

Information Note

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Progress in the Implementation of the Policy of Debundling Textbooks and Teaching/Learning Materials for Pricing

Purpose

This paper reports on the progress in the implementation of the policy of debundling textbooks and teaching/learning materials for pricing (debundling policy).

Background

2. In response to public concern (especially parents) about the ever-increasing textbook prices, the Government set up the Working Group on Textbooks and e-Learning Resources Development (WG) in October 2008 to study the development of textbooks and e-learning resources. In its report submitted to the Secretary for Education (SED), the WG recommended the “five-year no revision rule” for textbooks and the debundling policy. The “five-year no revision rule” came into effect in the 2010/11 school year. As to the debundling policy, publishers indicated that they needed time to work out the details involved in its implementation and would have great difficulty completing the task if the policy was implemented in the 2010/11 school year. In view of the difficulties encountered by the publishers and the efforts they had made in freezing textbook prices for the 2010/11 school year, the Education Bureau (EDB) has decided to postpone the implementation of the debundling policy for one year, i.e. until the 2011/12 school year.

3. The debundling policy was formulated by the WG after more than a year of extensive discussions with stakeholders on the development of textbooks and e-learning resources through diverse consultation channels, including open seminars, student forums and a school questionnaire survey. Views from parents were also gathered through the electronic platform of the Hong Kong Education City (HKedCity). The decision on the debundling policy was made after a detailed analysis of the information collected.

Progress

4. The EDB's decision to postpone the implementation of the debundling policy for a year was explained in a written report submitted to this Panel in July last year. At a meeting held last October, the Textbooks Committee and two textbook publishers associations agreed to set up a working group to discuss the detailed arrangements for the implementation of the debundling policy in the 2011/12 school year. The working group has met three times and its fourth meeting is scheduled for 17 March this year.

5. Through extensive discussion, the EDB and the two textbook publishers associations have reached consensus on the following issues regarding the implementation of the debundling policy (Please see *Annex* for details):

- Categorisation of teaching/learning materials (including textbooks, teachers' handbooks, teaching materials for teachers' use) and arrangements for the disclosure of their prices;
- Arrangements for debundling the sale of learning materials and textbooks for individual subjects (such as Music);
- Arrangements for uploading the prices and weight of textbooks (including learning materials inseparable from them) on the Recommended Textbook List (RTL), as well as information of the debundled teaching and learning materials to the websites of the EDB and publishers; and
- Copyright of teaching materials.

6. When discussing the detailed arrangements for the implementation of the debundling policy with textbook publishers associations, the EDB was particularly concerned about whether the quality of learning and teaching would be adversely affected by the debundling of **teaching materials** and textbooks, and whether schools would have difficulty finding **resources**.

Teaching materials

7. At present, teaching materials that come with textbooks are not the only source of teaching resources. All along, the EDB has been providing teachers with a

wide range of teaching resources. In addition to textbooks and their related teaching materials, teachers should also make flexible use of other learning resources, including teaching materials developed by the EDB and educational organisations, as well as e-learning resources. Meanwhile, the EDB has expedited the development of the existing Depository of Curriculum-based Learning and Teaching Resources and expanded the coverage of the Depository in terms of Key Learning Areas. The developed materials have already been uploaded to the HKedCity website for use by primary and secondary teachers. With the implementation of the debundling policy, teachers will have the flexibility of using suitable teaching materials produced by different publishers to meet their actual needs and enhance the quality of learning and teaching.

Resources

8. In view of schools' different contexts and their varying needs in purchasing teaching materials, the EDB will maintain the current block grant funding mechanism, i.e. the provision of "Operating Expenses Block Grant" and "Expanded Operating Expenses Block Grant", to give schools greater flexibility in using resources to purchase learning materials in accordance with their school-based circumstances and actual needs.

9. In addition, in support of the development of e-learning resources in schools, the EDB provided all subsidised schools with a one-off grant in the 2009/10 school year, amounting to some \$30,000 to \$70,000 per school, for the purchase of teaching materials as required over a three-year period.

10. In the absence of pricing information, whether schools have sufficient resources to purchase teaching materials cannot be ascertained. Nevertheless, the EDB has repeatedly indicated that, if a school finds that it has insufficient resources to purchase teaching materials, the EDB will assess the actual situation of the school and allocate additional resources through the existing funding mechanism for the purchase of necessary teaching materials.

Our work in the coming months

11. The EDB will request textbook publishers to provide the prices of individual textbooks and relevant learning materials on the RTL for the 2011/12 school year in

April 2011. The information will be uploaded to the RTL webpage for schools' reference.

12. The prices of other teaching and learning materials which have not been submitted for review should be uploaded to the websites of individual publishers with hyperlinks to the RTL webpage for ease of reference and comparison by schools and parents.

13. To align with the implementation of the debundling policy, the EDB will revise and issue to schools a circular memorandum entitled "Notes on Selection of Textbooks and Learning Materials for Use in Schools", drawing special attention to the following:

- (1) schools are not allowed to accept any donations, or any form of benefits from textbook publishers or textbook retailers, including equipment, teaching aids and supplementary teaching resources on free loan (e.g. overhead projector, television set, computer hardware, computer software) and free on site services, cash grants for purchase of equipment or teaching aids, funding for school functions, advertisements on school publications, speech day floral baskets, scholarships, prizes, etc, so as not to increase the cost of publishers and have the choice of textbooks being influenced in any way; and
- (2) schools should not accept advantages or luxurious entertainment offered during the marketing activities of textbooks.

Concluding remarks

14. The debundling policy is based on the user-pays principle. Schools and parents should be able to choose and pay only for the appropriate teaching and learning materials that fit the circumstances of individual schools and the specific needs of students. Textbook publishers should produce the appropriate amount of teaching materials, taking into consideration the needs of schools and students. They should also stop giving "free" teaching resources to schools indiscriminately so that the development costs of these resources would not be included in those of textbooks, which would in turn raise textbook prices and increase parents' financial burden. In addition, textbook publishers should also refrain from making donations to schools, providing free services or offering luxurious entertainment to school staff. The EDB believes that through these cost-efficiency measures, textbook publishers should have

room to reduce the prices of textbooks. The debundling policy, coupled with the “five-year no revision rule”, will be able to address the public concern about rising textbook prices.

15. Textbook publishers will take into consideration market factors, development costs and inflation when deciding the prices of their textbooks and teaching materials. These are commercial decisions in which the EDB should not interfere. However, rationalising the existing practice of bundling the marketing of textbooks with that of teaching materials is in the interest of the public and meets their expectation. The EDB is pleased to note the acceptance of these principles by publishers, and looks forward to working with them to implement the debundling policy in order to meet public demands and provide students with quality textbooks and learning materials at reasonable prices.

Education Bureau
10 March 2011

**Consensus reached between the EDB and two publishers associations
on the implementation of the debundling policy**

1. Categorisation of teaching/learning materials and pricing arrangements

(i) Textbooks:

- Students' textbooks for public sale should be priced, and their prices and weight should be uploaded to the EDB's website.

(ii) Teachers' handbooks:

- Teachers' handbooks and textbooks are related. Since suggested answers are provided in the handbooks, public sale is not desirable in view of the potential adverse impact.
- They should be priced and sold to schools through other channels, such as EdMall of HKedCity.

(iii) Teaching materials for teachers' use:

- Teaching materials with answers in red are not suitable for public sale and should be priced. Like teachers' handbooks, they should be sold to schools through other channels.
- Those without answers, such as atlas for reference, may be sold in public and should be priced.

(iv) Learning materials for students:

- They may be sold in public and should be priced.

(v) Teaching/learning materials for both teachers and students:

- They may be sold in public and should be priced.

2. Debundling arrangements for learning materials and textbooks of individual subjects

The EDB will exercise discretion in considering the debundling arrangements for textbooks and supplementary teaching materials of individual subjects, having regard to the uniqueness of the subjects. For instance, CDs for the subject of Music and listening CDs for that of Putonghua are inseparable from textbooks, hence debundling is not required. Learning materials of other nature should be debundled for pricing.

3. Information to be uploaded to the EDB's website

- (i) The EDB will only upload the prices and weight of textbooks on the RTL (including learning materials inseparable from them) to its website.
- (ii) Pricing information of teaching/learning materials which have not been submitted for review should be uploaded to the websites of individual publishers using the form provided by the EDB. Publishers should submit the URLs of their websites to the EDB for the creation of hyperlinks on the RTL webpage for reference of schools and parents.

4. Copyright of teaching materials

Publishers should deal with the copyright of teaching materials carefully through market investigations to ensure the contents of the teaching materials are cleared of copyright restrictions.