

**Flexibility in the Application of
Chinese Language Requirement for the Admission of
Non-Chinese Speaking Students into UGC-funded Institutions**

PURPOSE

At meetings of the Education Panel and of the Bills Committee on Race Discrimination Bill earlier this year, we informed Members that the Education Bureau (formerly Education and Manpower Bureau) had initiated discussions with the eight institutions funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC) on the possibility of their offering further flexibility in the application of the Chinese Language requirement for the admissions of non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students. This paper reports progress of the discussions and the way forward.

BACKGROUND

2. Hong Kong has a long tradition of being a bilingual society and this tradition is one of Hong Kong's competitive edges. Consistent with the overall language regime, for many years local students applying for entry to undergraduate programmes funded by the UGC are generally required to obtain a pass in Advanced Supplementary Level Use of English and Chinese Language and Culture in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) before the institutions would consider their applications. Specifically, such a language proficiency requirement has been put in place to ensure that students admitted have the capability to fully benefit from tertiary education and the programmes the students wish to study. Tertiary education covers not only classroom teaching but also other studies/activities in a local setting and life on campus. This expectation of our top students pursuing higher education also underscores the equal importance of the two official languages and sends a clear signal to our younger generations.

3. Notwithstanding the above general language admission requirement, the UGC-funded institutions have built in flexibility in the admission process by providing a number of alternative avenues to admit students (including NCS students) without the requisite Chinese Language proficiency –

- (a) Under the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS), students (including NCS students) may, in place of the Chinese Language result, use the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) result in a language other than English in applying for admission to undergraduate programmes;
- (b) The institutions may relax the Chinese Language requirement and admit students on the basis of their outstanding performance in other academic subjects;
- (c) In exceptional cases, the Chinese Language requirement may be waived having regard to individual circumstances; and
- (d) Students who pursue a non-local curriculum may apply for admission with the UGC-funded institutions direct by using results other than those in the HKALE under the “non-JUPAS route”. In this context, individual institutions have been accepting an alternative qualification in Chinese in examinations such as General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), General Certificate in Education (GCE) and International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE).

4. Our discussions with the representatives of the UGC-funded institutions have focused on the case of further flexibility in respect of **NCS students pursuing the local curriculum and applying (alongside other students pursuing the local curriculum) for admission to publicly-funded programmes under JUPAS**, i.e. those for whom the arrangements under paragraph 3(a), (b) and (c) above are now applicable. First, most of these NCS students attending local schools have taken Hong Kong as their home. Realizing the importance of learning Chinese for integration into the community, they would wish to devote their efforts to learning the language rather than study another foreign language in lieu of Chinese for the sole purpose of seeking admission to UGC-funded institutions. Second, some of these students may have greater difficulties learning Chinese than their Chinese-speaking counterparts and the alternative requirement for “outstanding performance in other academic subjects” may be regarded by them as a higher threshold for entry to the institutions. The existing possibilities of waiver on a case by case basis are also regarded as too vague for the purpose of giving a

general indication of the chances.

PROGRESS

5. During the discussions, representatives of the institutions have rightly pointed out that any further flexibility to be contemplated should not be applied simply on the basis of whether an applicant is a NCS student. In admission of students, there should not be any discrimination on the ground of whether a student is Chinese-speaking or not. This is because NCS students are not necessarily less proficient in Chinese than Chinese-speaking students. Likewise, Chinese-speaking students (or students whose mother tongue is supposed to be Chinese) do not necessarily fare better in Chinese Language. To ensure that any further flexibility is reasonably applied, any special consideration and arrangements to be accepted should target at **specified circumstances** which may apply to both NCS and Chinese-speaking students.

6. Accordingly, we and the representatives of the institutions have come to the view that **in addition to** the existing flexibilities set out in paragraph 3 above, institutions may favourably consider further flexibility in the form of accepting alternative qualification(s) in Chinese for **students pursuing the local curriculum and have been verified by the schools concerned as fulfilling one of the following specified circumstances** –

- (a) the student has learned Chinese Language for less than six years while receiving primary and secondary education. This caters specifically to those students who have a late start in the learning of Chinese Language (e.g. due to their settlement in Hong Kong well past the entry level) or who have been educated in Hong Kong sporadically;
or
- (b) the student has learned Chinese Language for six years or more in schools, but has been taught an adapted and simpler curriculum not normally applicable to the majority of students in our local schools.

7. By so focusing on the specified circumstances, the flexibility may apply to all those students in the same circumstances, irrespective of whether they are NCS students or not. We will therefore not be favouring NCS

students at the expense of Chinese-speaking students (who are normally ethnic Chinese) and hence contravening the spirit of the Race Discrimination Bill. In effect, some Chinese-speaking students who have emigrated overseas and returned to Hong Kong may be eligible. The arrangements will also prevent abuse of the flexibility by those students who should otherwise be capable of competing on the basis of the general language requirement but who are only looking for an easy way out. For instance, it would then be difficult for a student whose mother tongue is Chinese and who has been learning Chinese in our local schools to justify the use of an alternative Chinese Language qualification for seeking admission.

8. It is believed that cutting off at “six years” is reasonable. In this regard, we understand that, on average, a six-year period is generally adopted for qualifying a non-native speaker for English as a Second Language assessments in Australia. Seen from another angle, a student who has been exposed to Chinese Language for at least six out of 12 years of school education (or six out of 11 years up to Form 5 under the present system) should have been provided with a considerable period of time to catch up. And for those who have the exposure for six years or more, the school authorities would be called upon to verify the application of a simpler school-based Chinese curriculum in their cases. This allowance for schools’ input is in line with our emphasis on school-based, professional judgement on the competence of students and on the need for schools to adapt the central Chinese Language curriculum framework to cater for students’ diverse background. In exercising their judgement as to whether the students concerned should follow an adapted curriculum, schools are expected to account for their decision and to take into consideration relevant factors, such as the mother tongue of the student, the number of second or third languages in which the student is learning in schools and the extent of family support for learning the language outside schools.

9. We wish to emphasise that the further flexibility proposed is for the purpose of facilitating the entry into UGC-funded institutions of those students who may have genuine circumstantial difficulties meeting the general Chinese Language requirement. For the avoidance of doubt, the minimum requirements other than Chinese Language proficiency will continue to apply as in the case of other students not applying for the flexibility. Institutions will also retain their autonomy in selecting, on the basis of merits, from among

the students who have met the minimum entry requirements. Students who would like to make use of this flexibility should also realize that their entry into the institutions is one thing, their competitiveness in terms of Chinese Language proficiency in their future career is another. Over time, we hope that more and more NCS students would be able to attain higher proficiency in Chinese Language through the series of support measures we have introduced. For students who are able to attain Chinese language proficiency comparable to their local counterparts, we encourage them to take the Chinese Language paper in the HKCEE or the future Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination.

10. Conveying the suggestion of individual Legislative Council members, we have also consulted the representatives of the institutions as to whether they would admit ethnic minority students for the purpose of promoting cultural diversity on campus. Representatives have advised that they welcome multi-culturalism on campus and have been giving or are prepared to give due consideration to this factor when admitting students. That said, they would not prefer setting hard and fast rules for promoting cultural diversity through admissions, since admission of students must be based on merits of each case and the capacity of the applicant to participate fully in the programme enrolled.

WAY FORWARD

11. Building on the consensus achieved so far, our discussions with the institutions in the coming months will focus on the following –

- (a) the institutions to consider and confirm, after further internal consultation, that the specified circumstances set out in paragraph 6 above therein would be generally accepted for the purpose of administering further flexibility in respect of students pursuing the local curriculum;
- (b) individual institutions to specify the alternative Chinese Language qualification(s), e.g. GCE, IGCSE and GCSE, to be accepted generally under the specified circumstances and the minimum acceptable grading for each;

- (c) notwithstanding the general flexibility, individual institutions to specify any special, additional requirements in respect of Chinese Language proficiency that may be applicable to specific faculties/programmes of studies; and
- (d) the institutions and the Education Bureau to work out the mechanism under which students fulfilling the specified circumstances and are applying for admissions with the accepted alternative Chinese language qualification(s) would be identified under the JUPAS application process.

Education Bureau
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