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Panel on Education

Meeting on 15 July 2015

Updated background brief on issues related to the review of the new senior secondary curriculum and assessment

Purpose

This paper summarizes the deliberations of members of the Panel on Education ("the Panel") on issues related to the review of the new senior secondary ("NSS") curriculum and assessment.

Background

The NSS curriculum under the new academic structure ("NAS")

2. The NAS comprises a three-year senior secondary curriculum and a four-year undergraduate programme. The NSS curriculum has been implemented in all secondary schools at Secondary ("S") 4 level since September 2009.

3. The NSS curriculum is made up of three components, namely, (i) four core subjects of Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies ("LS"); (ii) elective subjects¹ and (iii) Other Learning Experiences². Starting 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 and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. Students now receive 12 years' school education and will take only one public examination upon completion of S6.

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.

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, the results of the NSS subjects in the HKDSE Examination are reported in five levels, i.e. 1 to 5. 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.

Review of the NAS

5. The Administration has taken forward the review of NAS in strategic stages. The short-term stage (from October 2012 to March 2013) of the review focused on refinements and concerns and issues that had already emerged from the implementation of the NSS curriculum and assessment.

6. In April 2013, the Administration released a report entitled "The New Senior Secondary Learning Journey – Moving Forward to Excel", with details of the fundamental changes, achievements and challenges of NAS as well as an overview of the recommendations for fine-tuning the NSS curriculum and assessment³. The short-term fine-tuning measures on the NSS curriculum and assessment were implemented in September 2013.

7. The NAS Medium-term Review was launched in October 2013 and the major issues to be addressed were at **Appendix I**. According to the Administration, the recommendations for the NAS Medium-term Review would be made in batches so that schools and students could benefit at the earliest possible time. The first batch of recommendations on four subjects, namely Chinese Language, Chinese Literature, LS (Independent Enquiry Study) ("IES") and Business, Accounting and Financial Studies ("BAFS"), was announced in April 2014 and some of them were implemented in schools in the 2014-2015 school year⁴. In April 2015, the Administration announced the revision of School-based Assessment, as well as of the curricula and public examinations of some subjects in the NAS Medium-term Review and Beyond⁵. The last batch of recommendations was expected to be announced by July 2015. Afterwards, the long-term review of all senior secondary subjects would be conducted on a regular basis taking into consideration the subjects' needs and the ongoing curriculum and assessment development cycle.

³ The report is available at <http://www.edb.gov.hk/nas/review>.

⁴ Information on the NAS Medium-term recommendations is available at <http://www.edb.gov.hk/nas/review>.

⁵ Recommendations on the revision of School-based Assessment are available at <http://www.edb.gov.hk/nas/review>.

Deliberations on issues of concern

8. The Panel attached great importance to the review of the NSS curriculum and assessment. At the meetings held on 30 May 2013 and 9 June 2014, members discussed with the Administration issues related to the relevant findings and recommendations of the short-term review and the first batch of recommendations of the Medium-term Review. The Panel also discussed at various meetings issues related to certain subjects under the NSS curriculum. The major views and concerns expressed by members are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Objective and scope of the review

9. Members noted that in response to concerns about the lack of clear objectives of the review against which the success or otherwise of the NSS curriculum could be evaluated, the Administration had stated that given the scale of the education reform, it would take time for experiences to be consolidated. Hence, a pragmatic approach had been adopted to conduct the review in stages, with the first stage focusing on the more immediate and practical concerns.

10. There was a view that the review had not addressed issues related to the provision of teacher manpower in schools. The decline in secondary student population would eventually lead to a reduction in the number of classes, teachers and elective subjects offered by schools. Hence, it was necessary for the Administration to examine how the teacher manpower in schools could be deployed to ensure the smooth implementation of the NSS curriculum and assessment.

11. According to the Administration, the review had attached equal importance to teacher manpower and to curriculum and assessment. It nevertheless reiterated that issues related to the overall workload of teachers and students would be monitored on an ongoing basis.

Workload arising from implementation of the NSS curriculum and assessment

12. Members expressed concern about the heavy course contents of some subjects, such as BAFS and Mathematics subjects, and insufficient lesson time to cover the NSS curriculum. They noted that schools often had to arrange after-school classes for students which had resulted in increased workload for both teachers and students.

