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Panel on Education

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 12 November 2012

Implementation of the new senior secondary curriculum and assessment

Purpose

This paper summarizes the issues of concern raised by the Panel on Education ("the Panel") about the implementation of the new senior secondary ("NSS") curriculum and assessment.

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. After a three-month consultation exercise which commenced in October 2004, the Administration published a Report entitled "The New Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education – Action Plan for Investing in the Future of Hong Kong" on 18 May 2005. The NSS curriculum under NAS has been implemented in all secondary schools at Secondary ("S") 4 level with effect from September 2009.

3. The NSS curriculum is made up of three components, namely, four core subjects of Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies ("LS"), elective subjects¹ and other learning experiences². Starting

¹ Students may choose two or three subjects from 20 elective subjects, a range of Applied Learning courses and other languages.

² These include moral and civic education, community service, aesthetic development etc.

from 2012, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education ("HKDSE") Examination, administered by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority ("HKEAA"), has replaced the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination ("HKCEE") and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination ("HKALE"). The results of the first HKDSE Examination were released on 20 July 2012.

4. A standards-referenced reporting ("SRR") system is used in reporting student results in the HKDSE Examination. Instead of using grades A to F as in the past reporting system, the results of the NSS subjects in the HKDSE 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. Unlike the previous reporting system under which Grade E is a passing grade, there is no official passing level under SRR. The HKDSE Examination also comprises a School-based Assessment ("SBA") component under which students are assessed by their subject teachers. Marks awarded will count towards students' results in the HKDSE Examination.

Deliberations of the Panel

5. Over the past few years, the Panel held a number of meetings to discuss issues related to the implementation of the NSS curriculum and assessment in the context of reviewing NAS and the HKDSE Examination. Members were briefed on the latest progress of the implementation of NAS at the meeting on 20 April 2012. At the meeting on 11 June 2012, members discussed with the Administration issues related to Applied Learning ("ApL") in the NSS curriculum. The Administration reported to the Panel the final preparation in the run up to the release of HKDSE Examination results at the meeting on 10 July 2012. The major issues of concern raised by members are set out in the following paragraphs.

The NSS curriculum

Core subjects

6. Some members were of the view that LS should not be a mandatory subject for university admission. They considered that the absence of structured teaching and learning resources and the lack of clear objective assessment criteria had made it difficult for many students to grasp the subject. Some other members however considered that LS should be a mandatory

subject in the NSS curriculum as it was important for students to acquire a broad knowledge base and develop critical thinking skills. In this regard, 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. Moreover, an attainment at Level 2 for LS would suffice as part of the minimum university entry requirement.

7. Members also exchanged views with the Administration on whether Mathematics should be specified as a mandatory subject for university admission. Some members were concerned this would deprive the chance of those students who excelled in subjects other than Mathematics for local university education. According to the Administration, local universities supported the designation of Mathematics as 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 nevertheless agreed to exercise flexibility in considering the applications for admission on a case-by-case basis.

8. Some members were of the view that the Administration should review whether LS and Mathematics should continue to be core subjects. In response, the Administration advised that the matter would be included in the comprehensive review on the NSS curriculum. The Administration would take into account the performance of students and whether the knowledge and analytical skills they had acquired from LS and Mathematics were helpful for their articulation to post-secondary programmes.

Liberal Studies

9. On the course design of LS, members sought information on whether the Administration had made reference to the experiences of other jurisdictions. It was also suggested that different approaches, including non-classroom learning experiences and enhancing interactions between teachers and students, should be adopted for the teaching of LS.

10. The Administration advised that it had taken into account overseas experiences in drawing up the LS curriculum with a view to encouraging students to draw knowledge from different disciplines. In view of the evolving and ever-changing nature of issues to be studied in LS, teaching of the subject should not rely on textbooks. The Web-based Resource Platform for LS had been put in place to facilitate class discussion of current issues. In collaboration with HKEAA, EDB had also set up a LS School Network Scheme to provide support to both schools and teachers on curriculum and assessment of the LS curriculum.

Applied Learning courses

11. Under the NSS curriculum, S5 and S6 students may choose ApL courses as elective subjects. Members note that the first cohort of NSS ApL courses was launched in September 2010. There was a concern about the significant difference in the number of students applying for certain ApL courses in the first cohort (i.e. 2010-2012) and the number applying in the second cohort (i.e. 2011-2013). In response, the Administration explained that the number of student applications for ApL courses depended, among others, on the number of participating schools as well as the number of course providers offering the courses.

12. There was a view that ApL courses should be less vocationally oriented and more geared to broadening students' knowledge base. It was also suggested that the low number of student applications for ApL course might be attributable to the high course fees. The Administration was asked to conduct a survey on students who did not take ApL courses to find out their reasons for not choosing the courses and to formulate appropriate measures to promote ApL. Whilst the Administration would consider the suggestion of conducting such a survey, it nevertheless advised that apart from imparting practical skills, ApL courses also aimed at developing students' interpersonal, generic and thinking skills, as well as innovation and entrepreneurship. There might be synergies between ApL courses and other elective subjects under the NSS curriculum.

13. Some members expressed concern about the pathways to further studies and employment for students who had taken ApL courses, as well as the recognition of ApL courses. The Panel noted from the Administration that as the first cohort of senior secondary students taking ApL courses had just graduated in 2012, information on their pathways to further education and employment was yet to be obtained. At the meeting in June 2012, the Administration reported to the Panel on the latest progress of the recognition of ApL courses under NSS. For example, students attaining the result of "Attained with Distinction" in ApL courses would be regarded as reaching Level 3 or above at HKDSE Examination. The "Attained" level is deemed by the Civil Service Bureau as Level 2 for the purpose of civil service appointment.

HKDSE Examination

Reporting method for HKDSE Examination

14. 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. Hence, the likelihood of disputes over results might increase.

15. According to the Administration, it was a global trend to use SRR which was an internationally recognized method for reporting examination results. SRR would enable 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. SRR also provided a good basis for comparing the standards and performance of students who took the examination in different years. Teachers could also adjust the pedagogy according to the ability of students as indicated by the results of SRR.

Assessment of LS

16. Members were concerned about the fairness and reliability of the assessment of students' performance in LS. They considered that as the assessment of LS was based on the judgment of the markers and in the absence of uniform assessment criteria, there was doubt as to how LS examination scripts would be marked. Concern was raised about possible disputes arising from 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 the personal views stated by the students. Members also suggested that for the sake of clarity, samples of the 2012 HKDSE LS marked examination scripts should be made public.

17. The Administration explained that in assessing students' performance in the LS examination, the emphasis was on the skills applied by students 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' reference. Examination scripts would be marked by two markers and when there were significant differences in the markers' opinions, the opinion of a third or even a fourth marker would be sought. With the established guidelines, candidates would receive fair grades.

18. There was a view that schools should be allowed to decide whether or not to adopt SBA within the first three years after the implementation of the NSS curriculum. The Administration explained that SBA was an integral part of LS and was not designed as an option for schools and students. According to HKEAA, many overseas bodies had accepted that SBA was an integral part of LS. Without SBA, the recognition of the qualification of HKDSE by overseas jurisdictions might be affected.

19. Members expressed the concern that conducting SBA had created heavy workload on students, and asked whether the Administration would consider making adjustments to the SBA arrangements. In response, the Administration advised that HKEAA had reviewed and adopted arrangements for streamlining SBA in the HKDSE Examination. According to the information provided by the Administration in April 2012, HKEAA had conducted a longitudinal study since the end of 2010 on the implementation of the Independent Enquiry Study ("IES"), the school-based component of LS, in schools for the first cohort of students taking LS. The study was scheduled to be completed by August 2012 and reference would be made to the results of the study for the review and enhancements of the implementation of IES.

20. The design and setting of LS examination questions was another issue of concern to members. In one of the questions in the LS examination paper in the HKDSE Examination 2012, candidates were asked to refer to the popularity ratings of political parties obtained from a survey with a low response rate. There was grave concern that the examination question itself was a leading question and the political stance indicated by candidates in their answers might affect their marks. According to HKEAA, in assessing students' performance in the LS examination, consideration would be given to whether candidates were able to understand the questions and express their views clearly with justifications. The political stance of candidates was not a key factor in the assessment. Some members commented that the Chinese version of an LS examination question was poorly written. Members called on HKEAA to review the design and setting of examination questions for LS in the HKDSE Examination.

