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# 1990s plan to beat the brain drain

HONGKONG is dealing with the brain drain problem by investing heavily in education, the director of Hongkong's Economic and Trade Office on the US west coast, Mr Peter Johnson, said yesterday.

Although the investment in education would not have any immediate effect, it would pay off handsomely by the end of 1990s by producing a five-fold increase in the numbers of college and university graduates, he said in San Francisco.

"The number of graduates produced locally and overseas probably will exceed the loss by an estimated 3,000 a year," he said.

Hongkong also was encouraging emigrants to return, said Mr Johnson who was one of the three panellists addressing the question of the brain drain at a meeting of the Hongkong Association of Northern California.

"There is evidence that the numbers are increasing judging by figures supplied by the consulates and the trickle of letters coming into the office from would-be job seekers to Hongkong," he said.

But Hongkong would not take steps to restrict emigration, which he said had been a fact of life since some of its citizens left for California during the 1849 gold rush.

While acknowledging that the brain drain was a matter of concern to the government, he said Hongkong people were "upwardly mobile" and had a great capacity for self-improvement.

A government task force on emigration had earlier estimated that Hongkong would lose more than 45,000 people this year. The figure is the highest level of emigration in Hongkong's history, compared with 27,000 and 11,000 in 1986 and 1985 respectively.

In response to the brain drain crisis, the government has recently sought the co-operation of Hongkong's major business operations in assessing and suggesting methods to tackle the problem.

The input from the private

sector will give the government a more detailed breakdown of the various types of professionals lost and plans to replenish them will be accordingly through various levels of training, a senior official told the *Sunday Morning Post*.

The government found that the territory's education system could also prevent people from coming to work in Hongkong. "We are told many who have started working here found their children could not fit into Hongkong's education system," he said.

He said the government was examining plans to have a spread of international schools catering to children with Chinese and expatriate background.

The official admitted that the numbers of Hongkong people emigrating had gone up sharply and said that there was no miracle solution to the problem.

He added that although many Hongkong people had left the territory in the past years, many others had returned.

He said the task force was now trying to determine the number of ex-residents returning to Hongkong after being dissatisfied with life overseas; those who returned after securing a foreign passport and those here on a visit.

The senior vice-president of an electronics manufacturer, Flextronics Corporation, Mr Dennis Straford, said the brain drain did not appear as serious in the high-technology industries as in the financial services companies.

"Electronics people feel their positions are secure after 1997 and there will be lots of opportunities for them," he said.

Mr Straford, who had just returned from a visit to Hongkong added that he foresaw increasing investment in Hongkong electronics companies.

Speaking on behalf of the financial sector, the third panellist, vice-president and area personnel manager of the Bank of America, Ms Patricia Taber, said the large number of "better educated" residents who were emigrating was putting a strain on the financial sector.