13. As advised by the Administration, in comparison with other countries, lesson time in Hong Kong was relatively longer because students in general took six to seven subjects (i.e. four core subjects and two/three elective subjects).

Following review, both the short-term recommendations and the first batch of medium-term recommendations aimed at trimming the curriculum content and streamlining assessment requirements of individual subjects where practicable. It was expected that the total lesson time as well as the workload on teachers and students would be reduced after the implementation of the recommendations.

Subjects under the new senior secondary curriculum

Liberal Studies

14. Members held different views over the LS subject under the NSS curriculum. Some members disagreed that LS should be a mandatory subject for admission to local undergraduate programmes. They considered that the absence of structured curricular content and the lack of clear objective assessment criteria had made it difficult for many teachers and students to grasp the subject. There was a view that the LS subject focused too heavily on local political issues. There was also concern about possible bias and subjectivity arising from the political stance, if any, of the teachers teaching the subject. Some other members however agreed that LS should be a mandatory subject in the NSS curriculum as it was important for students to acquire a broad base of knowledge and develop analytical and critical thinking skills. They considered that certain hiccups in the initial stage should not become impediments to implementing the LS subject.

15. According to the Administration, the objective of LS was to develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills, which were essential for students of all disciplines. As a core subject, LS served irreplaceable functions as it interconnected the knowledge across different disciplines and subjects in the NSS curriculum. Regarding concerns about the fairness and reliability of the assessment of students' performance in LS as such assessment was based on the judgment of the examination script markers, HKEAA confirmed that the assessment design for individual subjects had followed the Curriculum and Assessment Guide. The assessment of the LS subject covered all the modules of the subject instead of focusing on a particular module only.

16. Some members expressed grave concerns about the handling of controversial political issues in LS classes. According to the Education Bureau ("EDB"), teaching and learning should be conducted in a professional manner, free from any outside pressure or political interference. The Administration would defer to the professionalism of teachers and schools in conducting their activities. It also urged for respect for the existing professional mechanism of curriculum development and assessment in Hong Kong.

17. Concern was also raised about the lack of learning and teaching resources for the LS subject, as LS was a relatively new subject and EDB currently did not accept the submission of LS textbooks for review. The Administration explained that over 2 000 items of learning and teaching materials and assessment items were provided for teachers on the Web-based Resource Platform for Liberal Studies. EDB would publish the Liberal Studies Curriculum Resources Booklet Series providing ready-to-use learning and teaching resources for the six modules in the LS curriculum. In the longer run, it would also explore the feasibility of accepting LS textbooks to be submitted for review.

Elective subjects

18. Some members observed that after the implementation of the NSS curriculum, there had been a drop in the number of students taking certain elective subjects such as Chinese History, Visual Arts, and Information and Communication Technology ("ICT").

19. In this regard, the Administration explained that changes in the number of students taking NSS elective subjects could be mainly attributed to a drop in the overall student population. Moreover, under the NSS curriculum, students were given a much more diversified choice of subjects than under the past secondary curriculum. Very often, students were encouraged to explore their interests and broaden their choices by taking more than two elective subjects at S4, and then make a decision, having regard to their interests and aptitude, to take two elective subjects in the HKDSE Examination. Hence, student enrolment for certain elective subjects might drop at S5 and S6 levels. Under the NSS curriculum, students could take elective subjects according to their preference rather than being streamed into arts, science and commerce classes as under the past curricular system.

20. Noting that some elective subjects were taken by a handful of students only, some members were concerned about the enrolment threshold, if any, for offering an elective subject in schools and for arranging examinations in the HKDSE Examination. As advised by the Administration, it had all along encouraged schools to offer more choice of NSS elective subjects. Schools were also encouraged to network with other schools so as to widen the range of NSS subjects that could be taken by their students.

21. The Panel noted that the BAFS subject was a new subject under the NSS curriculum which had combined and replaced several subjects in the past curriculum. Some members shared the concern expressed by teachers about the depth and breadth of the BAFS curriculum, and its course contents which were overloaded to the extent of resembling a miniature undergraduate course in

Business Administration. Noting stakeholders' concerns, the Administration informed the Panel that one of the short-term recommendations was the reduction of the content of the BAFS curriculum by 15%. Communication with stakeholders would continue in the medium- and long-term review to further improve the subject.

