

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)2642/10-11
(The minutes have been seen
by the Administration)

Ref : CB2/PL/ED

Panel on Education

Minutes of meeting
held on Monday, 13 June 2011, at 4:30 pm
in Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building

- Members present** : Hon Starry LEE Wai-king, JP (Chairman)
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan (Deputy Chairman)
Hon Albert HO Chun-yan
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong
Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon Tommy CHEUNG Yu-yan, SBS, JP
Hon Audrey EU Yuet-mee, SC, JP
Hon WONG Kwok-hing, MH
Hon Andrew LEUNG Kwan-yuen, GBS, JP
Prof Hon Patrick LAU Sau-shing, SBS, JP
Hon KAM Nai-wai, MH
Dr Hon LAM Tai-fai, BBS, JP
Hon Paul CHAN Mo-po, MH, JP
Dr Hon Priscilla LEUNG Mei-fun
Hon CHEUNG Kwok-che
Hon Mrs Regina IP LAU Suk-ye, GBS, JP
Dr Hon Samson TAM Wai-ho, JP
Hon Tanya CHAN
Hon WONG Yuk-man
- Member absent** : Hon Abraham SHEK Lai-him, SBS, JP

Public Officers attending : Agenda item IV

Mr Kenneth CHEN, JP
Under Secretary for Education

Mr Tony TANG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Education
(Support Services)

Ms Nancy SO
Controller, Student Financial Assistance Agency

Agenda item V

Mr Kenneth CHEN, JP
Under Secretary for Education

Ms Amy WONG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Education
(Higher Education)

Agenda item VI

Mr Kenneth CHEN, JP
Under Secretary for Education

Ms Esther LEUNG, JP
Deputy Secretary for Education (6)

Ms Nancy SO
Controller, Student Financial Assistance Agency

Agenda item VII

Mr Kenneth CHEN, JP
Under Secretary for Education

Dr K K CHAN
Deputy Secretary for Education (5)

Dr TONG Chong-sze
Secretary General
Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority

Dr CHEUNG Kwok-wah
Principal Assistant Secretary for Education
(Curriculum Development)

Clerk in attendance : Ms Amy YU
Chief Council Secretary (2)6

Staff in attendance : Ms Catherina YU
Senior Council Secretary (2)6

Ms Camy YOONG
Legislative Assistant (2)6 (Acting)

Action

I. Confirmation of minutes

[LC Paper No. CB(2)1984/10-11]

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 April 2011 were confirmed.

II. Information paper(s) issued since the last meeting

[LC Paper No. CB(2)1737/10-11(01)]

2. Members noted the information note provided by the Education Bureau ("EDB") concerning the Early Retirement Scheme for aided secondary school teachers [LC Paper No. CB(2)1737/10-11(01)].

III. Items for discussion at the next meeting

[Appendices I and II to LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11 and LC Paper No. CB(2)2038/10-11(01)]

3. Members agreed to discuss the following items proposed by the Administration at the next regular meeting scheduled for 11 July 2011 at 4:30 pm -

- (a) Progress report on the follow-up work pertaining to the recommendations in Report No. 55 of the Public Accounts Committee on Direct Subsidy Scheme Schools;

Action

- (b) Review on the subvention arrangements for the English Schools Foundation; and
- (c) Allocation of research funding.

4. Regarding (c) above, the Chairman said that during the discussions on the Report on the Higher Education Review 2010 at the Panel meeting on 14 March 2010, members considered it necessary to further discuss the proposed allocation of research funding. Dr Priscilla LEUNG raised a similar request in her letter dated 8 June 2011 [LC Paper No. CB(2)2038/10-11(01)] and suggested that staff representatives from the University Grants Committee ("UGC")-funded institutions should be invited to attend the meeting to give views on the subject.

5. Ms Cyd HO expressed concern about the impact of UGC's proposal to introduce more competition in the allocation of research funding on institutions the curricula of which were principally in humanities and social sciences subjects. She considered it necessary to invite representatives from the higher education sector to give views on the subject.

6. Members agreed that representatives of the management and staff unions/associations of the relevant UGC-funded institutions should be invited to attend the next regular Panel meeting to give views on the subject. To allow sufficient time for discussion, members also agreed that the meeting should be extended to end at 7:30 pm.

7. The Chairman informed members that more than 100 organizations/individuals had indicated that they wished to attend the special meeting scheduled for 27 June 2011 to give views on the consultation on moral and national education. In view of the large number of deputations, the Chairman suggested and members agreed that an additional special meeting should be arranged to receive public views on the subject.

IV. Review of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1986/10-11(01) and (02) and EDB(QA)/SCH/3/14/11R]

8. Members noted the background brief entitled "Review of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme" [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(02)] prepared by the Legislative Council ("LegCo") Secretariat.

