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A fault in the system

THE recent controversy surrounding a request by a pre-vocational school to delete the word "pre-vocational" in its English name has enlivened the concern of many over the system of pre-vocational education in Hong Kong.

While this re-naming bid has been turned down by the Government because of the obvious need to uphold the original objectives of pre-vocational training, doubts are looming large in the eyes of the educators that the present provision of pre-vocational education may have been outmoded by the continuing changes in the territory's economy and the educational expectations of parents and students.

In their earliest days some 20 years ago, it was envisaged that the bulk of pre-vocational pupils would, after three years of pre-vocational education from primary six, go into various trades at the legal employment age of 14 (later revised to 15) or enter approved apprenticeship schemes with associated training in a technical institute at the craft level.

Thus, a school may be classified as pre-vocational only if the curriculum includes about 40 per cent of technical, commercial and practical subjects for Secondary (S) 1 to 3, and about 60 per cent general subjects.

The technical and practical content is reduced to about 30 per cent in S4 and 5. The technical group includes subjects like woodwork, light metalwork, engine studies, air-conditioning and refrigeration, printing, textiles, fashion and clothing.

At present, there are 23 pre-vocational schools with a total enrolment of 20,000. They are supposed to offer an alternative form of secondary education tailoring for students with an aptitude for practical and technical studies.

The enrolment statistics provided by some pre-vocational educators have painted a far less rosy picture than the Government.

While the number of places available for S1 has been maintained at around 4,900, the total number of entries received has dropped from 10,000 in 1988 to 6,000 in 1993.

It has been pointed out that the central allocation, which takes place every year after the pre-vocational interviews are completed, has this year returned 890 S1 pupils to the pre-vocational stream compared with 120 in 1989. In most cases, these centrally assigned pupils have not chosen pre-vocational schools to start with.

The evolving changes in the infrastructure of the local economy and the rising educational expectations of the average family in Hong Kong following from the expansion in the local senior secondary and tertiary education have made it increasingly difficult for pre-vocational training to fulfil the original mission.

The relocation of the local manufacturing industry to places with considerably lower production costs across the border has altered the territory's labour input from labour-intensive type to that with a technology and service bias.

The fundamental academic and practical knowledge and skills that are acquired during the three years of pre-vocational training have been proving inadequate.

With the introduction of S4 and 5 into pre-vocational schools in the 80s and of S6 last year, over 80 per cent of the "S" students can now have further education in their own pre-vocational schools up to S5, and some, beyond. Yet, problems are encountered in the transition to tertiary institutions, when senior pre-vocational students with better academic performance look for academic advancement.

If pre-vocational schools are part and parcel of the local secondary school system they must be a viable alternative to conventional training offered by the grammar schools.