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Panel on Manpower

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 17 June 2011**

Implementation of the Qualifications Framework

Purpose

This paper summarizes past discussions by the Panel on Manpower ("the Panel") on the progress of implementation of 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 to promote lifelong learning, with a view to enhancing the overall competitiveness of the workforce in Hong Kong. The Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance (Cap. 592), which provides a legal framework for the quality assurance mechanism underpinning QF, commenced full operation on 5 May 2008. QF was formally launched on the same day.

3. QF is a seven-level 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. All qualifications recognized under QF are quality assured.

Deliberations of the Panel

4. The Administration reported to the Panel on the progress of implementation of QF on a half-yearly basis since its full implementation in May 2008. The concerns of the Panel are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Qualifications Framework Support Schemes ("QFSS")

5. Members noted that to support the implementation of QF, the Administration had launched a number of financial assistance schemes including accreditation grants for course providers, subsidies for registration of qualifications in the Qualifications Register, reimbursement of Recognition of Prior Learning ("RPL") assessment fees to employees and accreditation and start-up grants for RPL assessment agencies. As the financial assistance schemes to the education and training providers only covered non-profit-making training providers, some members expressed concern that while the vast majority of labour unions were running training courses on a non-profit-making basis, the schemes should be extended to cover training programmes run by labour unions. Some other members, however, considered that if the Administration intended to recognize labour unions as training providers eligible for the financial assistance schemes, similar consideration should also be given to trade associations.

6. According to the Administration, it was the established practice of the Government to provide subsidies to non-profit-making organizations only, and it was unusual 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 or trade associations, other organizations such as professional bodies would likely have a claim for similar treatment. The Administration would have difficulty in holding the line of refusing subsidizing profit-making organizations. To be eligible for the financial assistance schemes, training providers affiliated with labour unions might consider applying for non-profit-making status from the Inland Revenue Department.

Implementation of the RPL mechanism and eligibility for reimbursement of RPL assessment fee

7. Members were concerned about the measures adopted by the Administration to facilitate aged workers and employees with low educational attainment in obtaining recognition of qualifications under QF.

8. The Administration advised that in parallel with the implementation of QF, the RPL mechanism had been developed so as to enable employees to seek formal recognition of the knowledge, skills and experience they acquired at the workplace and to facilitate their continuing learning without starting from scratch. Since June 2008, the RPL mechanism had been implemented on a pilot basis for a period of two years for three industries, namely the Printing and Publishing, Watch and Clock, and Hairdressing industries. There was a five-year transitional period for each industry during which employees might

apply for recognition of QF qualifications at levels 1 to 3, based on their past relevant working experience without the need to undergo any assessment. After the expiry of the transitional period, all levels of qualifications must be attained through assessment. The form of assessment would be in line with the skills and knowledge required of individual levels. As for the recognition of QF qualifications at higher levels, i.e. level 4 or above, it was necessary for an applicant to prove his possession of the relevant competency standards. Apart from considering the years of working experience of the applicant with respect to relevant competence, certain assessment had to be conducted.

9. Noting that as at the end of May 2010, only some 1 300 applications involving over 4 800 clusters of competencies at various QF levels had been processed by the assessment agency, some members held the view that the application rate for RPL assessment far from satisfactory, when compared to the vast working population in these three industries. They enquired whether the Administration had encountered great difficulties in enlisting the support of employers and employees in undergoing RPL assessment.

10. According to the Administration, participation in the RPL pilot scheme was entirely voluntary. With the provision of a five-year transitional period for each of the participating industries, stakeholders in the industries concerned generally expected that the number of applicants would increase gradually at the later stage of the transitional period. To promote the RPL mechanism, the Administration had embarked on a series of publicity and promotional activities in collaboration with the assessment agency. The activities included organizing exhibitions or promotional events specifically for the three industries running the RPL pilot scheme; visiting trade associations, labour unions, organizations or companies of these industries; participating in promotional events organized by trade associations or labour unions; giving media interviews; publicizing feature articles/advertisements in newspapers or trade magazines; and distributing promotional leaflets to encourage employees to participate in the pilot scheme.

11. Concern was raised over the financial burden on employees. Members were concerned 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. Members called on the Administration to increase the rate of reimbursement for these employees. They were concerned whether employees were eligible for reimbursement of RPL assessment fees, if they had no plans to enrol in QF-recognized training courses.