Rechecking/re-marking of HKDSE Examination results

21. Members considered it important to put in place a fair appeal mechanism to handle disputes on the assessment results. They 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. The Administration advised that as it was the first HKDSE Examination, school candidates would not be required to obtain the support of their schools in applying for rechecking/re-marking of their 2012 HKDSE Examination results/scripts. In addition to the four existing Onscreen Marking ("OSM") centres, three temporary OSM centres would be set up to handle the anticipated increase in applications due to the double cohort of HKALE and HKDSE Examination in 2012. The additional OSM centres would also enhance HKEAA's capacity in handling re-marking.

22. Members considered that the re-marking fee of \$720 per subject was hardly affordable for the less well-off candidates, and urged the Administration

and HKEAA to provide fee remission for needy students. As advised by the Administration, the Examination Fee Remission Scheme administered by the Student Financial Assistance Agency and the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA") administered by the Social Welfare Department did not provide automatic assistance for supplementary services administered by HKEAA, including rechecking/re-marking of examination results. Nevertheless, needy candidates could apply to HKEAA for consideration of a partial waiver for fees on rechecking/re-marking. 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 for consideration by HKEAA. Fees for rechecking/re-marking would be refunded to candidates who got an upgrade in the examination result following the review.

Recognition of HKDSE

23. Members noted that the HKDSE qualification was broadly comparable to the General Certificate of Education ("GCE") A Level Examination³. Given that Level 4 is not further differentiated in HKDSE results, members suggested to add a Level 4* which was comparable to Grade B in GCE A Level Examination. This would facilitate renowned universities in the United Kingdom in deciding whether a HKDSE holder could fulfil the relevant university admission requirements. The Administration explained that there was normally no direct grade by grade comparison between two qualifications unless the design of one system was modelled on another, as in the case of HKALE being modelled on GCE A Level Examination. The Administration indicated that it would review the HKDSE levels after the first HKDSE Examination in 2012.

24. As HKDSE was a new qualification, members considered it necessary for the Administration to promote this qualification in order to enhance its international recognition. At the meeting of the Panel on 20 April 2012, the Administration informed members that more than 110 universities worldwide had recognised the HKDSE qualification. The Administration was requested to provide members with details of the overseas universities which had recognized the HKDSE qualification.

25. Given that many local students intended to pursue tertiary education in

³ In early 2010, HKEAA announced the inclusion of the HKDSE qualification into the Tariff System of the University and Colleges Admissions Service in the United Kingdom. Levels 3, 4 and 5 in the HKDSE Examination were broadly comparable to Grades E, C and A in the GCE A Level Examination respectively. However, there are no levels in the HKDSE results that are comparable to Grades B and D in the GCE A Level Examination.

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.

26. The Administration advised that there were currently three ways for local students to get 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 them; while some 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 EDB 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 taking the Joint Entrance Examination for Universities in Mainland China.

Relevant Council questions

27. Hon CHEUNG Man-kwong raised a written question at the Council meeting of 6 January 2010 enquiring on the elective subjects taken by students under the New Senior Secondary Academic Structure. He raised another written question at the Council meeting of 18 May 2011 on HKDSE examination fees. At the Council meeting of 9 May 2012, Hon WONG Yuk-man raised an oral question to enquire on the design of examination questions for LS in the HKDSE.

Review on the implementation of NSS curriculum and assessment

28. According to the information provided by the Administration in April 2012, the Curriculum Development Council, EDB and HKEAA would jointly evaluate the implementation of the NSS curriculum and the delivery of the first HKDSE Examination in 2012. A comprehensive review of all NSS subjects, including both curriculum and assessment issues, would be conducted. The Administration will brief the Panel on the review on the NSS curriculum and the delivery of the first HKDSE Examination at the upcoming Panel meeting on 12 November 2012.

Relevant papers

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

Council Business Division 4
Legislative Council Secretariat
9 November 2012

Appendix

List of relevant papers

Committee	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
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
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

Committee	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Establishment Subcommittee	28.11.2007	Minutes EC(2007-08)10
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
Panel on Education	30.3.2009 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	11.7.2009 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	6.1.2010	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 90 - 96 (Question 15)
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 70 - 75 (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

Committee	Date of meeting/ issue date	Paper
Legislative Council	9.5.2012	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 48 – 55 (Question 6)
Panel on Education	11.6.2012 (Item VI)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Education	10.7.2012 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes

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