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Panel on Manpower

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 16 July 2009**

Qualifications Framework

Purpose

This paper summarizes past discussions by the Panel on Manpower (the Panel) on the Qualifications Framework (QF).

Background

2. In February 2004, the Executive Council endorsed the establishment of QF and its associated quality assurance mechanism to provide a platform for lifelong learning and to enable learners to progress along a clear articulation pathway.

3. QF is a seven-level cross-sectoral hierarchy covering qualifications in the academic, vocational and continuing education sectors. With well-defined standards of qualifications and clear indication of the articulation ladders between them, QF enables people to set clear goals and direction for obtaining quality-assured qualifications. The implementation of QF will benefit learners and help enhance the overall competitiveness of the workforce.

The Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Bill

4. The Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Bill was introduced into the Legislative Council on 6 July 2005. The Bill sought to provide for accreditation of academic and vocational qualifications under QF administered by an accreditation authority, and for related and consequential matters. At the House Committee meeting on 8 July 2005, a Bills Committee was formed to scrutinize the Bill. The Bill was enacted on 2 May 2007 and came into effect on 1 October 2007.

5. During the scrutiny of the Bill by the Bills Committee, the Administration undertook -

- (a) to report to the Panel on Manpower (the Panel) the progress of implementation of QF in individual industries on a half-yearly basis; and
- (b) to report to the Panel the results of the review of the pilot scheme on recognition of prior learning (RPL) for the first three industries (i.e. Printing and Publishing, Watch and Clock, and Hairdressing industries) that had finalized their respective Specification of Competency Standards (SCSs).

Deliberations of the Panel

Funding proposals for the development and implementation of QF

6. At its meeting on 17 May 2007, the Panel was briefed on the funding proposals for the development and implementation of QF.

7. While supporting the funding proposals for the development and implementation of QF, some members expressed concern about the financial burden on employees. These members pointed out that employees had to pay assessment fees, in addition to tuition fees for training courses, should they wish to undergo RPL assessment for the purpose of pursuing further training. They urged the Administration to consider increasing the rate of reimbursement for these employees. Members enquired whether employees would be eligible for the proposed reimbursement of RPL assessment fee, if they did not have plans to enrol in QF-recognized training courses.

8. The Administration responded that the prime objective of RPL was to help employees with low educational attainment to seek recognition of their skills, knowledge and experience, so that they could pursue continuing learning or skills upgrading without starting from scratch. The purpose of providing reimbursement of RPL assessment fee was to encourage more employees to pursue lifelong learning, which was also the primary objective of establishing QF. The Administration proposed to reimburse 50% of the RPL assessment fee, subject to a maximum of \$1,000 per person, incurred by an employee who had satisfactorily completed a QF-recognized training course after passing the RPL assessment. As the proposed financial assistance schemes were geared towards supporting lifelong learning, employees who did not pursue further learning or training could not benefit from the schemes. To extend the schemes to cover employees who did not pursue further training would remove the incentive and defeat the purpose of the schemes.

9. Noting that the proposed financial assistance schemes would cover non-profit-making training providers only, some members pointed out that as the vast majority of labour unions were running training courses on a non-profit-making basis, these schemes should be extended to cover training programmes offered by labour unions. However, some other members considered that if the Administration intended to recognize labour unions as training providers eligible for the proposed financial assistance schemes, similar consideration should also be given to trade associations.

10. The Administration pointed out that it was the established practice of the Government to provide subsidies to non-profit-making organizations only. Training providers affiliated with labour unions might consider applying for non-profit-making status from the Inland Revenue Department, in order to be eligible for the proposed financial assistance schemes.

11. After considering members' views, the Administration agreed to increase the reimbursement rate of the RPL assessment fee to 100%, subject to a cap of \$1,000 per employee upon completion of a QF-recognized training course. However, the Administration advised that it was unable to extend the eligibility criteria for the subsidies to cover organizations that were not classified as non-profit-making. If the Administration were to extend the eligibility criteria to labour unions, other organizations such as trade associations and professional bodies would likely have a claim for similar treatment. The Administration would have difficulty in holding the line or refusing subsidizing profit-making organizations.

Progress on the development and implementation of QF

12. At its meeting on 23 October 2008, the Panel was briefed on the latest position regarding the development and implementation of QF.

13. A member expressed concern that some workers were skeptical and uncertain whether the implementation of QF would affect employment opportunities and how their qualifications would be recognized under QF. The member enquired whether the Administration would introduce measures to educate the public about the benefits of QF to allay workers' concerns.

14. The Administration advised that it had adopted a multi-pronged approach to promote QF. The basic promotional theme was that QF would enhance the overall competitiveness of the workforce. As regards promoting QF to specific industries, it should tie in with the respective learning programmes in order to achieve the optimal effect. 12 industries covering more than 760 000 employees had set up Industry Training Advisory Committees to develop SCSs. Three industries had started providing learning programmes to their workers, another three industries had completed their SCSs, and four industries were in the final stage of completing their SCSs. In tandem with the introduction of learning programmes for certain industries, the Administration would step up publicity to promote QF to the relevant

associations and trade unions. The Administration would also consider whether publicity should be stepped up to enhance workers' awareness of the means to attain qualifications, in particular those at the lower hierarchy of the RPL qualifications.

15. Members enquired about the number of workers of the first three industries who had applied for RPL under the RPL pilot scheme, the success rate of these workers, and the criteria for assessing the effectiveness of the RPL mechanism.

16. The Administration responded that the RPL mechanism had been implemented in three industries on a pilot basis for a period of two years with effect from June 2008. The pilot scheme would be reviewed one year after implementation. Given that the RPL mechanism had just been implemented and there would be a transitional period of five years, there was no pressing need for workers in the three industries to apply for RPL at the current stage. In assessing the effectiveness of the RPL mechanism, the Administration would take into account, among others, the views of employees and employers who participated in QF. According to the Vocational Training Council, the appointed assessment agency for the RPL pilot programmes in the three industries, the success rate was high, especially for those applying for Level 1 to Level 3 of RPL. The success rate of applications from the Printing and Publishing industry was about 98%, while that of applications from the Watch & Clock and the Hairdressing industries was 100%.

17. A member asked whether the Administration would offer incentives to stimulate the participation of employers and employees in QF. The member pointed out that many employees had long working hours and could hardly spare the time to take training courses after work. In addition, some workers did not see the need to participate in QF as they believed that they could negotiate for a reasonable salary provided that their employers were satisfied with their experience and skills. Another member asked whether study leave would be offered to encourage workers to attend learning programmes.

18. The Administration responded that the provision of study leave was a matter for individual industries and employers. The Education Bureau had been working closely with the relevant stakeholders including employers, employees, trade unions, professional bodies, and education and training providers to build up the infrastructure of QF. The implementation of QF would benefit both employers and employees, as employers would be assured of workers' qualifications and the courses developed would help workers upgrade their skills. QF also helped workers assess whether their pay was commensurate with their qualifications. It would take time for the community to accept and appreciate the benefits brought about by QF.

Related information

19. At the Council meeting on 17 June 2009, Dr Hon Samson TAM raised a question on QF. The Administration's reply to the written question raised by Dr Hon Samson TAM is in the **Appendix**.

Relevant papers

20. Members may wish to refer to the following minutes of meetings and papers for further details of the discussions -

- (a) Report of the Bills Committee on Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Bill [LC Paper No. CB(2)1533/06-07];
- (b) Administration's paper on the funding proposals for the development and implementation of QF in Hong Kong for the meeting of the Panel on Manpower on 17 May 2007 [LC Paper No. CB(2)1828/06-07(13)];
- (c) Administration's supplementary paper on the funding proposals for the development and implementation of QF in Hong Kong for the meeting of the Panel on Manpower on 17 May 2007 [LC Paper No. CB(2)2172/06-07(01)];
- (d) minutes of meeting of the Panel on Manpower on 17 May 2007 [LC Paper No. CB(2)2174/06-07];
- (e) Administration's paper on the development and implementation of QF in Hong Kong for the meeting of the Panel on Manpower on 23 October 2008 [LC Paper No. CB(2)65/08-09(01)];
- (f) Administration's supplementary paper on the development and implementation of QF for the meeting of the Panel on Manpower on 23 October 2008 [LC Paper No. CB(2)789/08-09(01)]; and
- (g) minutes of meeting of the Panel on Manpower on 23 October 2008 [LC Paper No. CB(2)481/08-09].

