

ITEM FOR FINANCE COMMITTEE

HEAD 173 – STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AGENCY Subhead 228 Student financial assistance

Members are invited to approve improvements to the Examination Fee Remission Scheme for needy non-Chinese speaking students at senior secondary level.

PROBLEM

We need to make changes to the Examination Fee Remission Scheme (EFRS) so as to enhance support for needy non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students in obtaining internationally recognised qualifications that reflect more closely their proficiency in Chinese Language, in addition to meeting the basic language requirement for local higher education. This should be conducive to NCS students' academic and career advancement.

PROPOSAL

2. The Controller of the Student Financial Assistance Agency, with the support of the Secretary for Education, proposes to extend the ambit of the EFRS to include three additional non-local Chinese Language examinations, namely the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) (Chinese) Examination, the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Subsidiary (AS)-Level (Chinese) Examination and the GCE Advanced (A)-Level (Chinese) Examination administered by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA), for the purpose of fee remission to eligible NCS students sitting for these non-local Chinese Language examinations.

/JUSTIFICATION

JUSTIFICATION

Existing Arrangements under the EFRS

3. The Government is committed to encouraging and supporting early integration of NCS students into the community, including facilitating their adaptation to the local education system and mastery of the Chinese Language. Since the 2010 examination sitting, the Education Bureau (EDB) has been providing a subsidy to the HKEAA to bridge the difference between the examination fees of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (Chinese) Examination¹ and the defunct Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) (Chinese) or the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSEE) (Chinese) so that all eligible NCS students sitting for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, irrespective of means, will only need to pay a “subsidised examination fee” on par with that of the defunct HKCEE (Chinese) or the HKDSEE (Chinese). To be eligible for the “subsidised examination fee”, NCS students should be certified by the last attending school to have learnt Chinese Language for either –

- (a) less than six years while receiving primary and secondary education; or
- (b) six years or more in schools, but have been taught an adapted and simpler curriculum not normally applicable to the majority of students in local schools.

4. To ensure that needy NCS students will not be discouraged from sitting for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination because of lack of means, the ambit of the EFRS has been extended since the 2011/12 academic year, as set out in FCR(2011-12)17 on 27 May 2011, to allow eligible needy NCS students to apply for fee remission for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination under the EFRS. Eligible NCS students passing the means test of the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) receive either full or half fee remission of the “subsidised examination fee” for taking the GCSE (Chinese) Examination. They are also eligible for fee remission for a second examination entry of the GCSE (Chinese) Examination to be taken in the immediate following year so long as they are sitting for the examination as a school candidate.

/Proposed

¹ In the 2012 sitting, the examination fee charged by Edexcel, London for GCSE (Chinese) Examination is \$1,100.

Proposed Changes and Improvements to the EFRS

5. In addition to the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, the HKEAA also administers a number of other non-local Chinese Language examinations, including the IGCSE Examination, the GCE AS-Level Examination and the GCE A-Level Examination. There have been calls from NCS students that the Government should expand the scope of the examination subsidy to cover more non-local Chinese Language examinations because some students consider the GCSE (Chinese) Examination not challenging enough, given their proficiency in Chinese and their aspiration for further education and employment.

6. The Government is committed to facilitating NCS students to master the Chinese Language and to take up the challenge of sitting for more advanced Chinese examinations. As the relatively high examination fees² could be a deterrent for some NCS students aspiring to sit for these non-local Chinese examinations, EDB will, with immediate effect, expand the coverage of the “subsidised examination fee” to include three additional examinations, namely the IGCSE (Chinese) Examination, the GCE AS-Level (Chinese) Examination and the GCE A-Level (Chinese) Examination. Similar to the arrangement for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, EDB will provide a subsidy to the HKEAA (estimated to be around \$3 million for the 2012/13 academic year³) to bridge the difference between the fees of these three examinations and the HKDSEE (Chinese) so that all eligible NCS students can take these non-local examinations at the “subsidised examination fee” on par with that of the HKDSEE (Chinese) (i.e. \$567 for 2013). The expansion of the “subsidised examination fee” arrangement aims to encourage NCS students to set higher targets in the learning of the Chinese Language.

/7.

² The examination fees per candidate for the Chinese subject in the 2012 Examination Series in respect of the IGCSE, GCE AS-Level and GCE A-Level are as follows –

	IGCSE	GCE AS-Level	GCE A-Level
Fees charged by Edexcel, London	\$1,115	\$2,720	\$4,080
Fees charged by Cambridge International Examinations	\$1,060	\$1,355	\$1,945

³ The amount in the 2012/13 academic year is based on the current NCS student population in local public sector schools and schools under the Direct Subsidy Scheme and the examination fee levels at present. The amount in subsequent years will depend on various factors, including the NCS student population and examination fee levels.

7. To enhance the support for needy NCS students who may have difficulties paying the “subsidised examination fee”, we propose to expand the ambit of the EFRS to include the three non-local Chinese examinations which will be covered by the “subsidised examination fee” arrangement of EDB with immediate effect as set out in paragraph 6. An NCS student at senior secondary level having met the eligibility criteria for the “subsidised examination fee” in paragraph 3(a) or (b) will be eligible to receive full or half fee remission of the “subsidised examination fee” for taking any of the three non-local Chinese examinations as long as they are sitting for the examinations as school candidates and if they have passed the means test of SFAA.

8. In considering the maximum sittings of the non-local Chinese examinations for which each needy NCS student should be eligible for fee remission under the EFRS, we have taken into account the learning needs of NCS students as well as the different designs and relevant requirements on Chinese proficiency of these non-local Chinese examinations. We note that normally NCS students would take these examinations at Secondary 5 and/or 6. In addition, there is significant diversity among NCS students in their proficiency of the Chinese Language. Some may wish to go for the prudent approach of aiming higher only after having secured a certification at an elementary level. Some may wish to take the same examination twice particularly if they have failed in their first attempt.

9. Of the four types of examinations (including the GCSE (Chinese) Examination approved in 2011), the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, the IGCSE (Chinese) Examination and the GCE AS-Level (Chinese) Examination are for students at the elementary/intermediate level of learning the Chinese Language while the GCE A-Level (Chinese) Examination is for students learning Chinese at the more advanced level. We propose that eligible NCS students may, during their full-time senior secondary school years, receive examination fee remission for –

- (a) up to two entries for any of the following three examinations: the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, the IGCSE (Chinese) Examination and the GCE AS-Level (Chinese) Examination; and
- (b) up to two entries for the GCE A-Level (Chinese) Examination,

provided that they are sitting for these examinations as school candidates.

10. The University Grants Committee-funded institutions have, since 2008, provided flexibility in admission through accepting alternative Chinese Language qualifications which include IGCSE (Chinese), GCE AS-level (Chinese), GCSE (Chinese) and GCE A-Level (Chinese) for NCS students meeting the specified circumstances in paragraph 3(a) or (b) above. We believe that this proposal will provide NCS students with greater choice in meeting the basic language requirements under the Joint University Programmes Admission System. At the same time, we allow NCS students the choice of taking the above examinations in place of or in addition to the HKDSEE (Chinese)⁴ so as to encourage them to attempt the Chinese Language paper in the HKDSEE as their local counterparts.

11. As with the existing fee remission arrangement under the EFRS, SFAA will arrange direct payment of the “subsidised examination fee” to the HKEAA on behalf of those NCS students eligible for full or half level of assistance.

Number of Beneficiaries

12. We estimate that in the 2012/13 academic year, about 1 630 senior secondary NCS students will take the three non-local Chinese examinations. They will only need to pay the “subsidised examination fee”, i.e. the fee that is on par with that of the HKDSEE (Chinese). Of these students, we estimate that about 330 NCS students would be eligible for full or half examination fee remission.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

13. Based on the size of the NCS student population and the present fee level of the HKDSEE (Chinese), the additional disbursement under the EFRS as a result of expanding the ambit to cover three more non-local Chinese examinations for needy NCS students will be about \$0.2 million a year. The actual amount of disbursement each year will depend on such factors as the size of the NCS student population, the number of applications, the actual outcome of the means test of the applicants and any change in the examination fee levels, etc. We have included sufficient provision in the 2012-13 Estimates and will include the necessary provision in the Estimates of the subsequent years to meet the requirements of this proposal.

/IMPLEMENTATION

⁴ For the HKDSEE (Chinese), students can receive fee remission for up to two examination entries provided that the second entry is taken by the student as a school candidate in the immediate year following the first entry.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

14. Subject to Finance Committee (FC)'s approval, we plan to implement the above improvements to the EFRS with immediate effect. Registration for the Chinese examinations under the IGCSE, GCE AS-Level and GCE A-Level Examinations which will be held in May 2013 will start in early December 2012. We will brief schools and NCS students on the enhanced coverage of the examination subsidy as well as details of the improvements to the EFRS before the registration of these examinations.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

15. We consulted the Panel on Education on the proposed improvements to the Examination Fee Remission Scheme on 12 November 2012. Members supported the proposal and invited the Administration to consider further strengthening the support for NCS students.

BACKGROUND

16. The EFRS was introduced in the 1978/79 academic year following the approval of FC in 1978 to provide fee remission for public examinations for needy students. On 27 May 2011, FC approved vide FCR(2011-12)17 various changes to the ambit of the EFRS, including providing half fee remission to students means-tested by SFAA and providing fee remission to needy NCS students sitting for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination to enable them to meet the basic language requirement for local higher education. The actual number of NCS students benefiting from examination fee remission for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination in the 2011/12 academic year was around 100.

Education Bureau
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