Raising standards
ILEX’s first Hong Kong graduates will qualify this year, writes Noel Inge

In 2011 the first Hong Kong graduates will emerge from a new programme, devised in consultation with ILEX in the UK, that sets an educational benchmark for people who wish to call themselves legal executives.

ILEX’s involvement in Hong Kong legal education, principally through ILEX Tutorial College (ITC), goes back over 20 years. During this period there has been significant change. Hong Kong is now a special administrative region of China, with its own independent judiciary and common law under the principle of ‘one country, two systems’.

Despite some gloomy predictions made when the British handover to China occurred in 1997, Hong Kong has remained a vibrant centre of commercial activity, driven to a great extent by its unique demography. Its long history of trading with both east and west has attracted migrants, causing Hong Kong to become one of the most densely populated areas of the world.

This has created huge demand for both domestic and commercial real estate and so much of the legal work in the region is property related. For the buying and selling of flats, and indeed other private client matters, the population is served by many solicitors operating as sole practitioners or working in small firms. Most are assisted by non-qualified support staff.

In Hong Kong support staff are often referred to as ‘legal executives’, a term which is employed very loosely to denote all sorts of legal personnel. Recognising that this confusing situation did not serve the public or courts very well, the Law Society of Hong Kong (LSHK) consulted with ILEX and other stakeholders to establish benchmarks that would define a Hong Kong legal executive.

The result is that persons wishing to call themselves legal executives must study an approved course, such as the ILEX/Chinese University of Hong Kong professional diploma in legal executive studies. The course is set at Level 3 and has a similar structure to ILEX’s professional diploma in law and practice.

The first cohort of students of this programme will graduate in 2011. They will benefit from meeting the LSHK benchmark standards and are expected to bring greater expertise to their role of supporting solicitors.

Perhaps more significant is that although legal executives do not enjoy the status of their English and Welsh counterparts, they are increasingly recognised for their essential role in the administration of justice in Hong Kong.

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