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Panel on Education

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 14 May 2012**

Development of e-Learning and prices of school textbooks

Purpose

This paper summarizes the concerns of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") on the development of e-Learning and prices of school textbooks.

Background

Information Technology in Education Strategies

2. Since 1998, the Administration had launched three information technology ("IT") in education strategies and had invested about \$8 billion with the aim of shifting the paradigm in school education from a textbook-based and teacher-centred mode to a more interactive learner-centred mode. The objective of promoting IT in education is to improve the effectiveness of learning through electronic technology.

3. In 1998, the Administration launched the first IT in Education Strategy which focused on equipping schools with necessary IT facilities, connecting them to the Internet and providing digital resources for learning and teaching. The second IT in Education Strategy, launched in 2004, aimed, among others, to enhance students' information literacy, build up the capacity of teachers, disseminate best practices in using IT in the learning and teaching process among teachers, and engage the community in creating an environment conducive to the use of IT in education. To meet the changing needs of schools, teachers and students as their capacity in using IT in learning and teaching developed, the third IT in Education Strategy was launched in 2008. The objectives were to provide a depository of curriculum-based teaching modules with appropriate digital resources, sharpen teachers' IT pedagogical

skills, assist schools to draw up and implement school-based IT in education development plans, enable schools to maintain effective IT facilities, strengthen technical support to schools and teachers, as well as raise parents' information literacy and assist them in guiding children to use IT at home.

Development of textbooks and e-Learning resources

4. Following the implementation of the three IT in Education Strategies and in response to public concern about increasing textbook prices, the Administration set up in October 2008 the Working Group on Textbooks and e-Learning Resources Development ("the Working Group") to study the use and development of textbooks and e-Learning resources. The Working Group submitted its report to the Secretary for Education in October 2009. The major recommendations put forward by the Working Group included-

Development of e-Learning

- (a) launching a three-year pilot scheme on "Promoting e-Learning" in 20 to 30 local schools in the 2010-2011 school year;
- (b) provision of additional resources to strengthen and expedite the development of the "Depository of Curriculum-based Learning and Teaching Resources" ("the Depository") from the 2009-2010 school year onwards;
- (c) provision of a one-off grant in the 2010-2011 school year to all local schools for purchasing e-Learning resources for students;
- (d) setting up an e-commerce platform for e-Learning resources and an online community for teachers at the Hong Kong Education City ("HKEdCity") website;

Textbooks

- (e) implementation of the "five-year no revision rule" for textbooks; and
- (f) implementation of the policy of debundling textbooks and teaching/learning materials for pricing ("the debundling policy") from the 2010-2011 school year.

Deliberations of the Panel

5. The Panel had discussed the development of e-Learning, school textbook prices and debundling of textbooks and teaching/learning resources for pricing at a number of meetings. The major issues of concern raised by members are summarized in the following paragraphs.

One-off grant to schools for purchasing e-Learning resources

6. Members noted that the Administration had set aside \$50 million for providing a one-off grant to all subsidized schools in the 2010-2011 school year (in the amount of some \$30,000 to \$70,000 per school) for purchasing e-Learning resources and the grant could be spent over three years. They sought information on the basis for arriving at the amount, and were concerned whether the provision was adequate.

7. The Administration explained that the original plan was to provide the \$50 million grant to schools in one year. As only limited suitable e-Learning resources were available on the market, schools requested an extension of the one-year period to three years. The Administration would monitor the trend of using e-Learning resources. Should schools have financial difficulties in purchasing the necessary teaching materials, the Administration would provide more funding for schools.

Pilot Scheme on e-Learning

8. At the Panel meeting on 8 February 2010, the Administration briefed members on its proposal to launch a three-year pilot scheme on e-Learning in schools. Members sought information on the criteria for selecting the schools to participate in the Pilot Scheme on e-Learning ("the Pilot Scheme"). According to the Administration, selection of pilot schools would be based on the merit of the proposals submitted by schools and their commitment to develop and promote e-Learning. The selection criteria included the principles underpinning the proposed strategies; pedagogies and related curriculum design; benefits to learning and teaching through collaboration; sustainability and scalability; school's IT in education development capacity; evaluation and feedback mechanism for the project; and effectiveness of the proposed dissemination process and practices. Furthermore, given that the participating schools would be the research and development centres and change agents to facilitate future wider adoption and adaptation of e-Learning, the Administration also considered it important to maximize variations amongst the pilot schools in terms of school and curriculum contexts as well as partnership arrangements.

9. According to the Administration's response to Hon Andrew LEUNG's question on e-Learning resources raised at the Council meeting of 16 February 2011, a total of 21 pilot projects had been selected and the Pilot Scheme would be completed in 2014. The Education Bureau ("EDB") would review the Pilot Scheme regularly and publish the relevant findings.

Availability of e-Learning resources

10. To reduce the rising textbook prices, members considered it necessary for the Administration to explore the feasibility of electronic textbooks. Since teachers could not afford the time to produce e-resources, members called on the Administration to collaborate with the HKEdCity to provide resources for schools to develop school-based e-resources. Many deputations urged the Administration to provide assistance to teachers to develop electronic learning materials and to address related issues such as revision of software, increased workload of teachers, and changed mode of teaching.

11. The Administration pointed out that it had undertaken under the Third Strategy to develop the Depository for Primary to Secondary 3 levels in Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and General Studies (Science for secondary). The original intention was to complete the Depository for the primary level by the end of the 2010-2011 school year, and the secondary level by the end of the 2012-2013 school year. In line with the Working Group's recommendations, the Administration had expedited the development of the Depository and expanded the coverage of the Depository in terms of Key Learning Areas. The developed materials had already been uploaded to the HKEdCity website for use by primary and secondary teachers. The Depository collected free resources, both online and printed, provided by local and overseas government organizations, tertiary institutions, schools and non-profit-making organizations. The resources were selected and organized into thematic units based on the local curriculum framework, with teaching suggestions as well as user guides.

12. At the Panel meeting on 21 June 2011, the Administration advised that some e-Learning resources currently in use by schools were developed in collaboration with textbook publishers. Universities and educational organizations had also been invited to participate in the development of e-Learning resources with a view to ensuring diversity. Textbook publishers also informed members that they had made substantial investment in the research and development of e-Learning resources in recent years.

Copyright of e-Learning resources

13. Some stakeholders had expressed concern to the Working Group about copyright of online resources. It was pointed out that as the source of a large amount of online resources was unknown, some teachers were unable to obtain permission to use the materials. Publishers, on the other hand, were concerned about the illegal use of e-resources as these resources could be disseminated more readily than printed materials. The Working Group suggested that studies on the issue be carried out in order to formulate relevant strategies and support measures.

14. Members had received views from textbook publishers about copyright owners demanding high copyright fees which had posed a financial burden on them. Textbook publishers pointed out that while the copyright fees for printed textbooks could be set in accordance with the number of copies sold, there was no established mechanism for determining the copyright fees for online resources and the patronage of online resources was difficult to ascertain. Members sought information from the Administration on the guidelines for setting the relevant fees. Members considered that the issue of copyright of online resources warranted in-depth study. They noted that the Administration had not sought additional funding for carrying out studies on the subject as suggested by the Working Group.

15. The Administration explained that there were different modes for charging copyright fees for using online resources, such as by monthly payments or lump sum payments. There was no copyright fee for the use of certain resources, such as the "Creative Commons Hong Kong", for the benefit of the education sector. The Administration was aware of the importance of respecting the right of copyright owners, and had been educating teachers and students on legal use of copyright materials. The Administration also advised that it could absorb within its existing resources the cost for carrying out the studies on copyright of online resources.

e-Learning opportunities for needy students

16. Members were concerned that extensive use of e-learning materials would create a digital divide and marginalize needy students. To ensure that students of low-income families would have equal opportunities as other students in e-Learning, members considered it important to provide Internet access charges for needy students. At its meeting on 12 April 2010, the Panel deliberated the \$500 million start-up capital proposed by the Financial Secretary in the 2010-2011 Budget to provide convenient and suitable Internet learning opportunities for needy students. The initiatives included the introduction of a household-based cash subsidy scheme for Internet

access charges and the Internet Learning Support Programme ("ILSP") to help eligible families acquire affordable internet services and computer equipments and to provide them with necessary user and social support. Members expressed support in general for the Administration's proposal. The internet access subsidy has been disbursed to eligible families from the 2010-2011 school year, and the five-year ILSP was put in place in July 2011.

Textbook prices and debundling of textbooks and teaching/learning resources

17. Prices of school textbooks had been a long standing concern of the Panel. Members noted that the increasing textbook prices was attributable to the excessive bundling of textbooks with various teaching and learning resources, as well as the luxurious gifts and donations provided by publishers to schools in promoting textbooks. To address the concern about increasing textbook prices, the Administration had adopted the Working Group's recommendation to implement the debundling policy with a view to achieving reduction of textbook prices in the long run. Through the implementation of the debundling policy based on the user-pays principle, textbook publishers would be encouraged to produce the appropriate amount of teaching materials as required by schools. This would help reduce cost and avoid wastage, thereby lowering textbook prices.

Resources to schools for purchasing teaching materials

18. Noting that with the implementation of the debundling policy, schools would no longer be provided with teaching materials by publishers free of charge, members were concerned about the provision of adequate funds for schools for purchasing teaching materials. Members urged the Administration to work out with schools on the resources needed and to undertake to provide additional resources to schools for the purchase of necessary teaching materials. According to the Administration, EDB provided schools every year with block grants for meeting their operational needs, which could be deployed by schools for the purchase of teaching materials. In the absence of information on prices of teaching materials from textbook publishers, the Administration could not ascertain the additional resources required by schools for purchasing teaching materials. Schools could use their surplus to buy teaching materials first and at the end of each school year, EDB would conduct a survey to find out the actual amount spent by schools on teaching materials and reimburse them with the median value of the amount. If schools did not have adequate resources to purchase teaching materials, the Administration would allocate additional resources to them.