12. According to the Administration, the purpose of providing reimbursement of RPL assessment fee was to encourage more employees to pursue lifelong learning. The Administration reimbursed in full the RPL assessment fees incurred by an employee who had satisfactorily completed a QF-recognized

training course after passing the RPL assessment. To enable more employees to benefit from the subsidy, the total amount of reimbursement for each employee was subject to a cap of \$1,000. As the financial assistance scheme was geared towards supporting lifelong learning, employees who did not pursue further learning or training could not benefit from the scheme. To extend the scheme to cover employees who did not pursue further training would defeat the purpose of the scheme.

Measures to encourage the participation of employers and employees in QF

13. Members were concerned that many employees had long working hours and could hardly spare the time to attend 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. Members asked whether the Administration would offer incentives to stimulate the participation of employers and employees in QF. There was a suggestion that study leave should be granted to encourage workers to attend training programmes.

14. According to the Administration, the provision of study leave was a matter for individual industries and employers. Since 2004, the Education Bureau ("EDB") had been working closely with relevant stakeholders, including employers, employees, trade associations and unions, professional bodies, and education and training providers, to establish the infrastructure for 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.

15. Information was sought on whether the Administration would assess the benefits brought about by QF in terms of personal development, career advancement and social contribution.

16. According to the Administration, there was no empirical data to assess the impact of QF on personal development and social contribution. The Administration stressed that QF sought to provide a platform to promote life-long learning, with a view to enhancing the overall competitiveness of the workforce. While promoting QF, the Administration was mindful that the attainment of a QF qualification would not become a prerequisite for a person to secure employment.

Progress in setting up Industry Training Advisory Committees ("ITACs")

17. Another concern of members was the Administration's progress in assisting various industries in implementing QF. Information was sought on whether there were any difficulties in setting up ITACs for various industries.

18. According to the Administration, to ensure relevancy to industry needs, EDB had been assisting various sectors in setting up ITACs. ITACs were tasked to draw up Specifications of Competency Standards ("SCSs") for the relevant sectors, which set out the skills, knowledge and outcome standards required of employees in different functional areas of the respective sectors and provided a basis for course providers to design training courses to meet the needs of the sectors. As at the end of May 2010, ITACs had been set up for 13 sectors, covering about 36% of the total labour force. These 13 ITACs had made good progress in drawing up SCSs of their respective industries, with 11 of them having completed their SCSs. The Administration advised that it was reaching out to employers, employees, professional bodies and other stakeholders with a view to setting up more ITACs in other industries. In particular, it was exploring with stakeholders of the four economic pillars and the six priority industries identified in the Chief Executive's 2009-2010 Policy Address, with a view to setting up new ITACs in these industries. While responses from the stakeholders were positive, the Administration expected that a few industries, such as the retail sector and the testing and certification services sector, would be ready to set up their respective ITACs within 2010.

19. Members sought information on the targets of QF in the next few years in the setting up of ITACs. The Administration advised that the development and implementation of QF was a long term endeavour. It was industry-led and the participation of industries was voluntary. ITACs served as a platform for employers, employees, professional bodies and other stakeholders to exchange views on the development of QF as well as manpower development and upgrading. The establishment of an ITAC for a particular sector depended largely on whether there was general consensus among the relevant stakeholder groups on the need to implement QF in the industry.

Mid-term review on QFSS

20. With the funding approval of the Finance Committee in June 2007, the Administration has introduced various time-limited QFSS with a non-recurrent commitment of \$208 million to provide financial assistance to education and training providers, assessment agencies and employees to meet the expenses arising from the quality assurance requirements under QF. According to the Administration, it has conducted a mid-term review on the scope and operation of QFSS and intends to brief the Panel on the outcome of the review and the proposed improvements to the schemes at the Panel meeting on 17 June 2011.

Relevant papers

21. 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
Implementation of the Qualifications Framework**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Manpower	17.5.2007 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Finance Committee	22.6.2007	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	31.10.2007	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 18)
Panel on Manpower	23.10.2008 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	11.3.2009	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 3)
Legislative Council	17.6.2009	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 7)
Panel on Manpower	16.7.2009 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	22.10.2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	28.10.2009	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 13)
Panel on Manpower	17.6.2010 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	21.10.2010 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes