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Panel tells government to focus on education

Education is the long-term key to tackling poverty in Hong Kong but immediate efforts must be made by the government to treat welfare as an entitlement rather than a handout.

That was the message from panellists taking part in this year's final SCMP Redefining Hong Kong debate yesterday.

Speakers said that a more entitlement-based approach to welfare, as well as a commitment, backed by resources, to boosting education, should form significant components of chief executive Leung Chun-ying's policy address next month.

"Anybody in Hong Kong, faced with serious issues like unemployment, infirmity, disability or family, education and so on ... can be sure that they will be given the services which they require as a matter of entitlement, and not as a matter of either mercy by the government or their self-finance. This should be made a principle," said Leo Goodstadt, former head of the Central Policy Unit.

Francis Lui Ting-ming, economics professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said education should be the focus.

"Public expenditure on education [in Hong Kong] is 3.5 per cent of GDP, while the world median is 5 per cent," he said.

Privatisation of education had also made good education a privilege of the middle and upper classes, said Fermi Wong Wai-fun from NGO Unison.

"My call to the government is to end racial segregation in the school system ... introduce Chinese as a second language for *ethnic minorities*," she said.

Alex Lo, panel speaker and columnist at the Post, said social welfare should be put higher up the agenda. "The fact that we are not discussing these issues, we have provided governments – past and present – with a guilt-free ride," he said.

POVERTY

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