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Panel on Education

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the special meeting on 11 July 2009**

Liberal Studies under the new senior secondary curriculum

Purpose

This paper summarizes the issues of concern raised by the Panel on Education (the Panel) concerning the subject of Liberal Studies (LS) under the new senior secondary (NSS) curriculum.

Background

2. In 2000, the Education Commission (EC) recommended the adoption of a three-year senior secondary academic system to facilitate the implementation of a more flexible, coherent and diversified senior secondary curriculum. In May 2003, EC set out the proposals for developing a new senior secondary and higher education academic structure (the 334 structure). In his 2004 Policy Address, the Chief Executive confirmed the policy direction of developing the new academic structure.
3. The Administration issued in October 2004 a consultation paper entitled "*Reforming the Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education*" which set out the design blueprint, implementation timetable and the financial arrangements of the 334 structure. The consultation exercise ended on 19 January 2005.
4. On 18 May 2005, the Administration published the Report entitled "*The New Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education - Action Plan for Investing in the Future of Hong Kong*". The Report summarized the results of the consultation exercise and set out the road map for implementing the 334 structure in the 2009-2010 school year.
5. Under the NSS curriculum, there are four core subjects, namely, Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and LS. According to the 2005 Report,

LS aims to broaden students' knowledge base and enhance their social awareness through the study of a wide range of contemporary issues. By adopting an issue-enquiry approach to learning and teaching, the subject will help students to become independent thinkers and life-long learners.

Deliberations of the Panel

6. Over the past few years, the Panel discussed issues relating to LS in the context of the 334 structure and received views from educational bodies and student organizations. The issues of concern raised by members concerning LS are set out in the following paragraphs.

Professional development

7. As LS would be a core subject under the NSS curriculum and teachers were the direct change agents in the classroom to bring about effective student learning, members were gravely concerned about the readiness of teachers to teach the new subject and the availability of appropriate pedagogies and teaching resources. Some members considered that LS should only be included as a core subject when sufficient experienced teachers were available and appropriate pedagogies, assessment mechanisms, and support measures had been put in place. According to a survey conducted by a political party, teachers, in general, considered that the Education Bureau (EDB) had not provided sufficient professional development and support for teachers to teach the subject.

8. The Administration pointed out that the subject of LS was currently taught at the Advanced Supplementary Level. Good practices developed and experience gained from teaching LS, Integrated Humanities, and Science and Technology under the existing curriculum would be used to support schools which had little experience in teaching the subject. Schools were encouraged to start teaching Integrated Humanities and Science and Technology in senior secondary classes so that their teachers could start teaching topics covered by LS at an early opportunity. Currently, some 100 secondary schools were offering LS or Integrated Humanities at senior levels, and a few hundred teachers were teaching the relevant subjects. A web-based LS Resource Platform had been launched in mid-2005 to provide the basic knowledge which underpinned the LS curriculum for teachers' reference. An association of LS teachers, comprising some 300 serving teachers with experience in teaching the subject, had been established to form professional networks.

9. According to the Administration, the planning and provision of professional development courses for LS teachers were based on the principle that all of them would have the opportunity of attending professional development courses in six aspects, namely –

- (1) Understanding and Interpreting Curriculum;
- (2) Assessing Student Learning;

- (3) Learning and Teaching Strategy;
- (4) Enriching Knowledge;
- (5) Independent Enquiry Studies; and
- (6) Curriculum Management, Planning and Leadership.

10. The Administration pointed out that courses on (1) and (2) were provided to all prospective LS teachers, while the other courses were attended by teachers, coordinators and principals according to their own needs. As at March 2009, about 7 800 teachers had attended LS courses on various aspects. More emphasis would be put on practical learning and teaching in the classroom and the planning of Independent Enquiry Studies which would be the task of school-based assessment in LS.

Assessment

11. Under the NSS structure, a standards-referenced reporting (SRR) system would be used in reporting student results in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) examination which would replace the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE). Instead of using grades A to F as in HKCEE and HKALE, HKDSE would adopt five levels of performance, namely Level 1 to Level 5, with Level 1 being the lowest and Level 5 the highest. Members queried the rationale for adopting the new reporting system in HKDSE.

12. According to the Administration, unlike the existing HKALE which was taken by about one-third of the secondary school graduates, HKDSE would be attended by all senior secondary school graduates with a wider diversity in learning outcomes. It was necessary to design a broad grading system in HKDSE to provide information about actual achievement of students and enable monitoring of standards of attainment of students over time. Moreover, the adoption of the level of performance would avoid confusion between the old and the new systems of reporting results. To annotate the best performers among Level 5 students, 5* and 5** would be used. Under SRR, the standards were held constant with no fixed proportion of students for each level.

13. Members were given to understand that the Administration was considering reverting to norms-referencing reporting system on the assessment of students' performance in LS, and there would be model answers to examination questions. Members considered that this would defeat the purpose of implementing the NSS curriculum to develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills. According to the sample assessment of LS examination papers, the marking of assessors varied greatly. Members were concerned if the smartest candidates with the highest critical thinking skills might possibly get the lowest scores in LS examination.

14. The Administration clarified that there would be no model answers to examination questions in LS. The assessment of students' performance in LS involved a professional judgment of the markers who would be guided by detailed marking guidelines, and the results would be balanced through double marking of examination scripts. Before marking, qualified markers would need to discuss among themselves in order to reach consensus on the ways for marking the examination scripts.

Content

15. Members noted that "Modern China" would be one of compulsory units in LS. Some members considered piece-meal inclusion of the history of China in LS inadequate to promote students' understanding of their motherland and develop their national identity and sense of belonging. They were concerned that the design of the NSS curriculum would have profound impact on local students' understanding of the motherland. In their view, Chinese History should be made a compulsory subject under the NSS curriculum.

16. The Administration explained that the history of China was one of the mandatory subject areas of General Studies from Primary 2 to Primary 6 and of Humanities Studies from Secondary 1 to Secondary 3. Overall, schools were required to allocate 5% of the total lesson time at different levels to teach Chinese history. According to the annual surveys conducted by EDB, some 85% of schools offered Chinese History as a subject, around 6% to 7% offered a subject on Chinese and world history, and a small number of schools had not allocated sufficient lesson time to Chinese history studies in junior secondary levels. The curriculum of LS comprised core modules on "Hong Kong Today" and "Modern China" which covered, among others, areas on the historical and cultural developments of Hong Kong and China. LS was designed in such a way to enable students to make connections across knowledge areas and consider things from different perspectives. Like many overseas countries which had developed public examination systems, national history or world history was offered as an elective subject for students in Hong Kong. The Administration stressed that the NSS curriculum was finalized after extensive consultation. According to the annual surveys on teachers and students, their sense of national identity had been increasing in the past years. Apart from history, the learning of geography and economic development in the Mainland was also important for students to better understand the old and modern China. Compared with the existing senior secondary curriculum, the NSS curriculum went a step further in strengthening the teaching and learning of Chinese history by incorporating a core module on "Modern China" in LS.

17. Some members remained of the view that as Chinese History was only an elective subject under the NSS curriculum, the number of junior secondary students taking this subject would decrease which would in turn affect the study of Chinese History in universities and have an adverse impact on the development of the discipline.

University admission

18. Members noted that LS had been confirmed to be one of the four mandatory subjects for university admission. The Heads of University Committee considered that the awards of Level 3 in English Language and Chinese Language, and Level 2 in Mathematics and LS in HKDSE would likely be the minimum requirements of core subjects for admission purpose. A working group comprising EDB and university staff had been set up to work out the detailed arrangements for university admission.

Relevant papers

19. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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**Relevant papers on
Liberal Studies under the new senior secondary curriculum**

Meeting	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Legislative Council	15.10.2003	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 10 - 18 (Question)
Panel on Education	29.10.2004 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda CB(2)1721/04-05(01)
Panel on Education	20.12.2004 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	3.1.2005 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	5.1.2005	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 68 - 71 (Question)
Panel on Education	3.6.2005 (Items I - III)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	20.10.2005 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	13.2.2006 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	10.5.2006	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 86 - 91 (Question)
Panel on Education	12.6.2006 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	10.7.2006 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda CB(2)2680/05-06(01) CB(2)2680/05-06(02) CB(2)2680/05-06(03) CB(2)2792/05-06(01)

Meeting	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Panel on Education	19.10.2006 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	25.5.2007 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	9.7.2007	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	12.11.2007 (Item VII)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	21.5.2008	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 59 - 60 (Question)
Panel on Education	12.6.2008 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	30.3.2009 (Item II)	Minutes Agenda

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