

COMMENTHK

‘Tourism is anywhere in HK’ requires more infrastructure

Mathias Woo says city needs policies for the use of space that might yield a wider range of high-quality cultural experiences

President Xi Jinping recently called for high-quality development in the country’s tourism industry. Jointly issued in May by six departments, including the National Development and Reform Commission, the Implementation Plan to Promote Equipment Renewal in the Field of Culture and Tourism proposes the updating of facilities and equipment by 2027 to enhance the development of the cultural and tourism sectors in the country.

The Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau (CSTB) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region launched a consultation for the formulation of the Development Blueprint for Hong Kong’s Tourism Industry 2.0 in April, aimed at laying down future work plans, specific actions, measures, and performance indicators. Meanwhile, the CSTB and the Cultural Commission are mapping out a blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development to enhance the ecosystem for the industries, which will be published after revision. These two blueprints are interrelated and cover planning for facilities, talent development, the granting of strategic funding, and policy support for industrialization, outlining the development road map for Hong Kong’s cultural and creative industries and tourism industry for the next decade.

What the local tourism industry lacks is the formulation of policies for the use of land and space that might yield a wider range of high-quality cultural experiences. Compared to neighboring regions in Asia, Hong Kong is constantly in need of diversified tourism and arts facilities and spaces. The idea that “tourism is anywhere in Hong Kong” places an emphasis on efforts to make different local lifestyles and cultural experiences available for visitors. How can tourists experience local life? Open spaces are indispensable. For example, there is much in the way of historical legacy to uncover in the old districts of Hong Kong, by tracing the past to the present. Cafes, bookstores, arts markets, and performance venues constitute cultural and tourism spaces. The government should provide support in terms of planning. Also, the government should encourage operation models run by private funds or civil groups. Both governmental and nongovernmental models should be considered. Therefore, relevant licensing regulations should be more flexible



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so as to match national and international standards.

The government announced a calendar of mega events with over 100 events in the second half of the year. “Approximately 1.7 million tourists” whose spending “is estimated to be about HK\$7.2 billion (\$920 million)” are going to participate in the mega events in 2024, says Deputy Financial Secretary Michael Wong Wai-lun. These mega events are only part of the “visit anywhere in Hong Kong” plan. Cultural spaces are required in all 18 districts in the city.

Strategies should be developed in accordance with the unique characteristics and conditions of each district. The Hong Kong Arts Development Council, for instance, could support small and medium-sized arts groups in communities. The nine major performing arts groups or other performing arts troupes should have their own venue that could in return facilitate long-term development projects rather than short-term events.

The city lacks content-led cultural space. If someone were to construct a “Museum of Bruce Lee”, what would be the process? How do they apply for approval? Would the procedure be complicated? And how long would it take? The Museum of Hong Kong Literature, run by the Federation of Hong Kong Writers, has made a good start. Yet located on the third floor of Wan Chai’s 7 Mallory Street (M7), with its 180 square meter floor area, the museum is relatively small. Considering the influence of Hong Kong literature, the museum should be granted a large space that could house a wide array of exhibits.

The West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) covers 40 hectares, taking up 20 percent of Tsim Sha Tsui’s total area (192 hectares). Some land in the WKCD can be allocated for the use of some civilian-run cultural organizations. The WKCD now primarily caters to high-end retailers. The WKCD should include consumption

options for all strata of society, making cultural and artistic experiences accessible and affordable.

Next, how can Ocean Park, opened in 1977, be revitalized? How should its hardware and infrastructure be updated and upgraded? Other than the theme park and the hotel in Hong Kong Disneyland, what other development possibilities for tourism are available in the peripheries? Should Hong Kong learn from the Chinese mainland to lay down key performance indicators (KPIs) for cultural and tourist spaces that measure both quality and quantity? These KPIs should be determined through research, field consultations, and analysis of statistics. How can the government formulate policies to attract more investors to fund cultural development? How can real estate developers be incentivized to transform their shopping malls or commercial spaces for the development of the cultural industries?

Cultivating culture takes time and effort. It takes more than just a few cultural events. For example, an audience wouldn’t know how to appreciate ink paintings in the blink of an eye. It is a gradual process that involves going to museums, viewing artworks, understanding their context, and being aware of different art houses and styles. If Hong Kong were to establish a museum similar to the Hengshan Calligraphy Art Center in Taiwan, it would definitely help with the preservation, research, and development of calligraphy in Hong Kong. The city has had many renowned Chinese calligraphers — Yung Ho-yin, Jat See-yue, and Ho Shok-wai, to name just a few. WKCD should shift its focus from being Western-centric to embracing the diversity of arts in all forms. Unlike the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the WKCD now faces the challenge of not being able to attract returning visitors.

