



c/o Carmel Divine Grace Foundation Secondary School
Po Lam Estate, Tseung Kwan O, Hong Kong

On “Reforming the Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education---- Actions for Investing in the Future”

I. Introduction

Our Association, founded in November 2000, comprises 110 of the 112 aided English medium secondary schools in the territory. Together with the community at large and the education sector in particular, we applaud the Vision and Goal stated therein. The 3+3+4 reform, as claimed by Prof. Arthur Li, Secretary for Education and Manpower, is indeed “a worthy investment that will bring lasting benefits to our future generations.” As such, the Reform cannot be allowed to fail; it must succeed. It is in this spirit of cooperation with the Education and Manpower Bureau, the education sector and the community at large to ensure the success of the Reform that our Association submits the following comments and suggestions.

II. The New Academic System

Our Association agrees with this new System of three years of junior secondary schooling, three years of senior secondary schooling and four years of university education.

III. The Curriculum

The curriculum lies at the heart of the Reform. Without changes in the curriculum, the Reform would be meaningless. To achieve the goals of the new curriculum and put into practice the guiding principles, suggestions of frontline teachers must be carefully considered and their worries alleviated. Having canvassed our members for their opinions, we make the following suggestions:

1. English Language

The importance of English to Hong Kong, which, in spite of its lack of natural resources, aspires to be Asia’s World City on the basis of its human resources, cannot be overstated, as can readily be seen from the fact that the services sector, accounting for more than 85% of the city’s economy, employs some 2.7 million people, more than 85% of its labour force. While there is probably no need for every Hong Konger to be equally proficient in English, the city, undergoing structural changes towards a knowledge-based economy, does need as many proficient students of English as possible.



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Historically, because of the wide range in this proficiency among students, the present Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA), and its predecessor the Hong Kong Examinations Authority, offers Syllabuses A and B, of different degrees of difficulty, to candidates of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination.

The amalgamation of these two syllabuses in the proposed Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), with examination results broadly classified into five levels, would most likely fail to differentiate the proficiencies of the students to the satisfaction of the tertiary institutions, the employers and the students themselves. When a Level 5 can be obtained without strenuous efforts, it can safely be assumed that most students, because of human nature and the demands of other activities, would end up attaining a lower level of proficiency, to the detriment of the future of Hong Kong and of the students themselves.

Realising that English Language is at best a second language to most Hong Kong students, the Curriculum Development Council suggested and the then Education Department recommended that seven to eight periods per week, about 17.5% - 20% of lesson time, be allocated to the teaching of English Language. To reduce that to 12.5% will hasten the already alarming decline in students' English proficiency.

Moreover, the examples of the modules in the Elective Part of the proposed curriculum are not equivalent in their degree of difficulty. Most students can be expected to choose the easier ones in order to get better results. In addition, it is impossible for all 40 students in a class to participate fully in some of the modules, e.g. Learning English through Drama, Learning English through Debating. In these cases, class size must be reduced.

Recommendations:

- A. Add an Extension Part to the curriculum, as in the case of Mathematics, to cater for the needs of the more able students and to help universities and employers to select students with the desired level of proficiency.
- B. Increase the notional allocation of lesson time to at least 15%.
- C. Moderate the modules of the Elective Part so that they are comparable in their degree of difficulty.
- D. Reduce class size to 25 or less.



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2. Liberal Studies

In its zeal to “broaden students’ knowledge base and enhance their social awareness”, the proposed curriculum sacrifices depth for breadth. There are a total of 21 modules, covering three areas, of which students have to study nine compulsory ones and six elective ones. This means that students have to study, on average, five different modules in each of the three years of senior secondary schooling, at the end of which they will be examined in all fifteen in one sitting of the public examination. Since, at the present, more mature S.6 and 7 students taking the subject need study only two out of six modules, the magnitude of the task that teachers and students have to face in the future becomes obvious. Students will be overwhelmed in their effort to merely remember all the material covered, let alone “make explicit connections among knowledge and concepts from different disciplines/subjects”, and the very purpose for which this subject is introduced and made compulsory will be defeated.

Besides, while Liberal Studies is not a new subject in the curriculum, it is new to most teachers and students. In the last four years, according to statistics released by the HKEAA, only about 1,300 candidates out of a total of around 36,000 sat the subject. (For day schools, the corresponding numbers are approximately 1,270 and 27,000.) Should the subject become compulsory, the candidature will multiply by 60 or so times, necessitating a concomitant increase in the number of teachers. While teachers of Physics, History, etc. receive university education in their respective subjects and are thus ready to teach them upon graduation, would-be teachers of Liberal Studies are not so prepared. Consequently, a lot of training on the subject matter, pedagogy and assessment will have to be provided.

As most teachers and students are unfamiliar with both the content and the assessment of Liberal Studies, making it a compulsory core subject assessed in the same way as the other subjects only adds to the pressure of teachers and students alike. The difficulties associated with the assessment of generic skills rather than subject knowledge make fair, reliable and valid school-based assessments well nigh impossible.

In view of the diverse nature of the modules in this subject, even though teachers need not “have a profound knowledge of all the issues in the curriculum”, it may still help to have different teachers teach different modules. It will then be necessary to co-ordinate their work to ensure a smooth operation, additional workload for all concerned.



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While the content of the area of study Self and Personal Development can reasonably be expected to remain mostly unchanged from year to year, the same cannot be said of that of the other two areas: Society and Culture, Science, Technology and the Environment. Thus, teachers of these two areas will have to constantly update their knowledge, their notes and teaching aids. Those who may have to translate into English material in Chinese on the modules of Society and Culture will have added workload.

To meet the Curriculum Aims of this subject, the enquiry learning approach is recommended. To do so in a class of 40 students is, as is well known to all teachers, impossible. Class size must be reduced for effective learning and teaching to take place.

Recommendations:

- A. Reduce the number of modules to be studied from 15 to 8 or less and the notional allocation of lesson time to 10% or less. The time thus made available could be given over to English Language.
- B. Provide at least 120 hours of training to would-be teachers of the subject, particularly in the areas of pedagogy and assessment.
- C. Tertiary institutions offer courses that will equip some of their graduates to teach Liberal Studies immediately upon graduation.
- D. Make this a teaching rather than an examination subject. If it must be examined, then do it on a pass-fail basis, at least until both teachers and students are familiar with the subject in, say, five years.
- E. Provide schools with additional teachers in the staff establishment to meet the heavy workload and training needs of teachers. A Liberal Studies grant dependent upon the availability of funds is not enough.
- F. Provide quality teaching material, in both Chinese and English, to teachers and students.
- G. Reduce class size to 25 or less. If this cannot be done, allow split-class teaching and provide the requisite manpower.



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3. Elective Subjects

The proposal to limit the number of elective subjects that each student can take to two or three severely restricts the opportunity of the students to broaden their horizons. It will also force those who proceed with their studies to spend more time finding out their interest in and capability for various subjects.

More importantly, should university faculties and/or departments have non-overlapping subject requirements for admission, then matriculants will be severely handicapped in their choice of faculties and/or departments.

Recommendations:

- A. Increase the number of elective subjects that a student can take to four.
- B. Failing that, universities should ensure that a student taking only two elective subjects still has a wide choice of faculties and/or departments.

IV. Assessment and Certification

It is proposed that the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination be replaced by an assessment system leading to the HKDSE. This new assessment system has to perform at least two functions: reflect what the students have learned in their six years of secondary education and help tertiary institutions select suitable candidates for admission. These two functions, while not entirely at loggerheads with each other, are not entirely compatible with each other either. Care must be taken to ensure that both functions are satisfactorily served by this new system.

One feature of the new system is that it will be “standards-referenced”, i.e. students will be matched against standards, which say what students have to know and be able to do to merit a certain grade”. While this is to be welcomed, standards must be clearly spelt out and teachers trained in their application to ensure that assessment is fair, objective and reliable.

To broaden the assessment base, it is proposed that school-based assessment be a part of the certification of every subject. While this is all very good in theory, its practice can be fraught with difficulties, including:

1. While “[s]chool-based assessment is not new in Hong Kong”, it is, and will continue to be, new to many teachers, even with its extension to thirteen more subjects in 2004 – 2007. Teacher training, in both the ethical and technical aspects, is therefore an absolute necessity.



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2. When teachers first begin to make school-based assessments, to bank against teething problems of the system and to ensure fairness, they can be expected to assess as many tasks, assignments, activities, etc. as possible. This will not only lead to much extra work on the part of the teachers, but also exert a lot of pressure on the students.
3. Measures must also be taken to ensure the fairness, objectivity and reliability of school-based assessment. Teachers have to adhere strictly to guidelines laid down by the HKEAA and make sure that the work assessed is done by the students themselves. The HKEAA must also explore different methods of moderation for different subjects to make sure that moderation is reliable and valid.
4. Consequently, school-based assessment should not, at least in the initial stage and until most teachers feel comfortable doing it, account for too large a percentage of the total assessment.
5. Finally, to make school-based assessment meaningful and manageable, class size must be reduced.

Recommendations:

- A. Takes steps to ensure that the HKDSE satisfactorily reflects what the students have learned and serves as a means of selection for tertiary institutions.
- B. Spell out clearly and unambiguously the standards against which student performance is to be measured.
- C. Train teachers in the implementation of school-based assessment.
- D. The HKEAA explores diligently different methods of moderation for different subjects to make sure that moderation is reliable and valid.
- E. Reduce school-based assessment to 10% - 20% of the total assessment until teachers become familiar with it and are comfortable doing it.
- F. Reduce class size to 25 or less.



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V. Supporting Measures

It is comforting to learn that the Bureau will take steps to ensure the success of this Reform, an endeavour in which the Bureau can count on the cooperation of our Association. However, the human resource implications of the Reform must be viewed in the perspective of the many reform measures still underway, lest the Reform becomes the proverbial last straw that breaks the camel's back.

The assumption of a 40-student class by the RASIH Working Group is grossly unrealistic, especially in view of the fact that, at the present, there are at most 30 students in S.6 and S.7 classes, each of which is usually split into two groups. With the introduction of school-based assessment in every subject and in view of the increasingly interactive nature of lessons, class size must be reduced to make learning and teaching effective and fruitful.

