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# OPINION

## Diversity is an asset

Matteo Giovannini says the city must widen its talent pipeline to sharpen its competitive edge

Hong Kong's identity as a world-leading international hub has never been static. It has been built over time through openness, adaptability and, crucially, diversity. Recent discussions about the city's talent strategy, including concerns that the overwhelming majority of applicants under key admission schemes come from mainland China, raise a deeper structural question: can Hong Kong remain truly global if its talent pipeline becomes increasingly concentrated?

This is not about playing down the importance of mainland talent, which will remain central to the city's development within the Greater Bay Area. Rather, it is about balance. Diversity in talent is a core economic and strategic asset. Without it, Hong Kong risks weakening the very foundations that have underpinned its success.

First, a narrowing talent pipeline could erode Hong Kong's role as a superconnector. For decades, the city has thrived as an intermediary between China and the rest of the world, leveraging its bilingual environment, common law system and cosmopolitan workforce to bridge different markets, cultures and regulatory frameworks.

This role is becoming even more valuable as geopolitical fragmentation intensifies. Yet it is also becoming more demanding. Cross-border business today requires not only technical expertise, but also cultural literacy, global networks and the ability to navigate different institutional contexts.

If Hong Kong's workforce becomes less internationally diverse, its ability to perform this bridging function may diminish, as the informal networks and global mindsets that sustain it become thinner over time.

Second, innovation capacity is at stake. A large body of research shows diverse teams tend to outperform homogeneous ones in problem-solving and creativity. Diversity enables the cross-pollination of ideas, encourages constructive dissent and reduces the risk of groupthink.

Hong Kong is seeking to position itself at the forefront of sectors such as financial technology, artificial intelligence and green finance. These industries depend on international collaboration, exposure to different regulatory environments and ideas from multiple sources.

Competing hubs such as Singapore, London and New York have long cultivated internationally diverse talent ecosystems as a source of competitive advantage. If Hong Kong's talent inflows become too concentrated, it risks limiting knowledge diffusion, reducing creative friction and ultimately weakening the dynamism that innovation ecosystems require to thrive.

Third, there is a reputational dimension. Hong Kong's appeal to multinational corporations and globally mobile professionals rests not only on its low taxes and efficient infrastructure, but also on its image as an open, pluralistic and internationally connected city.

Perceptions in this context translate into real economic decisions. Companies deciding where to locate regional headquarters, and professionals choosing where to build their careers, rely on signals about openness, diversity and connectivity. A visible shift towards a more concentrated talent base could reshape these perceptions.

In a landscape where cities such as Singapore and Dubai actively position themselves as global talent magnets, even

subtle changes in how Hong Kong is viewed can have effects over time. Reputation, once diluted, is difficult to rebuild.

None of this suggests Hong Kong is losing its advantages overnight. The city retains significant strengths, including deep capital markets, a robust and internationally respected legal system, world-class infrastructure and a unique position within China's broader economic strategy.

**For Hong Kong, ensuring diversity in its talent pipeline is central to preserving its role as a superconnector**

Government initiatives to attract talent reflect a clear recognition of the importance of human capital to sustain growth. However, the next phase must move beyond a primary focus on numbers. The composition, diversity and resilience of that inflow are equally critical.

A more forward-looking approach would involve targeted efforts to broaden the geographical sources of talent. This could include deeper engagement with Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe, which offer growing pools of skilled professionals and strategic linkages for Hong Kong's development. Such outreach should be complemented by domestic policies that reinforce Hong Kong's attractiveness as a place to live and work.

Expanding international school capacity, supporting multicultural workplaces and maintaining a welcoming environment are all essential components of this effort. Strengthening collaboration between universities, industry and global research networks could further enhance Hong Kong's appeal for high-level talent.

Equally important is the narrative Hong Kong projects to the world. The city has often been described as China's gateway, a characterisation that remains valid but incomplete. To sustain its global standing, Hong Kong must also reaffirm its identity as a platform where different systems, cultures and ideas intersect.

This is not simply a matter of branding but reflects a deeper economic reality. Hong Kong's unique value lies in its ability to combine proximity to mainland China with genuine international openness. Preserving that balance is essential if the city is to continue translating its advantages into long-term competitiveness.

Ultimately, the question is not whether Hong Kong should attract mainland talent, as it clearly should, but whether it can maintain the breadth and diversity that have defined its success. In an era of intensifying global competition and geopolitical fragmentation, cities that combine local integration with a genuinely international outlook will be best positioned to thrive.

For Hong Kong, ensuring diversity in its talent pipeline is central to preserving its role as a superconnector, sustaining its capacity for innovation, and safeguarding its reputation as one of the world's truly global cities.

Matteo Giovannini is a finance professional with extensive experience in private and state-owned enterprises, specialising in Asian markets and cross-border project financing

## LETTERS

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### Policy support a must for mental health safety net

The upcoming Asian Professional Negotiators Network Conference in Hong Kong, scheduled for mid-April, marks a vital milestone for regional public safety. More than just a professional exchange, this event is a catalyst for a critical conversation about how we integrate law enforcement with academia and NGOs to protect vulnerable populations across Asia.

Across the Asia-Pacific, crisis negotiators are no longer just managing crime; they are the primary responders for mental health crises. In hyper-dense cities like Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Seoul, negotiators do not work in a vacuum. They operate alongside frontline mental health professionals, social workers and NGOs who understand local community dynamics. The regional ethos of crisis negotiation is built on saving lives with words – a mission that requires deep empathy and cultural nuance. To de-escalate these high-stakes scenarios successfully, we must move away from isolated silos towards a transdisciplinary ecosystem.

Crucially, this synergy must be anchored in rigorous, localised empirical research. By shifting towards a holistic psychological and mental health framework, we can apply evidence-based research directly to tactical communication. When law enforcement brings operational expertise, NGOs offer community agility, academics provide validation and governments support these exchanges, we create a safety net tailored to regional needs. For this collaborative model to succeed, it cannot rely solely on the grass-roots goodwill of individual practitioners. It requires high-level policy and structural support.

We hope policymakers across the region will champion this public health approach to crisis intervention by institutionalising cross-sector data sharing between hospitals, police and NGOs. Governments must also foster joint training initiatives that put academics, social workers and officers in the same room, while providing dedicated funding for action-research partnerships. Thus, Asian governments can ensure our cities meet the escalating complexities of human crises with both tactical precision and psychological depth.

Paul W.C. Wong, associate professor, department of social work and social administration, University of Hong Kong, and Neil Stapley, president, Asian Professional Negotiators Network

### Tweak concession fare scheme to make clear its objectives

I refer to the letter, "Replace HK\$2 fare concession with flat HK\$4 fee" (March 30). While the letter proposes replacing the current public transport fare concession scheme with a flat HK\$4 fare, a more fundamental overhaul of eligibility and usage rules may better balance equity, simplicity and fiscal responsibility.

First, eligibility criteria must be tightened. Restoring the lower age limit of 65 would realign the scheme with the long-standing Senior Citizen Card framework. This would effectively reduce costs, which have ballooned as eligibility expanded. With a growing elderly demographic, public resources must be targeted precisely to manage long-term liabilities.

Second, the government should preserve the HK\$2 rate but introduce a daily usage cap. Allowing, for example, up to four HK\$2 trips per day would comfortably cover most essential travel needs such as medical appointments, shopping and social engagement. Any additional journeys could be charged at half the adult fare. This approach would retain the simplicity that made the scheme popular while addressing concerns about excessive use.

Third, the scheme's scope must be narrowed to exclude non-essential travel. Subsidising cross-boundary trips to Shenzhen or premium airport routes falls outside the social intent of "ageing in place". Eliminating these subsidies would provide significant fiscal relief without impacting the daily mobility of seniors within their local communities. Moreover, refocusing the scheme on local transit would incentivise seniors to spend here, providing a modest but meaningful stimulus to Hong Kong's own retail and catering sectors at a time when the local economy needs it most.

The letter rightly warns against complex formulas that might confuse elderly passengers. However, complexity also stems from blurred objectives. We must decide if this scheme is a subsidy for essential mobility or a universal discount. By tightening eligibility and limiting daily use, the government can clarify the intent while preserving fairness.

Samuel Lo, Sai Ying Pung

### Cruel experiments on animals should be roundly condemned

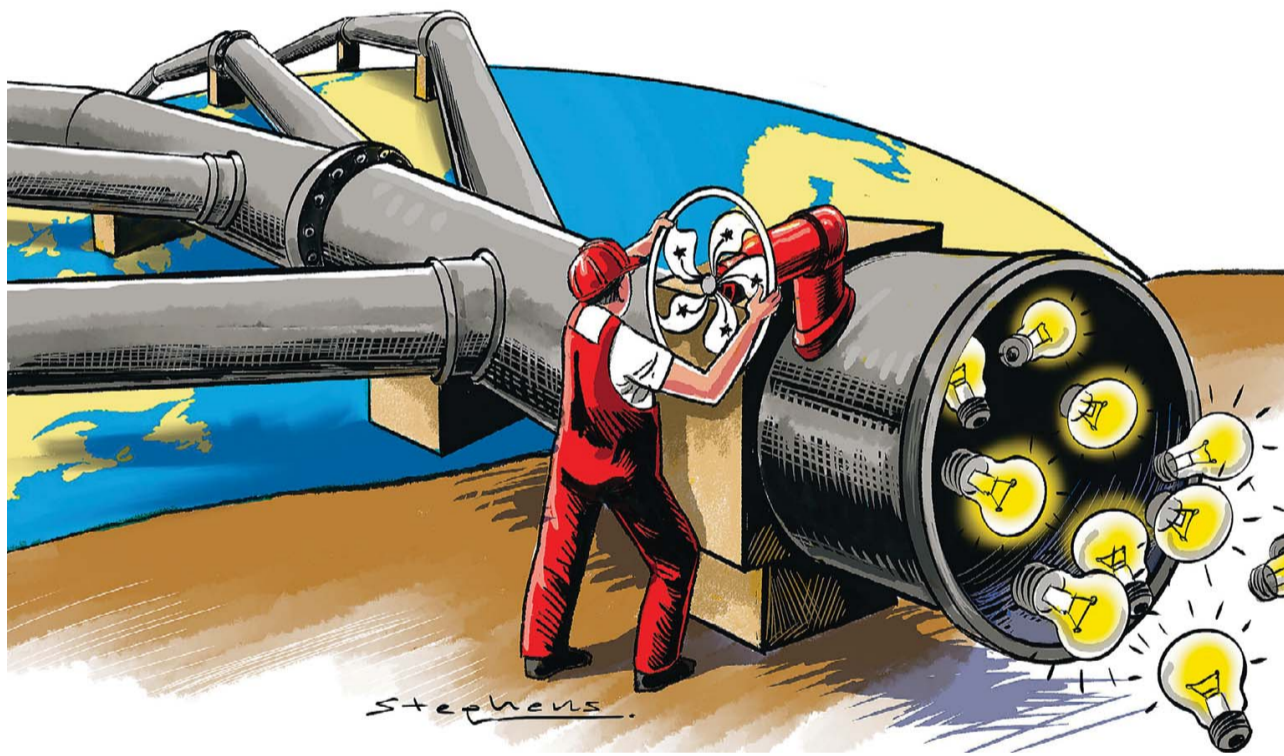
I refer to the report, "HKTVmall parent firm under fire for testing how long animal heads can survive" (April 1).

Even though the Department of Health has confirmed that these experiments were not conducted in Hong Kong, acts of cruelty towards animals deserve clear condemnation.

The report mentioned that such experiments may be useful for organ transplants. Nevertheless, as technology advances, our reliance on animal experiments should be minimised.

It is said a society is measured by how it treats those who cannot speak for themselves. Let's uphold animal rights.

Chloe Chao, Tai Po



## As war costs hit, China deals give Africa room to breathe

Goktug Caliskan says Beijing's inroads could help enhance the continent's food security efforts

The first tankers that turned away from the Strait of Hormuz did not just redraw shipping maps. They redrew grocery lists, too. After Iran's partial closure of the strait disrupted a chokepoint that carries roughly 20 per cent of the world's oil, traders priced in something they know too well: war is not only about missiles; it's about the bill that lands on kitchen tables months later.

Brent crude climbing above US\$100 a barrel, and touching roughly US\$120 on the worst days, is more than a market headline, affecting the diesel at the pump, the bread in the oven and the fertiliser on a field. Even if forecasts indicate that Brent will average closer to US\$90 in the second quarter, the risk premium is already present.

For wealthier economies, this may look survivable. For much of the Global South, it feels more like a stress test. Currencies are weak, reserves are thin and debts are heavy. In net importers such as Kenya, Senegal or Bangladesh, every US\$10 rise in crude quickly narrows subsidy space, lifts freight costs and hardens urban food inflation.

We often talk about oil as if it sits in a separate universe from food. In reality, they are closely linked. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) figures showed the global food price index rising in February for the first time in five months, with cereals and vegetable oils leading the rebound. The UN agency logged a second consecutive monthly increase as energy-linked costs affected food prices in March.

Fuel prices drive the cost of moving grain, running irrigation pumps and

producing fertiliser. When energy becomes more expensive, the cost structure of a bakery in Lagos or a maize mill in Bamako shifts quickly.

Global averages hide the harsher story. The FAO's food price monitoring kept flagging stubbornly high cereal prices in parts of East Africa and markets affected by conflict. In Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan, and across fragile stretches of the Sahel, staples can trade at levels that feel closer to siege economics than normal volatility.

An oil shock landing on that fragile base adds a war premium to almost everything else: diesel for hauling sacks of rice inland, fertiliser for the next planting season, and imported wheat for urban consumers. Oil shocks may be temporary, but the harm to kitchen tables can linger long after.

As oil shipping faces disruption and Western responses default to naval deployments and financial pressure, it becomes clear that China's outreach to the continent goes beyond altruism.

Against this backdrop, China's links to African economies look less like a side story

**China's diversification of suppliers and markets is not charity. It's an insurance policy for a world in chaos**

and more like a hedging strategy. Beijing's decision to grant zero-tariff access to imports from 53 African countries from May 1 fits into a broader effort to lock in long-term trade flows with the continent. China's diversification of suppliers and markets is not charity. It's an insurance policy for a world in chaos.

Agriculture is the centrepiece of this strategy. China's 15th five-year plan aims to lift grain production capacity to around 725 million tonnes by 2030, while building stable overseas supply channels for key commodities.

Research on agricultural cooperation between China and African countries points in this direction. If trade is paired with storage, transport links, technology transfer and support for local production, it can ease food security pressures rather than merely shift cargo around. While this does not shield Africa from oil shocks, it does give governments on the continent a few more levers when commodity markets turn ugly.

The contrast in great power behaviour is hard to miss. On one side stand military coalitions discussing strikes, escort missions, sanctions and emergency packages to protect the global economy. On the other side, there is a country deeply exposed to Persian Gulf energy flows, yet still talking mostly about corridors, supply chains, market access and diversification.

Of course, Beijing is not a disinterested actor. China depends heavily on imported energy and has every reason to worry about a prolonged Hormuz Strait disruption. This explains its investment in pipelines,

alternative maritime routes and diversified suppliers. Still, its preferred tools remain long contracts, ports, railways, grain terminals and trade openings rather than a cascade of sanctions and threats of regime change.

For many African and other Global South governments, finding the ideal partner is less about who sounds more moral in abstract terms and more about who is more predictable.

Nonetheless, trade still moves across the same oceans, relies on many of the same insurers and absorbs the same fuel surcharges when oil prices jump. Projects financed in hard currency feel the same interest rate pressure, and climate crisis shocks can hit both sides.

There is also the problem of overconcentration. If African economies lean too heavily on one major partner while neglecting local production, regional integration and diversified ties, they may simply exchange one dependency for another.

No single partner can shield Africa, or the broader Global South, from a world of higher war premiums. But a system built around open markets, agricultural cooperation and infrastructure gives vulnerable economies more room to breathe than one dominated by sanctions, capital flight and ad hoc military coalitions.

At one end of a sea lane, tankers wait in a nervous line – their cargoes marked up by fear. Far away, on an inland rail link carrying grain a little faster and cheaper than last year, the pressure is at least partially eased.

Goktug Caliskan is a PhD researcher at the International University of Rabat (UIR) in Morocco