Adequacy of the debundling policy

19. While generally welcoming the implementation of the debundling policy, members considered that the debundling policy was only a short-term measure which could at best help stabilize, and could not lower substantially, textbook prices. The long-term solution lay in introducing fundamental changes to the textbook market. Members had put forward various suggestions to the Administration to tackle the problem of increasing textbook prices, which included simplifying the vetting and approval procedure for inclusion of textbooks in its Recommended Textbook List with a view to bringing in more competition to the market, including textbook price as one of the criteria in the vetting and approval of textbooks, and imposing a cap on textbook prices.

Implementation timetable and textbook recycling

20. The debundling policy was originally scheduled for implementation in the 2010-2011 school year and was subsequently deferred for one year to the 2011-2012 school year at the request of textbook publishers on the ground that more time was needed to resolve the copyright issues. When the Panel was briefed on the progress of the implementation of the debundling policy in June 2011, members noted the textbook publishers' request for three more years for its implementation. Textbook publishers had indicated that primary and junior secondary textbooks in core subjects such as Chinese, English and Mathematics would be debundled first in 2012, while the textbooks for the rest of the subjects for primary schools and junior secondary schools as well as all textbooks for senior secondary would be debundled for pricing in 2013 and 2014 respectively. The Administration had indicated that if the publishers refused to debundle their teaching materials after the 2011-2012 school year, EDB would tender out the development of textbooks and teaching materials to introduce more competition to the market.

21. Some members expressed reservations about the Administration's proposal of tendering out the development of textbooks and teaching materials. There was concern that the tendering practice of awarding the contract to the lowest bidder would affect the quality of textbooks. Concern was also raised about the lack of diversity in the textbook market if the contract was awarded to only one or a small number of bidders. There was also concern about control of content of textbooks by the Administration should tendering be adopted. For the purposes of environmental protection

and lowering textbook prices, members expressed strong support for promoting initiatives on textbook recycling such as provision of textbooks by schools for loan to students and sale of second-hand textbooks in schools, and called on the Administration to collaborate with the parent-teacher associations to promote the benefits of textbook recycling. Members urged the Administration and textbook publishers to continue their discussion with a view to resolving their differences expeditiously for the early implementation of the debundling policy.

22. The Administration also advised that it had set up the Task Force on the Review of Learning and Teaching Resources to review issues arising from the debundling policy. The operation of the Recommended Textbook List and other measures concerning the supply of teaching and learning materials would be considered in particular with a view to ensuring the provision of quality and value-for-money materials. The Administration was requested to report to the Panel on the progress in the implementation of the debundling policy and the recommendations made in the report of Task Force.

Latest developments

23. In the 2011-2012 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced that the Administration will implement measures to further promote the development of electronic textbooks and learning resources to provide students with more interactive and diversified modes of learning, provide more flexibility to the production of textbooks, lower production cost, reduce waste, induce healthy competition in the textbook market, and provide users with an additional choice over printed textbooks.

24. The Administration will brief the Panel on the e-Textbook Market Development Scheme at the meeting on 14 May 2012. The Administration aims to submit the proposal to the Finance Committee in June 2012.

Relevant papers

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

**Relevant papers on
Development of e-Learning and prices of school textbooks**

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	28.7.1998 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	[Question 15] Reasons for the increases in textbook prices (Hansard English – pages 129-131)
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	[Question 17] Monitoring the prices of textbooks (Hansard English – pages 132-135)
Panel on Education	19.6.2000 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	18.6.2001 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	17.10.2001	[Question 1] Prices of primary and secondary school textbooks (Hansard English – pages 7-12)
Panel on Education	9.5.2005 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	11.6.2007 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	17.12.2008	[Question 8] Access to computers and internet by students from recipient families under CSSA Scheme (Hansard English – pages 69-71)
Panel on Education	11.5.2009 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	13.5.2009	[Question 11] High prices of school textbooks (Hansard English - pages 77-80)
Legislative Council	3.6.2009	[Question 18] Prices of school textbooks (Hansard English – pages 101-105)
Panel on Education	14.12.2009 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda
Executive Summary of Main Report of the Working Group on Textbook and e-Learning Resources Development		CB(2)518/09-10(01)
Panel on Education	8.2.2010 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda CB(2)2078/09-10(01)
Panel on Education	12.4.2010	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	16.2.2011	[Question 9] Electronic Teaching and Learning Materials (Hansard English – pages 84-86)
Panel on Education	10.3.2011	CB(2)1249/10-11(01)
Panel on Education	11.4.2011 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	21.6.2011 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda