

**For information**

**May 2005**

Legislative Council Panel on Education  
Provision of Free Education in Hong Kong and Overseas Countries

**Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the provision of free education in Hong Kong and overseas countries.

**Background**

2. 9-year free and compulsory education is offered in Hong Kong since 1978. In discussing the Administration's proposals regarding the new academic structure for secondary education and higher education at the special meeting of the Legislative Council Panel on Education held on 29 October 2004, the Hon. Emily Lau requested the Administration to prepare a paper to compare the provision of free education in Hong Kong and overseas countries, in particular the trading partners and competitors of Hong Kong.

3. In this connection, a report on the review of the 9-year compulsory education was published by the then Board of Education in 1997. The report reaffirmed that Hong Kong should continue to offer free and compulsory education to all children of the relevant age for nine years and recommended renaming "compulsory education" as "universal basic education".

**Research: Definitions, Scope and Source of Information**

*Free Education*

4. There is no single and commonly adopted definition of "free education". While the term could be narrowly defined as "education without the need to pay any tuition fees", it may also be interpreted as broadly as covering a wide range of other education-related expenses, such as costs for textbooks, uniforms, transportation; and free school meals. In any event, its meaning differs conceptually from "compulsory education" in that the latter may not necessarily

be provided totally free of charges, but is mandated as requirements in the form of laws, regulations or rules by the relevant authority.

5. In Hong Kong, we have been providing 9-year compulsory or universal basic education, with students attending schools without the need to pay any tuition fees. In this information paper, we will continue to define “free education” as meaning “education without the need to pay any tuition fees”. This is because different countries have different standards. Some countries or jurisdictions may provide additional subsidies for free school meals and free transportation, while others may only provide free tuition and other forms of subsidy for education-related expenses for needy students. We also use “compulsory education” as meaning “universal education” in our local context as the former term is still frequently used in many other countries.

6. The above understanding is important since compulsory education is not necessarily free. It is equally true that free education is not necessarily compulsory or universal. In some countries or jurisdictions, the government may *provide* free education for all in principle, but for one reason or another it may be *at the discretion of individuals to accept* the offer. If this and the cost for other education-related expenses are all included, it is more difficult to make a valid comparison. In Hong Kong, we have been practicing free and compulsory education for 9-years since 1978 to strike a balance between providing *education for free* and *education for all*. Various forms of assistance are provided to ensure no student is deprived of education opportunity through lack of means.

7. In the 1997 review of the 9-year compulsory education in Hong Kong, a comparison was made with a number of other countries including Hong Kong’s trading partners and competitors. Essentially the same countries are used here for comparison, except that Taiwan, Belgium and Mexico have been added to the list in view of their current position as a leading world trader or as a close trading partner of Hong Kong.

#### Source of Information

8. The information provided in this paper is sourced through advice by the

relevant authorities (e.g. Department/Ministry of Education or Consulate Generals), information on the Internet (e.g. the website of UNESCO) and in encyclopedia (e.g. the World Education Encyclopedia) or other relevant references (see details at Annex A). Where any discrepancies or inconsistencies arise from the various sources, the advice of the relevant authorities is taken as the basis for comparison. In cases where no confirmation is available, the latest information is adopted.

## **The Findings**

9. Annex B shows the duration of free education in the selected countries. A closer examination of the information shows the following:

- (a) The years of free education varies in these countries. It should also be noted in some countries there may be variations for different jurisdictions.
- (b) The duration of free education provided in developed countries in Europe and the Pacific is longer than that in Southeast Asian or Asian countries/regions.
- (c) The duration of free education in Hong Kong is comparable to those of Japan, Republic of Korea, Taiwan and Mainland China.

10. Free education is not necessarily compulsory or universal. The duration of free education is therefore only one of the indicators to show the kinds of support given by the government to improving the educational standards of its citizens. Also, as reported in another study<sup>1</sup>, in some European countries like UK and Netherlands, children start school at 5, while others like Germany and Netherlands offer part-time education instead of full-time education to some students at the upper secondary level. For the majority of cases in Europe (except Germany, Netherlands) and United States, the minimum school leaving age is still 16. Therefore free or compulsory schooling in all countries must be interpreted with care.

11. With the implementation of the reform of the academic structure in Hong Kong (“3+3+4”), the average school leaving age of students in Hong Kong will

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon O'Donnell (May 2004). International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks; Comparative tables and factual summaries – 2004. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and National Foundation for Educational Research.

be increased to 16/17, since all students will have access to 6 years of secondary education rather than 5 as currently applies. Though the 3-year senior secondary education has not been made compulsory, there is an expectation that nearly all students will proceed through 6 years of secondary education. The present arrangement where sufficient subsidised (82%) school places are provided for two years senior secondary for all students will extend to three years. As is the case now, students who require financial assistance will not need to pay the tuition fee.

12. Many studies on compulsory education show that mandatory school attendance without due emphasis on the quality of learning and teaching to motivate students will not raise the standards of student performance. This idea had actually been widely accepted and is adopted in the review of compulsory education in Hong Kong published in 1997. Improvement in the quality of education and diversification in the curriculum to meet individual needs have been the guiding principles in improving the educational standards of Hong Kong students. The new “3+3+4” system focuses on offering a broad spectrum of courses including the Career-oriented Studies, reduced examination pressure, and strengthened advancement pathways for students. It will improve the quality of our secondary school leavers.

13. The government is committed to providing free and compulsory/universal basic education for 9 years. It will invest further in education by moving to 3 years of heavily subsidised senior secondary education for all students under the new academic structure.

**Education and Manpower Bureau**  
**May 2005**

## Relevant Reference on Free Education

### General Reference

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### Reference on Individual Country/Region

#### ASIA

##### Mainland China

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*Malaysia*

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*Taiwan*

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## ***AMERICA AND THE PACIFIC***

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**EUROPE**

*Belgium*

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*Finland*

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*Germany*

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*Netherlands*

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**Free Education in Overseas Countries/Regions  
(Research Findings as at 20 December 2004)**

<b>Region/Country</b>	<b>Duration<sup>2</sup> (Years)</b>
<b><i>Asia</i></b>	
1. Hong Kong	9
2. Singapore	0 <sup>3</sup>
3. Indonesia	6
4. Mainland China	9
5. Japan	9
6. Philippines	9
7. Republic of Korea	9
8. Taiwan	9
9. Malaysia	11 <sup>4</sup>
10. Thailand	12 <sup>5</sup>
<b><i>America &amp; the Pacific</i></b>	
11. Mexico	9
12. Australia	12
13. Canada	12
14. United States	12
15. New Zealand	13
<b><i>Europe</i></b>	
16. France	- <sup>6</sup>
17. Turkey	8
18. Portugal	9
19. Denmark	12
20. Finland	12
21. Spain	12
22. Greece	12
23. Netherlands	12
24. Belgium	12/13
25. Germany	12/13
26. Italy	13
27. Norway	13
28. United Kingdom	13

<sup>2</sup> The information presented in this table refers to the total number of years in primary and secondary education.

<sup>3</sup> The Singapore Government committed in 2000 to providing all school-age children six years of compulsory education (i.e. up to Primary 6), and ten years of general education. Education is heavily subsidised by the Government. That said, parents are required to pay a token fee for the compulsory education provided.

<sup>4</sup> Primary schooling is mandatory for all children in Malaysia beginning 2003. The participation rates for the primary, junior secondary and senior secondary levels however are 98.48%, 84.40% and 73.52% respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Twelve-year free basic education was granted to students throughout Thailand for the first time in October 2002. The enrolment rates for the primary, junior secondary and senior secondary levels for the years 1999-2003 are over 100% (due to over-age students), slightly over 80% and around 65% respectively.

<sup>6</sup> No relevant information on free education could be identified. According to information provided in the website of the French Ministry of Education, compulsory education will be provided for all children until the age of sixteen.