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Subcommittee on Poverty

Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 9 July 2013

Qualifications Framework

Purpose

This paper summarizes discussions by relevant committees of the Legislative Council ("LegCo") on the Qualifications Framework ("QF").

Background

2. Launched in May 2008, QF is a seven-level hierarchy covering academic, vocational and continuing education sectors. According to the Administration, QF aims to promote lifelong learning with a view to continuously enhancing the quality, professionalism and competitiveness of the workforce in an increasingly globalized and knowledge-based economy. 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.

3. In the 2013 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced that the Government would continue to promote QF. Apart from the Specification of Competency Standards and the Award Titles Scheme ("ATS") and QF Credit, the Administration would further explore the development of a credit accumulation and transfer system, and foster collaboration with QFs of other areas.

Members' major deliberations and concerns

4. The implementation and enhancement of QF had been discussed by

the Panel on Manpower and the Panel on Education. Major concerns of members are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Qualifications Framework Support Schemes ("QFSS")

5. Members noted that to support the implementation of QF, the Administration had launched for a period of five years, a number of financial assistance schemes, known as QFSS, 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 as 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. The Administration advised that to encourage more providers to seek validation for their programmes, all education and training providers, irrespective of whether they were non-profit making organizations or not, should be eligible for the accreditation grant. In addition, the ceiling of the grant of \$3 million for each provider would apply to all providers, irrespective of their status. The Administration would continue to monitor and review the expenditure situation. Subject to availability of funds within the approved commitment and in the light of the further development of QF, the Administration might further fine-tune the operational details of QFSS having regard to operational experience and views of stakeholders.

7. As announced by the Financial Secretary in the 2013-2014 Budget, the Administration planned to provide \$10 million per year from 2013-2014 onwards to support Industry Training Advisory Committees ("ITACs") under QF to launch new initiatives to further enhance the knowledge and skills of workers in the industries, and their competitiveness in the labour market. To take forward these new initiatives, the Administration would extend the duration of the first five-year QFSS until around 31 March 2014.

Measures to encourage the participation of employers and employees in QF

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

11. 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 ITACs

12. 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.

13. 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. 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.

14. 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. As at January 2013, 19 ITACs had been set up, including Retail, Elderly Care Service and Property Management, covering about 46% of the workforce in Hong Kong. Of them, 12 ITACs had drawn up their SCSs, and the other ITACs would complete drawing up their SCSs in 2013 or 2014.

Recognition of prior qualifications and skills acquired at workplace

15. In response to members' concerns about the recognition of previous qualifications attained as well as the knowledge, skills and experience acquired at the workplace under QF, the Administration advised that the RPL mechanism had been implemented under QF to enable employees to obtain formal recognition of their competence acquired previously, so that they could pursue continuous learning without starting from scratch. Under the RPL mechanism, applications for recognition would be processed by the assessment agency. As at January 2013, RPL mechanism had been implemented in eight industries.

16. According to the Administration, under the RPL mechanism, there was a five-year transitional period for each industry during which employees might apply for a recognition of QF qualifications at levels 1 to 3, by producing documentary proofs of their years of relevant working experience, without the need to take any formal assessment tests. As regards recognition at higher levels, i.e. level 4 or above, it was necessary for an applicant to prove his possession of the relevant competency

standards and certain assessment had to be conducted.

17. Noting that the five-year transitional period for some participating industries would expire soon, members enquired whether the transitional period would be extended. The Administration advised that it had been working out post-transitional arrangements with the respective ITACs, and were consulting the stakeholders of the relevant industries. The arrangements would be duly worked out before the expiry of the transitional period, and the relevant details would be made available shortly.

Enhancement of QF

18. When the Panel on Manpower and the Panel on Education received briefings on the Chief Executive's 2013 Policy Address at the meetings on 25 January 2013, members were briefed on the major development of QF under the respective policy areas. The Administration pointed out that it announced the introduction of ATS and the use of QF Credit in October 2012. ATS specified the award titles that could be used for qualifications at various QF levels. QF Credit was a measure of volume or size of learning programmes recognized under QF. ATS and use of QF credit would further strengthen the infrastructure of QF in order to go in line with international development. EDB would explore the development of a credit accumulation and transfer system as the next step to enhance QF. In this connection, five education institutions had already signed a memorandum of understanding to give mutual recognition of credits awarded under their respective learning programmes.

Relevant papers

19. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

Appendix

Relevant papers on Qualifications Framework

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Finance Committee	22 June 2007 (Item 3)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	23 October 2008 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	16 July 2009 (Item III)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	22 October 2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	17 June 2010 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	17 June 2011 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Finance Committee	18 July 2011 (Item 4)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	25 January 2013 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Manpower	25 January 2013 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes