

## Executive Summary

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It is an important long-term foreign development strategy of China. The central government announced the co-operation and development principles of the BRI in 2013 in a bid to achieve connectivity and to seek common prosperity via enhancing co-operation among different countries and regions along the belt and road. The aggregate economic value of these places amounts to US\$21 trillion. Covering 4.4 billion people and accounting for more than 60% of the global population<sup>1</sup>, they form the longest economic corridors in the world.

Over the years, the economies of Hong Kong and Mainland China have been intertwined. Hong Kong should take into consideration the impact of this interaction when making future economic plans. It should think about how to promote its own economic development by making better use of its excellence in order for both sides to gain mutual benefits during the process of the development of the BRI.

Hong Kong has been playing the role of a “connector” and promoting economic co-operation among different countries and regions. It is a significant gateway for Mainland enterprises to “go global” and bring in foreign enterprises to the Mainland. It is therefore worth looking at how Hong Kong can make effective use of its excellence to connect more countries in the development of the BRI in order to upgrade itself from a connector to a “super-connector”. This issue, which involves the long-term development of both the Mainland and Hong Kong, is highly related to the career prospects of young people.

This study conducts an analysis from the perspectives of system and human resources. On the one hand, it examines the inherent excellence of Hong Kong in successfully connecting the Mainland and overseas countries. On the other hand, it tries to understand the younger generation’s knowledge and perception of the BRI. By synthesizing both perspectives,

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<sup>1</sup> Legislative Council. May, 2015. “One belt one road”. Legislative Council Essentials ISE12/14-15.

the study explores how Hong Kong can be prepared to take on the role of super-connector in the development of the BRI.

This study uses an online survey and focus groups to understand young people's knowledge and perception of the BRI and their willingness to learn about foreign cultures. In addition, experts and scholars are interviewed and asked to give their assessments of (a) the conditions required for Hong Kong to play the role of a super-connector and (b) the merits and inadequacy of Hong Kong. They also give suggestions on the preparations Hong Kong young people can make.

On the basis of the findings of this study, *Youth I.D.E.A.S.* puts forward four recommendations which focus on consolidating the international status of Hong Kong and strengthening the international perspective of young people.

## Key Findings

- 1. The survey respondents generally lacked confidence in the economic future of Hong Kong. Although the BRI is going to have a significant economic impact on Hong Kong, young people generally do not understand what it is about.**

The online survey, which was conducted in February 2016, yielded 543 responses from randomly selected members of The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG) aged 18 to 34. The respondents rated their confidence about Hong Kong's economy in the next 10 years; the average score was 4.91 on a 1-10 scale. The focus group discussions indicated that young people generally do not understand what the BRI is about. Some young people totally misunderstand it, believing it to be a strategy put forward by the Hong Kong SAR government in developing economic relations with other countries. Others who have accessed relevant information indicated that they are unclear about the actual situation.

- 2. The respondents tended to agree that the BRI is beneficial to Hong Kong's economy, but they doubted whether it would be helpful to them. Whether it would be helpful to them mainly depends on the industries they are involved in and the concrete plans of the BRI.**

The survey showed that the respondents tended to agree that the BRI is beneficial to Hong Kong's economy: 12.5% of the respondents thought that it was "very helpful" and 35.4% considered it to be "fairly helpful", while 5.7% thought that it was "not helpful at all" and 16.8% considered it to be "not very helpful". However, they doubted whether the BRI would be helpful to their career development: 14.2% thought that it was "not helpful at all" and 26.7% considered it to be "not very helpful" to their career, while only 7.6% thought that it was "very helpful" and 22.3% considered it to be "fairly helpful". The focus group discussions revealed that whether young people find the BRI helpful mainly depends on the industries they are involved in. Since the BRI still lacks concrete plans, their attitudes are rather cautious.

- 3. Although the respondents were willing to learn about foreign cultures, they were not interested in understanding the BRI and were not willing to invest time and money to prepare for it.**

The respondents expressed their interest in exchange and learning activities in countries along the belt and road. The region that interests them most is Russian and the Baltic Sea (58.2% said they were either "very interested" or "fairly interested" in this region), followed by West Asia and the Mediterranean and South Pacific, South East Asia, South Asia and the South Sea (respectively, 56.3% and 51.9% said they were either "very interested" or "fairly interested" in these areas). However, only 35.2% said that they were "very interested" or "fairly interested" in knowing more about the BRI, and only 36.1% were interested in the relevant economic courses or international relations courses. Less than 10% said they were interested in the languages along the belt and road such as Russian, Arabic, and Malay. Some focus group participants said they would only invest in taking relevant courses or joining exchange activities if the BRI is related to their future development.

4. **The respondents agreed that Hong Kong’s legal system and international status are excellent, but they were worried that the city’s international status would deteriorate and affect its connector role.**

With regard to the economic aspect, the respondents thought that in terms of areas of excellence, the most significant reason for Hong Kong being a connector between the Mainland and the world is its “comprehensive legal system” (41.6%), followed by its “stable financial system” (41.3%), “tax-free port” status (37.9%), and “international status” (30.4%), while the most significant problem cited was “rising competition from other Chinese cities” (46.4%), followed by “lack of direction in government economic policy” (44.0%), “deterioration of international status” (31.3%), and “China can conduct direct trade with foreign countries” (30.9%). With regard to the cultural exchange and livelihood aspect, the respondents thought that in terms of areas of excellence, the most significant reason for Hong Kong being a connector is its “international status” (49.7%), while the most significant problem cited was “deterioration of international status” (51.2%).

## Main Discussion

1. **Hong Kong has a solid foundation to connect the Mainland with foreign countries. It has the competency to develop itself into a super-connector for the BRI if its merits can be further strengthened.**

The BRI is a long-term development strategy of China, and time and collaboration are needed for its implementation. Hong Kong has been able to act as a bridge between the Mainland and foreign countries in terms of economic co-operation because, on the one hand, it is familiar with the Mainland and, on the other hand, it is able to integrate with the world. The most significant advantage of Hong Kong is the enactment of the one country, two systems policy. This policy enables Hong Kong to maintain its international city status while benefiting from its close ties with the Mainland. In addition, Hong Kong is able

to provide effective and qualified services in the following areas: financing, trading, offshore renminbi business, shipping, commercial and professional services, and arbitration. These contribute to Hong Kong's solid foundation to play the role of connector. It is worth exploring how the excellence of Hong Kong can be further strengthened so that it can upgrade itself to a super-connector and connect China with more countries along the belt and road.

**2. The biggest challenge in upgrading Hong Kong to become a super-connector is the lack of familiarity with most BRI countries among Hong Kong people.**

Hong Kong lacks experience in dealing with most of the 60 countries along the belt and road (e.g. countries in Middle Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, and Africa), apart from those in South East Asia and South Asia. Hong Kong is unfamiliar with the religious and cultural situations and the social and economic systems in these countries. The challenge brought by cultural differences cannot be overcome in the near future. Hong Kong needs to become more familiar with these countries and regions and to put extra effort into resolving the problems encountered in order to play the role of super-connector smoothly.

**3. The key to becoming a super-connector is to maintain the international status of Hong Kong.**

The findings from the survey revealed that young people worry about a potential deterioration in the international status of Hong Kong and the effect on Hong Kong's connector role. The individual and focus group interviewees raised concerns about different aspects, including the social environment, the business environment, freedom of speech, the legal system, the right of discourse in the international community, the social inclusion of ethnic minorities, the language ability and international perspective of young people, and confidence in the one country, two systems policy. The different parties of this society should try their best to maintain the excellence of Hong Kong as an international city, which includes values such as the rule of law, freedom, diversification, civilization, and openness; international

features in the legal, policy, system, life, and cultural aspects of the city; and Hong Kong's more significant right of discourse in international economic and cultural organizations.

- 4. There are both challenges and opportunities in the development of the BRI. Young people can make use of these opportunities to broaden their horizons and to bring new opportunities for their own personal development.**

In addition to the challenges it poses, the BRI has brought opportunities both in terms of economics and cultural exchange. This study revealed that some young people are interested in travel and enriching their experience. To them, the BRI can be regarded as a starting point for both career development and knowledge enrichment. It is believed that young people can be enlightened to explore new opportunities if they can gain further knowledge and experience of the BRI.

- 5. Young people generally lack knowledge of and an interest in the BRI. They are not willing to put resources into preparing for it at this stage. If young people could further understand the relationship between them and the BRI, this may increase their choices in terms of future development.**

The findings from the survey show that young people generally lack knowledge of and an interest in the BRI. They are not willing to put resources into preparing for it at this stage, such as taking relevant courses. In fact, interest in the BRI varies from person to person. However, since Hong Kong has the potential to become a super-connector of the BRI, young people who take part in it in the future can also benefit. It is believed that if young people can further understand the relationship between them and the BRI as well as the choices the BRI will bring, this will be beneficial to the future of both the Hong Kong economy and the personal development of young people.

## Recommendations

This study offers the following recommendations based on the above findings and discussions:

1. **Strengthening the international perspective of young people:**
  - (a) **The government should set up a “Multicultural Exchange Fund” to encourage non-profit making organizations and ethnic minority organizations to organize cultural exchange activities, such as an International Culture Day or a South Asia Food Promotion.**
  - (b) **The form of exchange should be enriched and diversified. Exchange activities organized by tertiary colleges and youth service agencies should be extended to include countries and regions in the belt and road. These activities may include student or scholar exchange programmes, internship programmes, and overseas voluntary service programmes. Subsidies could be provided as an incentive.**
  - (c) **Strengthening the international element of educational programmes. Educational institutes should strengthen the international element when designing educational programmes, such as providing knowledge of Islamic commercial law and global geographic politics.**
  - (d) **Providing practical knowledge. Chambers and professional associations in Hong Kong could organize more practical seminars providing information about the life, culture, and career opportunities in the countries along the belt and road.**
2. **Connecting young entrepreneurs. The government should encourage the young people of BRI countries to engage in joint business activities with Hong Kong young people in order to strengthen the multiple business ties of Hong Kong young entrepreneurs.**

3. **Making better use of the existing human network.** The government should provide suitable commercial training and employment services to the South Asian and South East Asian young residents of Hong Kong so that they can make better use of their abilities and human networks to connect more countries.
  
4. **Continuing school and public education.** The media channel and the secondary education Liberal Studies syllabus could be better used to help the younger generation understand the concept of the BRI and its relationship with Hong Kong and young people.