

\$100m for open learning

THE Open Learning Institute (OLI) will be given a general development fund of \$100 million to develop self-financing courses, especially in Chinese.

Hamish Macleod said whereas Hongkong's education policy had always focussed on schools and tertiary institutions, it was also important for the territory to meet the "relentless demands" on the tight labour supply as the economy continued to grow.

The \$100 million injection was heartily welcomed by the OLI's director, Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, who said the institute would take a very careful look at the community's needs on the basis of its three-years' experience in open learning.

"The capital will help cover the cost of course development in Chinese in areas such as management, accounting, computing, electronics, environmental science, education and job skills retraining."

Dhanarajan also said the institute had always recognised that presenting courses in the English language was a barrier to a large section of the community whose native language was Chinese.

Secretary for the Association for Continuing Education Mervyn Cheung however said the grant would only be a fund for generating interest, rather than being an allocation at the disposal of the OLI.

"This is an endowment fund and the present low interest rates would mean only low revenue-generating potential," Cheung said.

Dhanarajan said details of the terms of the grant had not yet been made clear to the OLI. But he is sure the OLI Council can be entrusted with the responsibility to use the grant in a way which will guarantee the best returns.

Adult education accounts for 0.46 per cent, or \$60 million, of the Education Department's total budget. This is a 4.9 per cent increase over last year's figure.

While expenditure on adult education matches economic growth, Cheung says the provision for adult education is limited.

He said the economic development of Hongkong was producing a fast changing working environment that had implications for the adaptability of the work force. He urged the government to give more money to adult education.

Although the OLI is due to become a self-funding institution from April this year, Dhanarajan hopes the \$100 million grant will not be seen by the government as a golden handshake.

"We would not expect the government to support all our needs," he said. "But in a high-cost society like Hongkong, where, many cannot afford to pay too much, marginal support should not be out of place."

"We should see the government's role as supporter of the OLI, to help improve adult education, for the good of the economy."

STORY: MARK SHARP