9. The Chairman drew members' attention to Rule 83A of the Rules of Procedure ("RoP") concerning personal pecuniary interest to be disclosed which provided that, in the Council or in any committee or subcommittee, a Member should not move any motion or amendment relating to a matter in which he had a pecuniary interest, whether direct or indirect, or speak on any such matter, except where he disclosed the nature of that interest. She reminded members to declare interests in the matter under discussion, if any.

Briefing by the Administration

10. Under Secretary for Education ("US(Ed)") briefed members on the Administration's proposal to take forward the recommendations of the Education Commission in its Report on Review of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme ("the Report") as detailed in the Administration's paper [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(01)].

Provision of 15-year free education

11. Mr WONG Kwok-hing enquired about the Administration's consideration of Members' request for the implementation of 15-year free education. In his view, the Administration should implement 15-year free education instead of making small improvements to the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme ("PEVS"). Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong also expressed support for the implementation of 15-year free education.

12. US(Ed) said that the kindergarten ("KG") sector had been characterized by diversity. The implementation of 15-year free education would involve not only the commitment of financial resources but also a substantial change to the current KG system. Should KG education be included in the scope of free education, it would be necessary to introduce a new regulatory system which would inevitably impose constraints on the flexibility currently enjoyed by KGs and limit parental choice. By providing direct fee subsidy to parents, PEVS had helped enhance parental choice. In addition, the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme ("KCFRS") operated in parallel with PEVS to provide additional financial assistance to needy families. It was the Administration's view that PEVS was an appropriate mechanism for funding pre-primary education.

13. Mr WONG Yuk-man said that it was the consensus of Members that 15-year free education should be implemented. He stressed that the Administration should seriously study and consider the request and report the progress of its consideration to Members. The study should include the

Action

difference between the implementation of PEVS and free KG education in terms of Government expenditures. He further pointed out that it was not really the case that "money follow parents" under PEVS as parents only enjoyed part of the subsidies, some of which were earmarked for the professional upgrading of KG teachers. In his view, the implementation of 15-year free education would help resolve the issues arising from PEVS.

Salary scale for KG teachers

14. Mr WONG Kwok-hing enquired whether the Administration would consider introducing a salary scale for KG teachers, which was a long-standing demand of KG teachers.

15. Principal Assistant Secretary for Education (Support Services) ("PAS(Ed)SS") said that the Working Group on Review of PEVS ("WG") had solicited the views of the KG sector in the process of reviewing PEVS. The WG considered that since it was the policy intent of PEVS to promote the development of pre-primary education in the private sector through direct subsidy to parents, KGs should have full discretion in determining teachers' salary on the basis of performance. He also informed members that there had been increases in KG teachers' salaries since the introduction of PEVS, with some KG teachers receiving salaries which exceeded the ceiling of the former normative salary scale.

16. The Chairman expressed disappointment that the Administration had not addressed the stakeholders' request for introducing a salary scale for KG teachers. To facilitate the Panel to follow up the matter, she requested the Administration to conduct regular surveys on the salaries of teachers of half-day and whole day KGs and provide such information to the Panel. US(Ed) agreed.

Admin

Ceiling on school fees

17. Mr WONG Yuk-man expressed concern about the financial difficulties faced by KGs which had reached the ceiling on school fees. According to media reports, as a result of high inflation in recent years and following the implementation of statutory minimum wage ("SMW"), some 60 non-profit making ("NPM") KGs which had reached the tuition fee threshold had to resort to freezing or even reducing the salaries of their teachers so as to cope with the rising operational costs. He asked whether the Administration had considered measures to address the problem of rising operational costs faced by KGs in its review of PEVS.

Action

18. US(Ed) responded that there were 42 NPM half-day KGs (about 8% of the total number of NPM half-day KGs) and 16 NPM whole-day KGs (about 2.3% of the total number of NPM whole-day KGs) charging tuition fees that had reached the prescribed threshold levels. EDB agreed to the WG's recommendation of reviewing the tuition fee thresholds annually with reference to inflation, and proposed to conduct annual review of the fee thresholds with reference to the Composite Consumer Price Index ("CCPI") with effect from the 2012-2013 school year. He assured members that the Administration would closely monitor the situation to ensure the smooth operation of PEVS.

19. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong shared the concern about the difficulties faced by KGs in meeting rising operational costs. He pointed out that while the prescribed ceiling on school fees at \$24,000 and \$48,000 for half-day and whole-day places respectively had remained unchanged for five years since the introduction of PEVS in the 2007-2008 school year, the accumulated inflation rate over these years had amounted to some 12.6%. The 58 KGs which were already charging tuition fees at the threshold levels encountered difficulties in coping with the rising operational costs. Given that the proposed annual review of the fee thresholds would not commence until the 2012-2013 school year, Mr CHEUNG suggested that the Administration should consider, as an exceptional measure, allowing flexibility for these 58 KGs to adjust their school fees above the threshold levels in the 2011-2012 school year to help them cope with the rising expenditure on staff salaries after the implementation of SMW.

20. US(Ed) responded that as PEVS had operated on the principle that the prescribed fee thresholds were to be maintained for a period of five years from its introduction in the 2007-2008 school year and both the KG sector and parents were well aware of such an arrangement, the Administration did not consider it appropriate to give special approval to those KGs charging tuition fees at threshold levels to further increase their tuition fees. He stressed that the majority of KGs were charging school fees under the threshold levels and the 58 KGs represented only a small percentage of the PEVS KGs.

21. US(Ed) further said under EDB's fee assessment mechanism, KGs' fee levels were determined on the basis of their estimated income and expenditure. For NPM KGs, a margin of up to 5% of their expenditure was allowed to give them flexibility to cater for unexpected expenditure. For KGs which encountered difficulties in meeting their operational costs after their fee level had been assessed by EDB, they could submit the relevant financial information to EDB for consideration. Such cases would be dealt with according to the established mechanism. PAS(Ed)SS supplemented that for

Action

the 58 KGs which were charging tuition fees at threshold levels, the Administration had assessed their fee increase applications and noted that the majority of their teaching staff had received pay rise. He reiterated that the 5% margin allowed in the annual cost estimates of NPM KGs had provided them with some degree of flexibility in meeting their operational costs.

22. Mr Tommy CHEUNG expressed disappointment with the review on PEVS conducted by the WG. He pointed out that the existing PEVS had failed to realize the "money follow parents" concept. In his view, the voucher subsidy should not be limited only to NPM KGs charging fees below certain prescribed levels. He shared the concern that many of the KGs charging tuition fees at the threshold levels would close down, which would reduce the choice of parents. To truly implement the "money follow parents" concept, the voucher subsidy should be made available to all parents irrespective of the type of KG attended by their children. This would enhance parental choice and help maintain the diversity of the KG sector.

Value of the voucher and subsidy for whole-day KGs

23. The Chairman said that apart from the concerns about the ceiling on school fees and salaries for KG teachers, the deputations attending the Panel meeting in December 2010 had also requested that the subsidies for whole-day KGs should be increased. She was concerned that many whole-day KGs would close down due to financial difficulties, which would affect many parents who needed the child care services provided by whole-day KGs. To facilitate the Panel to monitor the situation, she requested the Administration to provide members with information on the respective numbers and percentages of half-day and whole-day PEVS KGs on a regular basis. US(Ed) agreed.

Admin

24. The Chairman further asked why the proposed annual adjustment of the value of the voucher according to inflation was to be implemented only in the 2012-2013 year but not earlier in the 2011-2012 school year.

25. US(Ed) explained that when PEVS was introduced, a schedule of voucher value for the five years starting from the 2007-2008 school year had been set. According to the schedule, the amount of the voucher dedicated to fee subsidy would be increased from \$14,000 to \$16,000 in the 2011-2012 school year. In response to the stakeholders' requests, the Administration would introduce a number of measures to enhance the assistance to KG children of needy families from the 2011-2012 school year. These included the calculation of the percentage of fee remission after deducting the voucher value and the removal of the social needs assessment for eligibility for the

Action

whole-day rate of fee remission. Whole-day KGs would also benefit from the latter measure.

26. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong shared the view that setting the same subsidy rate for half-day and whole-day KGs was unfair to whole-day KGs which operated longer hours than half-day KGs. Noting that the turnover rate of teachers in some whole-day KGs was as high as 40%, he expressed concern about the adverse impact of the high turnover rate on the quality of pre-primary education and urged the Administration to increase the subsidy for whole-day KGs.

27. US(Ed) said that as the objective of PEVS was to provide direct subsidy to parents for their children's KG education, the Administration considered that the same rate of subsidy should be provided to all children, irrespective of whether they were attending half-day or whole-day KGs. He also pointed out that whole-day KGs charged higher tuition fees than half-day KGs. Needy children attending whole-day KGs who required financial assistance on top of the fee subsidy from PEVS might apply for fee remission under the KCFRS.

28. PAS(Ed)SS supplemented that the tuition fees charged by half-day PEVS KGs ranged from \$10,000 to \$24,000 while those charged by whole-day KGs ranged from \$15,000 to \$48,000. The operational needs of half-day and whole-day KGs were fully reflected in their level of tuition fees. He further informed members that the overall turnover rates of KG teachers were 6.8% and 6.9% in the 2009-2010 and the 2010-2011 school years respectively. He added that as KGs operated in the private sector, they had the flexibility to make adjustments to remuneration packages and working conditions to attract and retain teachers.

29. The Chairman said that with longer working hours and lesser subsidies, the high turnover rate of teachers in whole-day KGs was understandable. She requested the Administration to provide information on the turnover rates of KG teachers in half-day and whole-day KGs on a regular basis to facilitate the Panel's follow-up. While agreeing to provide such information, US(Ed) stressed that there were many reasons attributing to the high turnover rate in whole-day KGs. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong however held the view that the lesser amount of voucher subsidy provided to whole-day KGs was one of the key factors for the high turnover of their teachers.

Admin

Conclusion

30. Concluding the discussions, the Chairman said that the Panel supported the submission of the funding proposal to the Finance Committee ("FC") for consideration in July 2011.

V. After-school Learning Support Partnership Scheme [LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1986/10-11(03) to (05)]

31. The Chairman drew members' attention to RoP 83A concerning disclosure of personal pecuniary interest. She reminded members to declare interests in the matter under discussion, if any.

32. Members noted the background brief entitled "Provision of after-school learning support for students of low-income families" prepared by the LegCo Secretariat [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(04)] and the joint submission from Society for Community Organization and Children's Rights Association [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(05)].

Briefing by the Administration

33. US(Ed) briefed members on the Administration's proposal to launch the After-school Learning Support Partnership Pilot Scheme ("the Scheme") for economically disadvantaged primary school students with academic needs as detailed in the Administration's paper [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(03)].

Selection of participating schools

34. Noting from paragraph 4 of the Administration's paper that priority would be accorded to schools which demonstrated capacity and competence in joining the Scheme, Mr WONG Kwok-hing sought elaboration on the meaning of "capacity and competence".

35. US(Ed) explained that the Administration would invite schools with a higher concentration of economically disadvantaged students to join the Scheme. The Administration proposed to use the percentage and number of students receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance or Student Financial Assistance Scheme full grant as an objective criterion in identifying eligible schools. Schools participating in the Scheme should have the resources required for providing the support service after school and their students should also be in need of such service. Mr WONG Kwok-hing

Action

cautioned that the selection of participating schools should be carried out in an open and fair manner to avoid disputes.

36. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong considered that the Scheme should not be limited to 50 schools as proposed by the Administration. He suggested that the Administration should also adopt a district-based approach in providing the service so that needy students not attending the 50 schools could also benefit from it. The 50 participating schools should be located in different districts and consideration could be given to designating at least one school in each district for providing the service to needy students attending other schools in the same district.

37. Mr Albert HO was concerned that the 50 schools selected to run the Scheme would be labeled as schools with a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students. To avoid any labeling effect on participating schools and to benefit more needy students, the selected schools could provide venues and administrative support for the after-school learning support programmes but the programmes should be opened up to needy students outside the schools.

38. US(Ed) responded that as the Scheme was launched on a pilot basis, its design should be kept simple to ensure its effective implementation. Some schools might have reservations in opening up their after-school learning support programmes to students from other schools. Nevertheless, he undertook to discuss with the education sector to explore the feasibility of opening up the Scheme to students not attending the 50 participating schools.

Source and appointment of tutors

39. Noting the Administration's target to recruit around 800 tutors from students of teacher education institutions ("TEIs"), Dr LAM Tai-fai enquired whether the Administration had discussed with the TEIs in this regard. He further enquired about the basis for determining the rate of allowance for tutors, which was initially set at around \$130 to \$170 per hour.

40. US(Ed) responded that the target to recruit 800 tutors in the first year of the Scheme was set having regard to the number of students (about 4 000) in full-time teacher education programmes and after consultation with the institutions offering such programmes. As regards the rate of allowance, it would be determined on the basis of the year of study of the tutors.

Action

41. Dr LAM Tai-fai expressed concern about the quality of the tutorial service. He was worried that as the tutors were university students, they might not have sufficient experience or ability to handle a group of eight students at a time. He asked about the rationale for setting the group size at eight.

42. US(Ed) responded that in setting the proposed group size at eight, the Administration had made reference to the tutor-student ratio in similar programmes offered by private tutorial schools. As the tutors were students studying full-time teacher education programmes, they should have the knowledge and capability to provide tutorial service to groups of eight primary school students.

43. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong suggested that apart from university students, retired or experienced teachers should also be enlisted as tutors for the Scheme.

44. US(Ed) said that the Scheme was intended to benefit not only needy primary school students who received after-school homework guidance but also the tertiary students acting as tutors. Hence, it was proposed that tertiary students, particularly those studying at TEIs, be appointed as tutors to provide them with an opportunity to gain practical teaching experience. Retired or experience teachers could be engaged by schools to provide the necessary administrative support for the Scheme.

45. Mr TAM Yiu-chung said that many economically disadvantaged primary school students in Tin Shui Wai were in need of homework guidance. Pointing out that some tutors might be reluctant to go to remote districts such as Tin Shui Wai given the high transportation expenses and the long travelling time, he expressed concern about the difficulties in enlisting tutors to provide the service in remote districts.

46. US(Ed) responded that in selecting schools to participate in the Scheme, the Administration would ensure that the needs of needy students in remote districts would be catered for. While recognizing that there might be some difficulties in engaging tutors to provide the service in remote districts, he said that the allowance for tutors was set at a level higher than that for private tutors to attract more TEI students to join the Scheme. Apart from gaining teaching experience, the Scheme would also provide an opportunity for tertiary students to serve the needy in the community. He knew of university students who did not mind travelling a long way to help students in remote districts with their studies.

Action

47. Ms Audrey EU expressed support for Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong's suggestions of adopting a district-based approach in providing the service and enlisting retired or experienced teachers as tutors. While supporting the objective of the Scheme to provide homework guidance to primary school students of low income families, she considered it important to put in place a mechanism for making timely adjustments to the implementation details of the pilot scheme within its three-year period to ensure achievement of its objectives. She further enquired whether any training would be provided to the tutors and whether any mechanism would be in place to monitor and evaluate the performance of tutors.

48. US(Ed) responded that the Administration would review the Scheme one year after its implementation and make improvements to the Scheme if necessary. While the TEIs joining the Scheme would be required to provide training to the tutors, the participating schools would be the employers of the tutors. Principal Assistant Secretary (Higher Education) ("PAS(HE)") supplemented that participating schools would be required to provide feedbacks to tutors on their performance. The schools could bring to the attention of the TEIs concerned the performance of individual tutors if considered necessary, or they could do so through EDB. In response to Ms Audrey EU, PAS(HE) advised that the schools could terminate the service of individual tutors whose performance was found to be unsatisfactory.

49. Miss Tanya CHAN said that some parents were concerned about the availability of the after-school learning support service during examination periods. As the tutors were undergraduate students, they would need to prepare for their own examinations and hence might not be able to provide the service during examination time, which might coincide with that of primary school students. She sought information on the arrangements for substitute tutors and suggested that retired teachers be appointed as substitute tutors.

50. Mr Albert HO shared the view that retired teachers should be enlisted as tutors under the Scheme. Such an arrangement could help address the concern about the provision of the service by tertiary students during examination periods. The Administration could compare the effectiveness of TEI students and retired teachers in serving as tutors under the Scheme.

51. US(Ed) said that the Scheme aimed at helping primary school students establish good learning attitudes and enhance their learning effectiveness, rather than preparing them for examinations. As the schools could appoint retired teachers to provide administrative support to the Scheme, retired teachers would be able to share their experience with the tertiary students serving as tutors.

Scope of the Scheme

52. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan considered it not necessary to launch the Scheme on a pilot basis. Instead, the Administration should extend the scope of the service to cover all needy primary school students as soon as practicable. He sought information on the estimated total number of primary school students who were eligible for the service according to the criteria set by the Administration and whether it was the Administration's policy objective to provide the service to all economically disadvantaged primary school students with academic needs.

53. US(Ed) responded that unlike the existing after-school learning support programmes offered by schools or non-governmental organizations, the Scheme served dual purposes i.e. to help needy primary school students with academic needs and provide TEI students with an opportunity to gain practical teaching experience. The Scheme was launched on a pilot basis as it was necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the Scheme in rendering academic support to needy primary school students on the one hand and enhancing the tutors' understanding of a teaching career on the other. Since not all economically disadvantaged students would require homework assistance, the pilot scheme would also facilitate an assessment on the need for the service. He added that some schools were worried about the additional administrative work involved in participating the Scheme. The Administration considered it prudent to launch the scheme on a pilot basis to test out its effectiveness before considering the need for extension of its scope.

54. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan stressed that the prime objective of the Scheme should be the provision of homework guidance to financially needy primary school students, rather than the provision of training to TEI students.

55. Miss Tanya CHAN shared Mr LEE Cheuk-yan's view on the objective of the Scheme. She considered that an interim review of the Scheme should be conducted, say one year after its implementation. Subject to the outcome of the interim review, the Administration should consider extending the scope and duration of the Scheme and relaxing its eligibility with a view to benefiting more students.

56. US(Ed) reiterated that the Scheme was intended to benefit not only needy primary school students but also the tertiary students acting as tutors. The Scheme would be reviewed one year after its implementation. On the basis of the review, the Administration would consider the need for extending the scope of the Scheme.

Action

57. Mr Albert HO echoed the view that the scope of the Scheme should be extended to benefit more needy students. He welcomed the Administration's commitment to review the Scheme one year after its implementation.

Conclusion

58. Concluding the discussions, the Chairman said that the Panel supported the submission of the funding proposal to FC for consideration in July 2011.

