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Panel on Education

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 10 July 2012

Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination

Purpose

This paper summarizes the issues of concern raised by the Panel on Education ("the Panel") about the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education ("HKDSE") examination.

Background

2.	In 2000, the Education Commission recommended the adoption of a three-year senior secondary academic system to facilitate the implementation of a more flexible, coherent and diversified senior secondary curriculum.	In his 2004 Policy Address, the Chief Executive confirmed the policy direction of developing the new academic structure ("NAS"), i.e. three-year junior secondary, three-year senior secondary and four-year undergraduate education.	NAS has been implemented in all secondary schools at Secondary ("S") 4 with effect from September 2009.

3.	Under NAS, there are four core subjects, namely, Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies ("LS").	The new HKDSE Examination has been implemented in 2012 to replace the two existing public examinations, namely, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination ("HKCEE") and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination ("HLALE"). HKDSE Examination, administered by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority ("HKEAA"), comprises three categories of subjects, namely the new senior secondary ("NSS") subjects, Applied Learning subjects and Other Language subjects.

4.   A standards-referenced reporting ("SRR") system will be used in reporting student results in HKDSE Examination. Instead of using grades A to F as in the current reporting system, the results of the NSS subject examination will be reported in five levels, i.e. 1 to 5, with Level 5 being the highest. Candidates with top performance will be represented by Level 5** and next top performance by 5*. Achievement below Level 1 will be designated as "unclassified". Under SRR, the standards are held constant with no fixed proportion of students for each level. Contrary to the previous reporting system under which Grade E is a passing grade, there is no official passing level under SRR.

Deliberations of the Panel

5.   Over the past few years, the Panel held a number of meetings to discuss progress on the implementation of NAS. At the meeting on 12 March 2012, members discussed the mechanism for rechecking/remarking the results of HKDSE Examination. Members were briefed on the latest progress of the implementation of NAS at the meeting on 20 April 2012. The major issues of concern raised by members are set out in the following paragraphs.

Assessment of LS

6.   Members were concerned about the fairness and reliability of the assessment of students' performance in LS. As the assessment of LS was based on the judgment of the markers and in the absence of uniform assessment criteria, teachers, students and parents were concerned about how LS examination papers would be marked and possible disputes on the assessment results. Some members commented that as the objective of LS was to develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills, merits should be given to innovative answers and personal contributions of students. Members also suggested that samples of the 2012 HKDSE LS marked examination scripts should be made public to address the concern.

7.   The Administration explained that the emphasis of assessment in the LS examination would be put on the skills the students applied in analyzing a situation, integrating the information and explaining their views in developing an answer. Examiners were required to respect individual responses and give credits to creativity and individual contributions which were very important elements in LS. Sample examination questions and exemplars of students' responses over a range of different levels of performance would be made available for teachers to have an idea of the standards of responses expected from students and how the questions would be marked. Examination scripts would be marked by two markers and when there were significant differences in

the markers' opinions, a third or even a fourth marker would be called in to resolve the discrepancies. With the established guidelines, candidates would receive fair grades.

8. There was a view that LS should not be a mandatory subject for university admission. It was pointed out that 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. On the other hand, some members 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.

9. The Administration advised that the objective of LS was to develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills which were essential for students of all disciplines. The university entrance requirement for LS was Level 2. Students were not required to have in-depth knowledge of all the areas covered in the LS curriculum; they 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.

Reporting method for HKDSE Examination

10. Members noted that unlike HKCEE and HKALE which used norm referencing, HKDSE would adopt SRR to report candidates' examination results. Members were concerned that the use of SRR might result in wide fluctuations in marks and candidates' results would be affected by the different levels of difficulty of the examination papers and hence increase in disputes over results.

11. According to the Administration, SRR had been used for the HKCEE English Language and Chinese Language examinations starting from 2007. It was a global trend to use SRR which was an internationally recognized method for reporting examination results. SRR enabled employers and universities to understand the candidates' levels of performance with reference to a set of standards rather than their relative ability among candidates taking part in the same public examination. It also provided a good basis for comparing the standards and performance of students who took the examination in different years. Furthermore SRR could facilitate teachers to adjust the pedagogy according to the ability of students.

Design and setting of examination questions

12. The design and setting of examination questions was another concern of members. In the 2012 HKDSE LS examination, candidates were asked to

refer to the popularity ratings of political parties obtained from a survey with a low response rate in answering a question. There was grave concern that the examination question was a leading question and the political stance indicated by candidates in their answers might affect their results in LS examination.

13. According to HKEAA, in assessing students' performance in LS examination, consideration would be given to whether candidates were able to understand the questions and express their views clearly with justifications; and political stance of candidates was not a key factor in the assessment.

14. Some members pointed out that the Chinese version of an LS examination question was poorly written and one of the questions in the Chinese Language paper on which candidates were examined on their understanding of ancient Chinese language was too difficult. Given that HKDSE no longer used norm referencing to report candidates' examination results, such difficult questions would affect candidates' results. Members called on HKEAA to review the design and setting of examination questions for the HKDSE Examination.

Rechecking/remarking of HKDSE Examination results

Mechanism and upgrading criteria for rechecking/remarking

15. Given the concerns over the assessment of LS, it was anticipated that there would be many applications for rechecking of results of LS. Members considered it important to put in place a fair appeal mechanism to handle disputes on the assessment results and were concerned whether HKEAA had sufficient manpower to handle a large number of rechecking applications within a short period of time after the release of the HKDSE Examination results in July 2012.

16. The Administration advised members that having regard to the fact that it was the first time the HKDSE Examination was held, school candidates would not be required to obtain their schools' support in their applications for rechecking/remarking of the 2012 HKDSE Examination results, which would help to streamline the application procedures. Apart from the current four Onscreen Marking ("OSM") centres, three additional temporary OSM centres were being set up to handle the increased demand in marking due to the double cohort of HKALE and HKDSE Examination in 2012. The additional OSM centres would also increase the capacity in handling remarking.

17. Members noted that for rechecking, the results would be upgraded if the final mark after correction of technical errors attained the minimum cut-off score of the next higher grade. For remarking, the results would be upgraded

if the new mark after averaging all the valid marks of the original marker(s) and the remarker(s) reached a specified margin above the minimum cut-off score of the next higher grade. Members raised concern about the different upgrading criteria for rechecking/remarking and sought justification for such difference.

18. According to HKEAA, rechecking referred to the checking of technical errors such as arithmetical errors, incorrect mark entries and unmarked pages which did not involve professional judgment. Hence, subject/component results would be upgraded if technical errors were found and the final mark after correction of technical errors attained the minimum cut-off score of the next higher grade. On the other hand, remarking involved the remarking of each answer script independently by a different marker. Marking involved professional judgment, especially for open-ended questions. It was well-established that slightly different marks might be given if a script was being marked twice, even when done by the same marker. As such, a small margin above the minimum cut-off score was necessary to take such marker variation into account in determining an upgrade.

Financial assistance to needy students

19. Members expressed grave concern about the level of fees for rechecking/remarking of HKDSE Examination. Members considered the remarking fee, which was as high as $720 per subject, unaffordable for the economically disadvantaged candidates, and urged the Administration and HKEAA to provide fee remission for rechecking/remarking for needy students, so as to ensure that they would not be deprived of the opportunity to apply for rechecking/remarking of their examination results due to a lack of means. Members requested that special consideration be given to granting all applications from needy students for waiving such fees for the 2012 HKDSE Examination.

20. According to the Administration, the Examination Fee Remission Scheme administered by the Student Financial Assistance Agency ("SFAA") and the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") administered by the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") all along did not provide automatic assistance for supplementary services provided by HKEAA, including rechecking/remarking of examination results, as they were not essential services or necessary procedures for a candidate to sit for an examination. Nevertheless, needy candidates could apply to HKEAA for consideration of a partial waiver for fees on rechecking/remarking if there were genuine needs. HKEAA would consider the applications on a case-by-case basis, taking into account factors such as the reasons given by the candidates and the financial situation of HKEAA. Whether candidates were beneficiaries of CSSA had also been an important factor considered by HKEAA. Fees for rechecking/remarking

would be refunded to candidates who got an upgrade in the examination result after the review.

Recognition of HKDSE

21. Members noted that following the inclusion in early 2010 of the HKDSE qualification into the Tariff System of the University and Colleges Admissions Service ("UCAS") in the United Kingdom ("UK"), Levels 3, 4 and 5 in the HKDSE Examination were broadly comparable to Grades E, C and A in the current General Certificate Education ("GCE") A Level Examination respectively, but HKDSE results lacked those levels which were comparable to Grades B and D in the GCE A Level Examination. Members were concerned about the impact of this on local students who wished to apply for admission to UK universities. Members pointed out that most of the renowned UK universities required a candidate to obtain a grade equivalent to Grade B or above in GCE A Level Examination. Without a level equivalent to Grade B in GCE A Level Examination, Hong Kong students would need to obtain Level 5 in HKDSE Examination (equivalent to Grade A in GCE A Level Examination) in order to gain admission to these renowned UK universities. Given the wide range between Level 4 (tariff 80) and Level 5 (tariff 120) in HKDSE results, members suggested adding a Level 4* in HKDSE which was comparable to Grade B in GCE A Level Examination to tackle the problem.

22. The explanation given by the Administration was that there was normally no direct grade by grade comparison between two qualifications unless the design of a system was modelled on another system such as the modelling of the HKALE on GCE A Level Examination. Some UK universities had indicated that they would not compare the grades in GCE A Level Examination directly with the levels in HKDSE and understood that Levels 3, 4 and 5 in HKDSE results were broadly comparable to Grades E, C and A in GCE A Level Examination. Both the Administration and UCAS would review the HKDSE levels after the first HKDSE Examination in 2012 and would make adjustments to the levels if necessary.

23. As HKDSE was a new qualification, members considered it necessary for the Administration to expedite its promotion to obtain international recognition of the qualification. According to the Administration, it had put a lot of efforts to promote the HKDSE qualification in the past few years and in general, the HKDSE qualification was well recognized by overseas tertiary institutions. At the meeting on 20 April 2012, the Administration informed members that more than 110 universities worldwide had recognised the HKDSE qualification so far. The Administration was requested to provide members with details of the overseas universities which had recognized the HKDSE qualification.

24.   Given that many local students intended to pursue tertiary education in the Mainland, the Administration was requested to explore the possibility of exempting local students from the Joint Entrance Examination for Universities in the People's Republic of China and accepting the HKDSE Examination results for admission to Mainland universities.

25.   The Administration advised that there were currently three ways for local students to gain admission to Mainland universities.   Some universities only recognized the results of the Joint Entrance Examination for Universities in the Mainland; some universities required applicants to take the examination conducted by the universities; and some Mainland universities recognized the public examination results in Hong Kong and exempted students with good results from taking their admission examinations.   Three Mainland universities (namely Peking University, Tsing Hua University and Fudan University) would continue to directly recruit Hong Kong students and exempt them from Mainland examinations.   Another three (Sun Yat-sen University, Hua Qiao University and Jinan University) might also directly recruit Hong Kong students, but would require them to sit for a separate examination.   The Education Bureau informed members in April 2012 that as a pilot scheme in 2012, 63 higher education institutions in Mainland China would admit Hong Kong students on the strength of their HKDSE Examination results and exempt them from the Joint Entrance Examination for Universities in Mainland China.

Mathematics as a mandatory subject for university admission

26.   Members also discussed the implications of including Mathematics as a mandatory subject for university admission.   Currently, Mathematics was not a mandatory subject for university admission.   With the implementation of NSS structure, students had to attain Level 2 in Mathematics in HKDSE in order to apply for university admission. Members were concerned that such a requirement would deprive the chance of the students who excelled in subjects other than Mathematics for local university education.   Some members requested the Administration to consider excluding Mathematics as a mandatory subject for university admission.

27.   According to the Administration, local universities supported that Mathematics should be one of the core subjects as it could help students develop their analytical skills and logical thinking which were essential for all students regardless of their study programmes.   Local universities had agreed to exercise flexibility in considering the applications for admission on a case-by-case basis.

Preparation for the release of the HKDSE Examination results

28.	According to the information provided by the Administration in April 2012, a basket of measures had been/would be implemented to support teachers, students and parents before and on the release of HKDSE Examination results on 20 July 2012. Details of the measures are outlined in **Appendix I**. The Administration will brief the Panel on its final preparation in the run-up to the release of the HKDSE Examination at the upcoming Panel meeting on 10 July 2012.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 2
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**Support to schools, students and parents
before and on the result release day**

Since the start of the 2011/12 school year, essential support has been provided to schools, students and parents, which aim to change their mindset and expectations on students' articulations as well as prompt their early preparation for 20 July 2012. These include:

- "Information Pack on the New Academic Structure – Meeting Aspirations through Multiple Pathways" specifically prepared for the first cohort of Secondary 6 students and their parents, was distributed through schools in September 2011;

- Four regional parents seminars, targeted at the same cohort of parents, were held in October 2011 to provide updates on multiple pathways and success stories of students pursuing sub-degree and other programmes to help change mindset and widen perspectives when parents consider for their children's aspirations;

- Thirteen identical workshops were held from September to November 2011 for schools on "Planning to Meet Students' Aspirations via Multiple Pathways under the NAS" to raise their awareness of "success under the NAS" and the need for a new approach to making early planning and working with parents and students; and

- The NAS Web Bulletin has been revamped since early 2012, with the front page showing a chart on multiple pathways and the motto "Of the multiple pathways to success, there's always one for you", to strengthen the key message disseminated to all students.

To ensure that events on 20 July 2012 are to be launched orderly, EDB is providing a range of support measures to schools, students and parents for their timely preparation and action.   These include:

- A list of key dates concerning application to post-secondary institutions and announcement of various results before and after the result release day;

- Three identical symposia for schools entitled "Student Aspiration Symposium" to be organised in May 2012 as part of the continuous effort to further update on pathways and services available, and to facilitate peer sharing, scenario planning (such as counseling, career guidance, mock interview and mock result release), and case studies for the result release day, etc;

- An electronic tool, "e-Navigator: Multiple Pathways under NAS" has been launched since February 2012 to assist students and parents for exploring opportunities in further studies and career development (students can download the APP version for smart phones by May);

- A pamphlet with essential information (such as telephone hotlines, and websites of EDB, HKEAA, NGO, institutions, students' roadmap) will be distributed by 13 July 2012 (e-version uploaded earlier in June) so that schools can gather their students as well as parents for a final briefing just before 20 July 2012 and provide any last-minute counseling and assistance;

- A parent seminar will be held on 13 June 2012 to provide support and updates to parents of the first cohort alongside with other parent seminars organised by other parties;

- A designated webpage hosted by EDB will be set up nearer the day to provide easy access to latest information on all pathways, including post-secondary institutions and organisations;

- A call centre will be set up by EDB from 18 July to 27 July 2012 to provide a one-stop point in co-ordinating enquiries from and responses to the students and schools while most of the services for students will still be best handled by schools; and

- Regional Education Offices of EDB will provide, from 18 to 27 July 2012, assistance to those students and parents in need of information and advice on multiple pathways, and to supplement the support provided by schools to their students.

**Relevant papers on
Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination**

Committee	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Legislative Council	15.10.2003	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 10 - 18 (Question)
Panel on Education	29.10.2004 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)1721/04-05(01)
Panel on Education	20.12.2004 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	3.1.2005 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	5.1.2005	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 68 - 71 (Question)
Panel on Education	3.6.2005 (Items I - III)	Agenda Minutes
Finance Committee	24.6.2005	Minutes FCR(2005-06)24
Panel on Education	20.10.2005 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	13.2.2006 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	10.5.2006	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 86 - 91 (Question)

Committee	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Panel on Education	12.6.2006 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	10.7.2006 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)2680/05-06(01) CB(2)2680/05-06(02) CB(2)2680/05-06(03) CB(2)2792/05-06(01)
Panel on Education	19.10.2006 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	25.5.2007 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	9.7.2007	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	12.11.2007 (Item VII)	Agenda Minutes
Establishment Subcommittee	28.11.2007	Minutes EC(2007-08)10
Legislative Council	21.5.2008	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 77 - 78 (Question)
Panel on Education	12.6.2008 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)561/08-09(01)
Panel on Education	10.11.2008 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	11.2.2009	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 86 - 91 (Question)

Committee	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Panel on Education	30.3.2009 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	11.7.2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	21.10.2009	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 98 - 101 (Question)
Legislative Council	6.1.2010	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 118 - 127 (Question)
Panel on Education	30.4.2010 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	12.7.2010 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	18.5.2011	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 83 - 89 (Question 7)
Panel on Education	13.6.2011 (Item VII)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	12.3.2012 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes CB(2)1681/11-12(01)
Panel on Education	20.4.2012 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes

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