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correspondence

Astronomy education in retreat

To the Editor — The Faculty of Science of the University of Hong Kong has recently announced plans to close the majors programmes in astronomy and mathematics/physics from 2018[1]. As an alumnus of the University of Hong Kong and a professor of astronomy in Taiwan, I am deeply concerned that this decision will lead to a major setback for basic science and STEM education in Hong Kong.

As one of the leading universities in Asia, the University of Hong Kong is the only tertiary institute in Hong Kong to offer a major in astronomy. In the past ten years, the university has been investing in astronomy by hiring several internationally renowned astrophysicists. Astronomers have also held important administrative roles in the university, including the head of the physics department as well as the dean of science. Established in 2008, the astronomy major programme has trained the next generation of astrophysicists and some of the graduates have pursued postgraduate degrees and postdoctoral positions at prestigious institutes. Regrettably, the newly hired dean of science has made a decision to cut majors and courses with small numbers of students, claiming that "teaching niche programmes is inefficient and results in a waste of academic time"[1]. This mindset is certainly a setback for the long-term investment in astronomy and STEM education in Hong Kong. As the best university in Hong Kong (according to the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings) this move also sends the wrong message to the public that astronomy should not be supported in Hong Kong. Ultimately, it will dissuade the next generation from pursuing astronomy research in the future. Both teaching and research will be hurt under this policy.

There is little doubt that some STEM subjects may become vulnerable as a result of changes in demand from students or employers, and they will be affected by this policy. Given the economic structure of Hong Kong, blue-sky science subjects are in the minority and we cannot judge their excellence simply by their immediate or even medium-term impact and return. If we want to be truly innovative we need to make sure excellent and valuable STEM subjects continue to be funded to attract the next generation.

In my view, higher education policy should not be based solely on cost efficiency, especially in disciplines related to basic science. One of the recent Hong Kong government's policies is to establish innovation and technology as drivers of economic growth[2]. We can succeed only if long-term investment in frontier blue-sky science is made to underpin future development. ❐

References
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Albert K. H. Kong
Institute of Astronomy, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu 30013, Taiwan.
e-mail: akong@phys.nthu.edu.tw