VI. Extension of relief arrangement relating to deferment of student loan repayment

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1986/10-11(06) and (07)]

59. The Chairman drew members' attention to RoP 83A concerning disclosure of personal pecuniary interest. She reminded members to declare interests in the matter under discussion, if any.

60. Members noted the background brief entitled "Relief arrangement related to deferment of student loan repayment" prepared by the LegCo Secretariat [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(07)].

Briefing by the Administration

61. US(Ed) took members through the Administration's proposal to extend the existing one-off relief arrangement relating to deferment of student loan repayment for one year until 31 July 2012 as outlined in the Administration's paper [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(06)].

Interest payment

62. Mr WONG Kwok-hing sought information on other measures to be adopted by the Administration to assist the financially needy students apart from the deferment of student loan repayment. He also asked whether the Administration would consider deferring the accrual of loan interest until the students had graduated with a view to alleviating their financial burden.

63. US(ED) responded that FC had recently approved the Administration's proposals to enhance financial assistance to needy students. Apart from relaxing the income ceiling for full grant under the means test mechanism, the tiers of assistance had been reduced from 17 tiers to five tiers so that students not receiving full grant would also receive more financial assistance. Given

Action

that the non-means-tested loan schemes operated on a no-gain-no-loss basis, the Administration had to take into account such a principle in considering the interest rate and loan repayment arrangements. The Administration was conducting a review of the operation of non-means-tested loan schemes with a view to improving their operation.

64. Deputy Secretary for Education (6) ("DS(Ed(6))") supplemented that loan interest would be accrued on means-tested loans only upon completion of studies of the borrowers. As for non-means-tested loans, interest would be charged once the loans were drawn down. In response to Mr WONG Kwok-hing's enquiry on the timetable for the review of the non-means-tested loan schemes, DS(Ed(6)) said that the Administration was drawing up specific proposals to improve the operation of the non-means-tested loan schemes including those relating to loan repayment arrangements and charging of interest. It was the Administration's plan to consult public views on these proposals later this year. The Chairman requested the Administration to consult the Panel on these proposals as early as practicable.

65. Ms Cyd HO shared the view that interest on non-means-tested loans should be accrued only upon graduation of the borrowers. She sought information on an estimation of the amount of loan interest income foregone should accrual of interest be deferred until the borrowers had graduated.

66. US(Ed) explained that for non-means-tested loans, interest started to accrue after the loans had been drawn down having regard to the no-gain-no-loss principle. He added that the need for financial assistance of students applying for non-means-tested loans was generally not as great as that of the means-tested loan applicants.

Release of loans

67. Ms Cyd HO urged the Student Financial Assistance Agency ("SFAA") to speed up the processing of student loan applications. She pointed out that some students had reflected that it took a long time for SFAA to process their loan applications and release the loans. As a result, they had to borrow money from banks when pressed by their schools to pay tuition fees. She enquired about the time required for processing a loan application from the time of receipt of an application to the time the loan was disbursed to the borrower.

68. Controller/SFAA responded that loan applications would be processed as early as possible. The processing time for non-means-tested loan applications was normally shorter than that for means-tested loans. It would normally take about three weeks to process a non-means-tested loan

Action

application provided that the applicant had submitted all the required information. The loan would be disbursed to the borrower as soon as the application was approved and all required documentation including those relating to the indemnifier had been provided. She added that SFAA had requested the institutions to allow a grace period for payment of tuition fees for students who had applied for loans administered by SFAA.

69. Ms Cyd HO considered it unfair to include the income of the applicant's siblings who were already in the workforce in the means tests. Controller/SFAA clarified that only 30% of the income of the applicant's siblings would be included in calculating the applicant's family income.

Conclusion

70. Concluding the discussions, the Chairman said that the Panel supported the submission of the funding proposal to FC for consideration in July 2011.

VII. Progress report of the implementation of the new academic structure

[LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1986/10-11(08) and (09)]

71. Members noted the updated background brief entitled "Implementation of new academic structure" prepared by the LegCo Secretariat [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(09)].

Briefing by the Administration

72. US(Ed) briefed members on the progress on the implementation of the New Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education ("NAS") as detailed in the Administration's paper [LC Paper No. CB(2)1986/10-11(08)].

Support to Liberal Studies teachers

73. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that according to a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, Liberal Studies ("LS") teachers were overloaded and under immense pressure. With some 150 000 senior secondary students studying LS in the 2010-2011 school year and the number expecting to further increase in the 2011-2012 school year, it would not be possible for LS teachers to cope with the extremely heavy workload without additional support. LS teachers found it exhausting to attend the workshops and seminars arranged by the Administration as they were already fully

Action

occupied by their work. There was also concern about the heavy workload of LS teachers in Independent Enquiry Study ("IES"). He sought information on the teacher-to-student ratio for IES.

74. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong further said that schools were supposed to make use of the special LS Curriculum Support Grant ("Special Grant") provided by the Administration to facilitate small group teaching for LS. He enquired whether there was any improvement in the adoption of small class for teaching LS by schools following the disbursement of the grant. As the Special Grant was only provided for the 2010-2011 school year, he was concerned that schools would not have adequate resources and facilities to run small group teaching for LS. He sought information on the number of schools which did not have sufficient classrooms for conducting small group teaching for LS.

75. US(Ed) said that the Administration had recently allocated some vacant school premises to a number of schools to mitigate the problem of classroom shortage for teaching LS in small groups. Under the new senior secondary ("NSS") curriculum which offered broad combinations of elective subjects, more classrooms were required for split-class teaching. The Administration had been discussing with the school sector on measures to meet the demand for classrooms.

76. US(Ed) further said that aside from the Special Grant which had been disbursed to schools in the 2010-2011 school year, the Administration had provided additional resources to schools for the implementation of NAS. The Panel had previously discussed whether schools should be required to restrict the use of the Special Grant on LS. The Administration was of the view that as situations in schools varied, schools should be given the autonomy and flexibility in managing their resources. To address LS teachers' concern about the pressure imposed by the attendance of workshops and seminars, the Administration had enhanced district-based support to LS teachers starting from the 2010-2011 school year.

77. Secretary General, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority ("SG/HKEAA") said that LS teachers generally welcomed the Special Grant for LS. Some teachers had suggested that more workshops on IES should be arranged and student exemplars on IES should be provided. It was HKEAA's plan to provide teachers with the student exemplars on IES in June 2011.

78. Deputy Secretary for Education (5) ("DS(Ed)5") supplemented that the district coordinators appointed by HKEAA would provide feedback on IES based on the information collected when schools submitted the assessment for

Action

Stage I of IES in May 2011. The Administration planned to announce in July 2011 the findings of the review and the improvement measures to be taken. The Administration would also collect information on the implementation of IES including teacher-to-student ratio and provide it to members for reference.

Admin

79. DS(Ed)5 further said that some schools had used the Special Grant for hiring teaching assistants to facilitate the implementation of small group teaching for LS. For schools which had participated in the Voluntary Optimization of Class Structure Scheme, more classrooms would be freed up for small group teaching. The Administration would monitor the adequacy of provision of classrooms for small group teaching of LS.

80. Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong said that a host of serious problems, including shortage of manpower and resources, and the immense pressure faced by teachers, had already surfaced at the early stage of the implementation of LS. He cautioned that the problems would exacerbate with the further increase in the number of senior secondary students taking LS. Given that LS was a core subject and would impact on students' chance of admission into local universities, he urged the Administration to take the necessary remedial measures as early as possible.

LS as a mandatory subject for university admission

81. Dr Priscilla LEUNG said that she had all along held the view that LS should not be a mandatory subject for university admission. She was given to understand that some science teachers who did not have the knowledge and skills to teach LS were deployed to teach LS. Given the breadth of the curriculum, the absence of structured teaching and learning resources and the lack of clear objective assessment criteria, many students had difficulties in grasping the subject. Some students who were outstanding in science subjects could barely pass in LS and were worried that their LS results would adversely affect their chance of being admitted to local universities. She urged the Administration to reconsider seriously whether LS should be a mandatory subject for university admission.

82. US(Ed) said that LS had been taught at local secondary schools for more than 15 years. Before the launching of NAS, there had been extensive consultations and thorough consideration on whether LS should be a core subject of the NSS curriculum. The objective of LS was to develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills which were essential for students of all disciplines. He assured members that the Administration recognized the difficulties in the implementation of LS and would continue to provide the necessary support to teachers. It should also be pointed out that many

Action

experienced LS teachers had been working very hard to assist students in learning the subject. SG/HKEAA supplemented that experienced LS teachers were enlisted to prepare teaching resources for sharing with other LS teachers on the HKEAA website. In addition to the web-based resources, district coordinators would give advice to and share good practices with LS teachers on teaching and assessing the subject.

83. While agreeing that the study of LS was beneficial to students, Dr Priscilla LEUNG remained of the view that it should not be a mandatory subject for university admission. If students were required to study LS, their results in the subject should only be reported as "Pass" or "Failed" and should not affect their university admission.

84. DS(Ed)5 said that the university entrance requirement for LS was only Level 2. Students were not required to have in-depth knowledge of all the areas covered in the LS curriculum. Students were required to demonstrate their abilities to analyze the given information and data and present their views on relevant issues in order to attain Level 2.

