade, widening the pipeline into higher education. By Asian standards, young people in Thailand have easy access to a university education.

But even Thailand displays evidence of pent-up demand. Since January, 7,000 people have signed up for short business courses designed for working professionals and being offered by a new Thailand Training Institute.

Japan is also taking steps toward more distance education. An advisory group to the Ministry of Education recommended last month that the government recognize Internet-based degrees and course work from institutions overseas.

The ministry, which maintains strict control over all levels of education in Japan, does not allow university students to take courses for credit through the Internet. It does allow undergraduates to earn almost half of their credits through other forms of distance education, like television.

But some observers say the demand for Internet courses could be more limited than what some American educators might expect. "There's an assumption that every Japanese has a computer-at-home, and that's not the case," says Lynne A. McNamara, director of program development in Asia for the University of Maryland University College. "And Internet access is extremely expensive compared to the United States."

DENSELY POPULATED

Within Hong Kong itself, distance is a matter for geography books; 6.4 million inhabitants are crowded into just 380 square miles. The territory is at the other end of the Asian demographic spectrum from western China or rural India, where poor villagers are spread out over large distances. Hong Kong is the world's second-most densely populated urban center (after Singapore), with some 16,840 people per square mile. Most of its neighborhoods are only a short cab or boat ride away from each other.

"The greatest distance here," says Olugbemi Jegede, a professor of education at the Open University of Hong Kong, "has long been between the traditional centers of learning and a population where thousands and thousands of people, limited by work, finance, and time, clamor to be part of a system which until recently had no means of accommodating them."

Relative to some other countries, the percentage of adult students studying by Internet or other unconventional modes of higher education here remains low: 21 percent, compared with 40 percent in Western Europe and more than 60 percent in Scandinavia. Unlike Hong Kong's eight conventional universities, the Open University accepts all comers, or at least as many as it can serve. That policy contrasts with those of older institutions, such as the Chi-



DAVID MCINTYRE, BLACK STAR, FOR THE CHRONICLE
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nese University of Hong Kong, which admit only about 18 percent of applicants.

"We allow people a second chance," says Richard T. Armour, registrar at the Open University. Even so, though, "second chance doesn't mean second-rate," he says. "It can't—not in status-conscious Hong Kong. We would be out of business if it did."

More than 100,000 students have studied at the Open University, with about a tenth of them earning degrees. From offering the most restricted opportunities for higher education, Hong Kong became over the past decade "a place where any 18-year-old who can hold a pen can obtain a diploma," in the words of one newspaper editorial.

A BOOM IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

The growth is particularly evident in the area of business schools. At one point, before the government began examining their credentials, more than 60 "fast track" M.B.A. programs were being offered in the territory, mostly by offshore institutions, and some with dubious, if any, accreditation. "We became very concerned at some of the overseas offerings, and still are, up to a point," says Ronnie Carr, dean of the Open University's school of education and languages. "There's no doubt that overseas institutions have been under massive pressure in their own countries to increase students."

"Some of these institutions have seen Hong Kong as a good place to cut corners," he adds, "especially given that this is a culture where students like to finish things quickly."

Still, the arrival of the "cowboys," as Mr. Carr describes them, was a backhand compliment for Hong Kong. "It showed that this is an ideal society for educational opportunities," he explains, mentioning the ease of English-language communication, among other cultural characteristics.

How has the university differentiated itself from its traditional competitors? Mr. Armour says it has set higher standards for

a degree. Fewer than 70 percent of its students pass the exams needed to graduate, he says, as opposed to almost 100 percent at traditional universities, which are hard to enter but easy to complete.

The Open University, Mr. Armour says, employs about 170 external examiners to audit its work. Although the Open University's students do most of their work at home, it does have a campus, where computers are ubiquitous—nowhere more so than at an electronic library (<http://www.lib.ouhk.edu.hk/>), which this year was named the best of its type for international education in a European Commission-sponsored competition.

NOT 'AMBITIOUS ENOUGH'

Some outside observers say the Open University does have its weaknesses. "If I have anything to say against the Open University," says Cheng Kai-ming, a professor of education at the University of Hong Kong, it is "probably that it hasn't been ambitious enough, especially at a time when whoever truly taps into the mainland-Chinese market will become a very, very significant player in higher education."

In China, a nation of 1.3 billion inhabitants, the number of students working toward a master's degree in business administration this year is just 2,000.

Open University administrators cite a variety of difficulties in penetrating the mainland market. According to the "one country, two systems" concept under which the transfer of rule from Britain to China took place in 1997, for economic purposes the Chinese regard Hong Kong as just another country.

China does have some plans of its own for distance learning. The Ministry of Education is expanding a \$43-million program to promote distance education in the economically backward western region, according to a ministry official.

The program, which began in 1998, will expand in the next year from the current five universities to as many as 30, offering undergraduate and graduate degrees and teacher training, says Wang Zhuzhu, deputy director of the office of education technology.

In Hong Kong, the Open University has pushed with some success over the past three years to have at least some of its programs accepted by the Chinese government. Today, more than 1,000 of its students are from the mainland.

Does Mr. Armour worry that the Open University could get trampled in the rush to tap into the mainland market, particularly if American institutions join the competition?

"Well," he says, pausing, "this is some where where brand names matter—people really notice them. So, let's say, it happens that Bill Gates wants to get into the higher education business in Hong Kong and China, and let's say he talks M.I.T. into joining him, and together they form a dot-com called Microsoft-M.I.T., that offer M.B.A.'s. Yeah, then we would really have something to worry about."

Beth McMurtrie, Tony Gilotte, and Paul Mooney contributed to this article.