

A bold defence of bilingualism

At the recent convocation of the Chinese University, the vice-chancellor, Dr Ma Lin, made a bold defence of the need for bilingualism in our education system, and particularly in universities. His comments make a particularly forceful impact at a time when Hongkong seems to be in a state of disarray on this question.

For increasingly we are tending to produce young people who are literate in neither language and who are increasingly speaking a hybrid tongue that while comprehensible to those with a knowledge of both, is neither one nor the other. Far better would it be for Hongkong to be turning out people who are fully fluent in one rather than duffers in both.

Yet where there is a need for two languages — and this is the case in many parts of the world with a bicultural or multicultural background — then standards in both have to be higher. We say this with all sympathy for the student who struggles with languages, but if their chosen career demands a fluency in both, that is the way it has to be.

This is easier said than done, as some school principals will testify. For the result of reforms in our secondary education system where students are no longer selected on their ability but on their locality, has meant a marked change in the quality of children going into those schools which previously put great emphasis on both languages.

This will in the years to come show through in the intake into universities and will make it that much harder to implement the bilingual approach, without making further basic language instruction essential. Indeed the need is already apparent. But it does not diminish the force of Dr Ma Lin's pronouncements; rather it reinforces them.

For Hongkong is part of the modern world and if ideas, as well as the great weight of technical and professional knowledge, are to be effectively communicated it is essential that both Cantonese (or Mandarin) and English are given equal importance in our universities, and in some courses such as law and medicine, the emphasis is bound to be more one-sided.

This is not to say, however, there is no room for Cantonese in these faculties; for as Dr Ma Lin said it is not right to maintain a language barrier between institutions of higher learning and the man in the street, and a university should be part of, not above its community. Thus Chinese and English must wherever possible be given equal prominence, not just in the Chinese University, but in the Hongkong University and the polytechnic.

His call for a comprehensive review of our policy on the medium of instruction in institutions of higher learning is thus apposite and well-merited and deserves full support. How we can introduce a scheme that achieves this ideal is more difficult to predict but strive to achieve it we must.