21. The above minutes and papers are also available on the website of the Legislative Council (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>).

Press Releases

Appendix

LCQ7: Qualifications Framework

Following is a question by the Hon Samson Tam Wai-ho and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Michael Suen, in the Legislative Council today (June 17):

Question:

The Qualifications Framework ("QF"), officially implemented by the Government on May 5, 2008, enables people engaged in various industries to set, through the qualification level recognition system of QF in accordance with their individual qualifications, experience and capabilities, clear goals and directions for further studies in order to obtain quality-assured qualifications. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of the work progress of the 12 Industry Training Advisory Committees already set up at present, as well as whether it has assessed the effectiveness of the relevant work; if so, of the assessment results; if not, the reasons for that;

(b) whether it has explored how QF of Hong Kong and the accreditation mechanisms on the Mainland and overseas can interconnect and mutually recognise, as well as whether it has studied the feasibility of establishing mechanisms such as "one examination for two certificates" or "one certificate for two examinations" and mutual exemption of qualification assessment; if it has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(c) whether it has looked into how QF can interoperate and interface with the other relevant professional accreditation systems in Hong Kong, so as to avoid duplication and confusion among different systems?

Reply:

President,

(a) The main task of the Industry Training Advisory Committees (ITACs), at the initial stage after their establishment, is to develop Specifications of Competency Standards (SCS). The SCSs set out clearly the skills, knowledge and outcome standards required of employees in different functional areas of the respective industries, and enable course operators to design training courses to meet the needs of the industries. Of the 12 ITACs established so far, eight have finalised their SCSs (Note 1), while two others are currently conducting extensive consultation on the draft SCSs. For the remaining two ITACs, the drafting of SCSs is nearing completion. Upon completion of the SCSs, the ITACs will actively promote the use of the SCSs and encourage training organisations to make reference to the SCSs in designing their training courses. As at today, training organisations have organised more than 100 SCS-based courses with over 5,000 participants. On the whole, the work of the ITACs deserves our recognition.

(b) While Qualifications Framework (QF) is being developed in many countries and regions worldwide, the frameworks developed are different from each other significantly, especially on the categorisation and the numbers of level of qualifications. The Mainland has not developed its QF. At present, there is no unified and effective system to facilitate articulation and

recognition among QFs. In Hong Kong, the QF was officially launched in May 2008 and is still at its early development stage. Our primary objective is to implement steadily the QF in the 12 industries where ITACs have been formed, so as to lay a solid foundation for the further development of QF. We will monitor closely the development of QFs in other countries and regions, and will explore in future the possibility of mutual recognition between the Hong Kong QF and the relevant systems in the Mainland and overseas.

It is worth noting that some local training organisations, such as the Vocational Training Council, have launched pilot schemes jointly with relevant organisations in the Mainland to provide a "One Examination, Two Certificates" trade test mechanism, or through co-organised programmes with Mainland institutions, to enable trainees to obtain both Hong Kong and the Mainland awards simultaneously.

(c) All qualifications recognised under the Hong Kong QF must be academically accredited. The focus of academic accreditation is to determine whether the course meets the academic standard of the relevant QF level. As regards professional qualifications, they have to be accredited by the relevant professional bodies, which focus on the knowledge and skills required by the profession. Generally speaking, professional bodies will only award professional qualification to candidates who have acquired the relevant academic qualification, e.g. a bachelor degree, plus relevant working experience of a certain duration or a pass in the professional examination. Thus, academic accreditation under the QF and professional accreditation undertaken by professional bodies are basically two different systems, which are not appropriate for direct comparison and linkage.

Note 1: One of the ITACs has just started to draft an SCS for another functional area in the industry.

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