Another point of great concern is the proposed teacher-to-class ratio. In one of the alternatives suggested, the ratio is 1.6 for every junior form class and 1.8 for every senior form class. Then there are extra teachers for split-class teaching, NET, etc. However, to be eligible for extra teachers for split-class teaching, schools have to offer a minimum of 12 elective subjects and there has to be at least 18 students taking each of the subjects. As things stand now, many schools are already hard pressed to find ten students to take subjects like History or Chinese Literature at the Advanced Level so as to be able to apply for split-class teachers. To raise this number to 18 virtually seals the fate and ensures the demise of such subjects at the senior secondary level.

In the no less unpalatable second alternative, the ratios are 1.7 and 1.9 respectively with an additional NET and none for split-class teaching. Assuming a school has five classes in each form and 40 students in each class, its 1200 students ($40 \times 5 \times 6$) will be taught by 55 teachers ($1.7 \times 5 \times 3 + 1.9 \times 5 \times 3 + 1$). Then the student-teacher ratio becomes 21.82, negating the hard-won gains made in the last twelve years when the ratio went from 21.8 in 1991-1992 to 18.0 in 2003-2004. (Even allowing for the fact that schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction may have one more teacher, the ratio drops only slightly to 21.43.)

Either way, the number of teachers in schools that offer Advanced Level courses now will decrease, up to an unbelievable 14 in some instances. (The average is 3.85 from a survey of our members.) In this day and age, when more and more responsibilities are thrust upon schools, when what used to be taught by parents at home is taught by teachers at school, any reduction in staff establishment is unconscionable and detrimental to the well-being of students. This is especially so in the first few years of the implementation of the Reform, when many teachers will be spending a lot of time undertaking in-service training, familiarising themselves with the new curricula, preparing new teaching material and aids, learning to do school-based assessment, etc., thus leaving them with precious little time to attend to their students.



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Therefore, should no additional manpower be granted for split-class teaching, schools, in an effort not to make unreasonable demands on their teachers, would be forced not to make split-class arrangements. The upshot is that fewer subjects will be offered and students will have fewer choices.

The suggestion that schools in the same neighbourhood band together and offer less popular subjects to students of all these schools is easier said than done, as is well known to any school administrator or teacher, even with added financial incentives from the Bureau. Different schools have different school calendars and lesson hours. They may want to offer different subjects. Their media of instruction may be different. Their students may have reached vastly different levels in their academic achievements and conduct. The list goes on and on. (Consider, for example, these neighbouring schools: Wah Yan College, Kowloon, True Light Girls' College, ELCHK Lutheran Secondary School.)

Another casualty of the reduction in staff establishment is the teacher-librarian, who will most likely be deployed to do more teaching and less library work.

For the Reform to succeed, it is vital that the Bureau wins over the heads and hearts of frontline teachers. The spirit may still be willing, but the flesh is already weak. The Bureau should spare no effort in removing hurdles that militate against the smooth transition to the new system and the ultimate success of the Reform.

Recommendations:

- A. Reduce class size to 25 or less, in clearly defined stages if not all at once.
- B. Make sure that no school will suffer a reduction in its staff establishment as a result of the implementation of the Reform. The teacher-to-class ratio can be increased to 1.8 for each junior form class and 2.0 for a senior form one, for example, and the number of teachers rounded up instead of rounded off.
- C. Grant schools using English as the medium of instruction the same number of extra teachers as those using Chinese. This is only fair and equitable.
- D. If the Bureau puts financial considerations above the welfare of Hong Kong students and insists on reductions in the staff establishment, then attractive early retirement packages should be offered to redundant teachers for what they have given of themselves to the education of Hong Kong youths.



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VI. Funding

Our Association sympathises with the Bureau's financial position and is not against a reasonable increase in tuition fees for senior secondary and university education. However, the Bureau must make sure that no person is prevented from receiving an education simply because of a lack of financial means.

Recommendation:

A. Provide financial assistance to all needy students.

VII. Critical Milestones

It is proposed that the Reform be implemented in September 2008. This does not seem to give enough time to all parties involved to work out the numerous details, including: design detailed curricula for each of the twenty-some subjects, gain international recognition of the HKDSE, develop descriptors for each of the five performance levels of each subject, secure sufficient financial and human resources, specify admission criteria to faculties and/or departments of universities, produce quality textbooks and teaching aids, train and retrain teaching professionals, gather the support of all segments of the community: students, parents, teachers, schools, tertiary institutions, businesses, government. History, unfortunately, is littered with well-intentioned but hastily implemented reforms that fell by the wayside. Regrettably, Hong Kong has had its share of them. Let not this Reform be yet another casualty.

Recommendation:

A. Implement the Reform in 2010.

VIII. Conclusion

Our Association lauds the Bureau for its effort to change with the times and to undertake reform for the long-term benefits of Hong Kong and its youths, and urges it to consider carefully the recommendations that we have made. In the days ahead, we shall continue to contribute our efforts and work with the Bureau, other members of the education sector and society at large to make this Reform the resounding success that it has to be.