The “anywhere” in the idea of “visit anywhere in Hong Kong” refers to venues and space. The conditions for building cultural and tourism infrastructure are already in place; however, there is now a lack of strategies and policies to support, explore and utilize these resources. In this regard, the CSTB should take references from other cities and develop a blueprint and indicators for development.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



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Universities’ tuition fee increase must be seen in perspective

In Hong Kong’s public-sector organizations, it is hard to recall an example in which fees and charges for services have stayed the same for close to three decades. Such a situation has found a parallel in the annual tuition fees payable for full-time undergraduate study programs at the universities funded by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government through the University Grants Committee (UGC). Since the mid-1990s, the administration has set the tuition level at 18 percent of the total cost of an undergraduate place, known as the “target cost recovery rate” — the portion of costs incurred by local public universities but met by tuition fees.

The tuition fees for bachelor’s degree studies offered by UGC-funded universities have remained the same for 27 years — a period during which the Composite Consumer Price Index has gone up by around 40 percent — which is long enough to justify a review for adjustment. To the government, the financial cost of higher education is rising continually, and it is imperative to safeguard long-term fiscal sustainability while actively promoting development in the education sector to enhance the city’s high-quality manpower base. Under the government’s plan, an upward revision of universities’ tuition fees for undergraduate education will be distributed over three years from the 2025-26 academic year, targeting an increase of 5.5 percent per annum. Calculated in this way, tuition fees for bachelor degree programs will grow from the current level of HK\$42,100 (\$5,392) to HK\$44,500 in 2025-26, HK\$47,000 in 2026-27 and HK\$49,500 in 2027-28, or an uptick of almost 17.6 percent over a three-year period. The fee hikes will improve the cost recovery rate to 13.4 percent from 12.5 percent.

Holding that the “very modest” fee adjustment does not deviate from the government’s continuing drive to strike a necessary balance between the SAR’s fiscal discipline and the provision of affordable higher education for students, Chief Secretary for Administration Eric Chan Kwok-ki said the fee hike has nothing to do with the prevailing public budget deficit, adding that the tuition fee level has remained unchanged for over 20 years and there is an obvious need to raise it closer to the targeted cost recovery rate. He disclosed that no plans have been contemplated for raising tuition fees further after the next three academic years.

It needs to be pointed out that not all fee revisions are automatically objectionable. For the case in point, tuition fees have not changed for 27 years despite a policy of recovering from undergraduate students 18 percent of the operating cost of each first-degree-level study place. The government in its previous terms, therefore, owes the general public an explanation for its failure to follow up in this area. This has elicited complaints over fairness from students currently enrolled in courses or waiting to be admitted to bachelor’s degree programs at public-sector universities since they regard themselves as shouldering the highest portion of the tuition fee adjustment, which they believe should have been spread over a longer time.

This group of students has been told that the running costs of their university education are escalating, and that any upcoming fee adjustments will be determined on this basis. This will lead them to wonder whether they have the power and authority to intervene in the spending of the universities they attend. As a case in point, one university is reportedly considering appointing nine vice-presidents, along with over 60 staff positions in the president’s office. In the face of such a mammoth and costly undertaking, for which students will have to share the financial burden through increased tuition fees, can students and their parents effectively advocate a policy to the contrary? The UGC, which advises the government on the development and resourcing of local universities, seems to have a case to answer so that students’ rights are properly protected.

Universities have reportedly amassed substantial financial reserves from running self-financing programs. In the spirit of deploying resources to serve the students’ best educational interests, there is a strong case for these accumulated surpluses to be plowed back into the mainstream operation of the universities, a strategy that will help reduce the pressure to collect higher tuition fees from students.

It is pleasing to note that the authorities have undertaken to make, in the light of the announced tuition fee increase, adjustments in the offer of the means- and nonmeans-tested financial aid, including loans and grants, to eligible full-time students at UGC-funded universities to ensure that they will not be deprived of the opportunity to receive higher education through lack of means. In this regard, the government will find it necessary to accurately assess the extent to which students from the lower- and middle-income families will be unfavorably affected by the new fee structure since such “sandwich classes” will not be given student grants but only loans.

Along with the fee review, there is the need to address the call for fee charging by individual subjects offered at universities, a system of fee fixing extensively adopted in many countries and regions, such as Singapore. It is understood that the average unit subsidy for the public-sector undergraduate population is HK\$310,000. There are, however, substantial differences in annual subscriptions across subjects, which vary from slightly over HK\$200,000 for some humanities programs to over HK\$500,000 for medical disciplines. It is understood that the government rejected, following a study in 2000, the idea of differential charging for undergraduate programs. The city’s higher education landscape has changed immensely over the past 20 years and there are valid grounds for revisiting this policy.

Last but not least, the 18 percent cost recovery rate should be reviewed, taking into consideration the changes that have occurred since in the operation of local universities in relation to their financial strength, student population, sustainability of resources from public coffers, community support and expectations and others. If 18 percent was not the magic number, then at what level should the rate be set to fit in well with the operating and developmental needs of universities? The objective is to lay down a framework for the universities to gather sufficient steam to proceed on their paths to become outstanding global institutions of academic teaching and research.

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Living conditions affect caregivers mentally

In Hong Kong, inadequate housing conditions have long been a severe social issue, particularly for those burdened with caregiving responsibilities, for whom the challenge is even greater. Recent survey data has revealed a concerning reality: Among the caregivers, as many as 20 percent had exhibited symptoms of depression and anxiety. This figure not only reflects the psychological stress they face but also highlights the impact of poor living conditions on mental health.

This survey, jointly conducted by Lingnan University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Partitioned Flat Support Network, interviewed 317 caregivers living in partitioned flats between last October and April this year. It found that the majority of these caregivers are women, predominantly aged from 40 to 49. Thirty-three percent are divorced or separated, and on average, each cares for two family members, with 92 percent of the care recipients being children. These statistics reveal an undeniable fact: The needs and well-being of caregivers themselves are often overlooked while they provide care for family members.

The findings point to an urgent issue that needs attention: the connection between caregivers’ living environments and their mental health. Caregivers not only bear the responsibility of looking after family members but also face additional labor because of the poor conditions in partitioned flats. For example, caregivers without a fixed cooking space must set up temporary cooking platforms and immediately clear them after meals to free up space. The extra labor demand adds to caregivers’ everyday stress, imposing an additional burden on their mental health. Some caregivers even have to deal with emergencies like water leaks at night, severely affecting their rest and quality of life.

These analyses reveal the pressures faced by caregivers in partitioned flats in their daily lives and emphasize the importance of improving housing conditions to enhance their quality of life and mental health. The Hong Kong



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Special Administrative Region government and society need to work together to provide more support and resources for these caregivers.

The government currently offers a cash subsidy pilot project, a three-year program aimed at alleviating the living difficulties faced by grassroots families because of the long waiting time for public rental housing. According to the latest information, despite calls for the program to be made permanent, the government is initially inclined not to turn it into a permanent project. The government also provided support through the Assistance Programme to Improve the Living Environment of Low-income Subdivided Unit Households, which aimed to improve the home environment of low-income partitioned flat occupants and strengthen their connection with community services or resources. Eligible partitioned flat occupants received a one-time noncash subsidy grant for home improvements or repairs, such as purchasing furniture or household items. Additionally, the Community Living Room program offers extra living space for partitioned flat occupants. The first community living room is already up and running in Sham Shui Po, providing shared kitchen facilities, dining areas, and common spaces for homework, interest classes, and group activities. The government encourages businesses and local organizations to participate to expand services and benefit more grassroots families.

To fundamentally enhance the quality of liv-

ing environments, establish a comprehensive social support system, and focus on the mental health of caregivers, thereby improving the overall community’s quality of life, I suggest that the government implement regulations requiring partitioned flat units to meet certain living environment standards, such as having windows, ensuring good ventilation, and prohibiting adjacent kitchens and toilets, and continue to promote more Community Living Room projects. It should collaborate with nongovernmental organizations to establish a community support system covering medical, educational, employment, and social aspects. Such a system can assist families in need through home visit assessments, resource referrals, and volunteer services, and fund mental health programs specifically established for caregivers, such as providing clinical psychological treatment, counseling, psychiatric assessments, and more. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to establish support groups to enable caregivers to support each other and collectively face caregiving pressures.

In Hong Kong, there is a close link between the living environment of partitioned flat caregivers and their mental health. Improving the living conditions of these caregivers can not only enhance their quality of life but also have a positive impact on their mental health. By providing more suitable living spaces, increasing basic living facilities, and improving the overall living environment, we can help caregivers reduce stress and better cope with the challenges of daily life. We can look forward to a society that is more caring and supportive of partitioned flat caregivers, ultimately achieving a healthier and more harmonious Hong Kong. This is not only the government’s responsibility but should also be the result of the collective efforts of the entire society. Let us work together to create a better future for partitioned flat caregivers.

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