

Research centre for social enterprises takes shape at HKU

Liz Heron

A centre to help launch and develop social enterprises is taking shape at the University of Hong Kong.

Veteran charity leader Raymond Yim Chun-man was given a room in the university's Social Sciences Research Centre last month to conduct and co-ordinate research into social enterprises and provide help and advice for organisations trying to set them up in Hong Kong.

"As far as we know, it is the first home for research of this sort in Hong Kong," said centre director John Bacon-Shone. "It is not a formal centre in HKU at this stage, but we believe it has real potential in exactly the same way that science and technology transfer spin-offs do in science."

The Social Enterprise Incubation Centre helped to launch Green-design, a graphic design shop employing three young people which opened last week at the Methodist Centre in Kwun Tong with funding from the government's Enhancing Self-Reliance Through District Partnerships programme.

The centre is acting as a consultant to three fledgling enterprises aiming to provide work for immigrant women from the mainland, the elderly and ex-prisoners. They are expected to open over the next year.

Mr Yim, who has registered for a PhD at HKU, is organising a forum on

social enterprises at the university early next year and is hoping to attract experts from the United States and Britain to share their experience with leaders from Hong Kong's business and voluntary sectors.

He said he hoped to encourage other social science postgraduates to research the topic.

Social enterprises are businesses that provide work for unemployed people, meet social objectives and put profits into the business or the community rather than paying shareholders. They are a key plank of Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen's anti-poverty policy.

In his election platform, he vowed to take charge of support for social enterprises in districts where unemployment rates are at least 2 percentage points above average. More than 180 have been set up in recent years, and Mr Tsang has predicted the new type of business could generate business equal to 0.5 per cent of the city's gross domestic product.

But Mr Yim, who is director of volunteer-run social-service provider the Methodist Centre in Wan Chai, said most so-called social enterprises were using government funding to set up projects that provided work for needy people, but were not functioning as viable businesses.

"I hope that the centre will be able to help some of these projects become commercially viable."