85. SG/HKEAA supplemented that HKEAA had made available LS papers and exemplars of students' performance on the HKEAA website to illustrate the requirements of Level 2. He stressed that teachers should not expect answers at a level beyond the standard of senior secondary school students. HKEAA would provide more information and arrange more workshops on the assessment of LS in June 2011.

86. Ms Audrey EU considered that LS should be a mandatory subject in the NSS curriculum as it was important for local students to acquire a broad knowledge base and develop critical thinking skills. Given the concerns of parents, students and teachers about LS, the questions should not be too difficult and the assessment standard should not be too demanding at the early stage of the implementation of LS. While she appreciated that student exemplars would serve as a useful aid for teachers in assessing the subject, HKEAA should explain clearly to teachers that the exemplars should not be regarded as model answers and students should not be required to learn them by rote. To nurture students' creativity, credits should be given to innovative answers.

87. SG/HKEAA clarified that there were no model answers for LS. One of the purposes of the workshops for LS teachers was to provide them with more information on the assessment of LS under the standards-referenced reporting system. At the request of Ms Audrey EU, SG/HKEAA agreed to provide information on the standard required to be attained for Level 2.

Training and assessment of LS teachers

88. Ms Cyd HO said that she was shocked by the findings of the "Study on Liberal Studies Teachers' Attitudes towards Human Rights and the Rule of Law" ("the Study") recently conducted by The Hong Kong Institute of Education. The Study revealed that many LS teachers lacked basic understanding of the rule of law and human rights and their support for these core values was alarmingly weak. She quoted some of the findings of the Study and expressed grave concern that the negative values and misconceptions held by LS teachers would be passed onto students. She enquired whether the Administration provided any training to LS teachers.

89. DS(Ed)5 responded that a maximum of 100 training hours would be provided to in-service teachers before they were required to take up teaching duties for LS. The training covered subject-based knowledge, pedagogy, assessment of students' learning and IES. In addition, induction programmes would be organized for new LS teachers during the summer months to prepare them for teaching the subject.

90. The Chairman considered it important to conduct assessments on LS teachers' understanding of the subject to ascertain their readiness to teach the subject and the effectiveness of the training programmes. In response to the Chairman's enquiry, DS(Ed)5 said that LS teachers were not assessed on their knowledge of LS after attending the training programmes. Having regard to the findings of the Study and members' concern, the Administration would strengthen LS teachers' knowledge of the rule of law. Information on legal issues pertaining to areas covered under the LS curriculum was provided on the HKEAA website to ensure the dissemination of accurate information to students.

91. Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che considered that the Administration should provide the correct answers to the questions in the Study for the benefit of the education sector. The answers should be made available on the Administration's website. On the other hand, Dr Priscilla LEUNG opined that there should not be standard answers for the questions and different views should be respected.

92. US(Ed) stressed that many LS teachers had years of experience in teaching the subject. While he had yet to examine the background and target groups of the Study, he considered it unfair to generalize from the Study that LS teachers had a weak understanding of or little regard for the rule of law. At the request of the Chairman, he undertook to examine the findings of the Study and revert to the Panel on its follow-up actions.

93. Ms Cyd HO said that the Study targeted at LS teachers in local secondary schools. A self-administered questionnaire was sent to all 460 local secondary schools. A total of 791 completed questionnaires from 255 schools were received, representing a participant response rate of 34.4% (assuming five LS teachers per school) and a school response rate of 54.8%. She considered that the findings of the Study were worth noting given its sampling size.

Assessment of LS

94. The Chairman said that many parents and students had expressed concern about the fairness and reliability of the assessment of students' performance in LS as the assessment results would have direct impact on students' chance of being admitted to local universities. She stressed the importance of putting in place a fair appeal mechanism to handle disputes on the assessment results. She considered this particularly important for the first few cohorts of students taking the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination.

95. SG/HKEAA responded that the LS examination scripts would be marked by two markers. In case of discrepancy, a third or even a fourth marker would be used to obtain a consensus mark. Upon a request for review of the results, another two markers would be involved and the assessment results would be reviewed by the Appeal Review Committee ("ARC") appointed by the HKEAA Council. All appeals would be handled by ARC in accordance with the established mechanism.

Support for students with intellectual disabilities

96. Ms Audrey EU said that the Panel had raised concern about the support provided to students with intellectual disabilities ("ID") during the last legislative session and she was disappointed about the slow progress in this regard. She enquired about the support measures to assist ID students to adapt to the NSS curriculum designed for them and the pathways for graduates of the curriculum.

97. US(Ed) said that special schools generally welcomed the Administration's study on the NSS curriculum for ID students. SG/HKEAA added that HKEAA would make special examination arrangements to cater to the different needs of ID students such as allowing them more time to answer questions and preparing examination papers in larger font size for amblyopic students.

Action

VIII. Any other business

98. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 6:51 pm.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
20 September 2011