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Programme lets students meet poverty face-to-face

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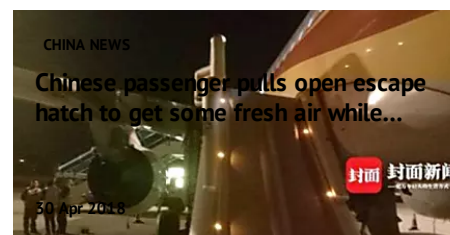
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Using messaging apps such as WhatsApp, she and a team of mentors answer questions from youngsters to give them a leg up in their education.

They are participants in a programme that encourages university students to do volunteer work and see first hand the challenges faced by the poor.

The programme's organiser, U-Fire Networks, first invited about 30 business executives to provide coaching for 120 university students who then became mentors for about 200 primary and secondary students.

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Huang, a business student, says the volunteer work has helped her connect with the people she meets, allowing her to better understand their needs.

She also takes the pupils under her care to visit elderly people living alone on welfare. Through these regular visits the students have compiled a series of articles that tell the stories of the old people.

"Many of the elderly are worried about health, so I look for some home remedies for them. And many of them just want someone to talk to," she said.

"It is through serving the elderly with the primary students that we - representing three generations - are interacting with and understanding the living conditions of others."

The programme aims to get participants personally involved - a counter to the Hong Kong tendency to throw money at poverty problems and then forget about them.

The global World Giving Index, carried out by the UK-based Charities Aid Foundation, last year found that 64 per cent of Hongkongers surveyed had donated money to charity.

But only 13 per cent had done some volunteer work.

U-Fire executive director Joyco Wu Yu-yung said the university students would play an important role in the community when they graduated.

"We believe it is a good idea that they get some experience of the needs of people from other parts of the community," he said.

Insights of a different kind are being offered in Mumbai, India, where the notorious Dharavi slum featured in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* has become a tourist attraction.

Fahim Vora, who grew up in Dharavi, has run a travel agency since 2010 offering tours of the community.

His guides are university students living in the community who want to earn money to pay tuition fees.

"We are showing our neighbourhood, which we are part of," Vora said.

Though it is called a slum, Dharavi has an estimated annual economic turnover of US\$500 million, mainly from the pottery, textile and recycling industries.

On a recent visit, tour guide Faizan Farooqui took a *South China Morning Post* reporter through filthy areas where a crow was eating a dead rat and the tough working conditions in the recycling and tannery workshops could be seen.

But the guide also stressed he would rather call his home a community than a slum because schools, temples, shops and restaurants are common; there is even a small cinema.



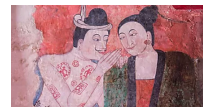
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Farooqui wants to be a pharmacist when he graduates, while one of his neighbours earns a living making shoes for Bollywood stars.


"Conditions are sometimes tough here, but we are like normal people. We are happy here. We know each other well," said Farooqui, who was once turned down for a part-time job outside the area because of where he lived.

Chung Kim-wah, a Polytechnic University academic specialising in social policy, said bridging the understanding gap could help the community come up with a more efficient strategy to tackle poverty.

"A thorough understanding of poor people is needed," he said.

*This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as:
Students meeting poverty face to face*

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 Lung Moon
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