22. Noting a reduced interest in history subjects among secondary students, some members suggested that Chinese History should be made a compulsory subject under the NSS curriculum. In this regard, the Administration informed members that Chinese History was the eighth most popular subject among all the elective subjects in the first three sittings of the HKDSE Examination, and rising to share the rank of the seventh most popular subject with ICT in the enrolment rate for the 2015 HKDSE Examination. About 10% of the candidates of HKDSE Examination sat for the examination on Chinese History in recent years. The ratio was comparable to that of the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination in the past.

23. At the Panel meeting held on 12 November 2012, concern was raised about the number of candidates taking the Visual Arts subject which had dropped significantly by 30% to 40% compared to the number of candidates taking the same subject prior to the implementation of NAS. Some members questioned the need to assess students on their ability in "Art Appreciation and Criticism", as well as appointing subject teachers to serve as markers instead of engaging independent experts. According to HKEAA, the teachers surveyed in the course of the review had agreed that the assessment on "Art Appreciation and Criticism" should be maintained. As subject teachers were most familiar with the requirements of the curriculum and assessment, it had been an established practice for subject teachers to serve as markers of the subject in public examinations.

24. The Panel noted that under the NSS curriculum, a wide range of Applied Learning ("ApL") courses were offered to S5 and S6 students as elective subjects in addition to traditional academic elective subjects. Some members were concerned about the drop in enrolment for ApL in various cohorts, the relatively low enrolment of students from special schools and whether the courses offered could meet the needs of the relevant industries. To encourage the uptake of ApL, there was a suggestion that the Administration should explore measures such as subsidizing, freezing or waiving the examination fees for ApL subjects.

25. According to the Administration, the percentage of students taking ApL courses in relation to the student population in various cohorts had remained stable. EDB would take action to facilitate the enrolment of students from special schools where appropriate. Members had been informed that a

committee on ApL comprising members from different industries had been set up under Curriculum Development Council and the ApL courses were linked to six broad professional fields relevant to the social and economic development of Hong Kong.

26. Members noted that the Administration would explore the feasibility of introducing one more attainment level for reporting ApL results in the HKDSE Examination to reflect students' better performance, in addition to the existing two levels of "Attained" and "Attained with Distinction", the latter being equivalent to Level 3 or above in HKDSE for further studies and/or employment. There was view that if the aforesaid arrangement would only apply to some, but not all, ApL subjects, those subjects with only two attainment levels might become less attractive to students.

Support for students with special educational needs

27. One of members' main concerns was the support available to assist students with special educational needs ("SEN students") to cope with the NSS curriculum. They noted that as short-term measures, EDB would promote teachers' confidence and competence by providing exemplars and resource materials for teachers in designing school-based curriculum with adaptation and relevant assessment processes that could better cater for the needs of SEN students.

28. Some members were gravely concerned about the difficulties faced by SEN students in studying the LS subject which placed heavy emphasis on language competency and analytical thinking, in which these students were relatively weak. Given the importance of LS as one of the core subjects, not attaining good results in the subject would become an impediment to SEN students' pursuit of higher education.

29. Members considered it important to put in place necessary adaptation measures to ensure that SEN students could be equitably assessed without having an unfair advantage over other candidates. In this regard, the Administration had highlighted that the IES project of the LS subject could be submitted in either written or non-written form to cater for students of different language abilities.

30. Regarding the LS subject, HKEAA informed the Panel that advice had been sought from educational psychologists on the necessary adaptation measures for SEN students in the HKDSE Examination, such as extending the examination time, exemption of students with hearing impairment from the listening assessment etc. HKEAA was also examining the feasibility of allowing SEN students to answer questions by speech-to-text software or audio

recording for the LS subject.

31. Members were concerned about the uptake of ApL courses by SEN students and students of special schools. According to the Administration, students from special schools could opt to take ApL courses or Adapted ApL courses. Among the 60 special schools, 31 of them served students with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities who were likely to choose Adapted ApL courses to suit their learning needs. In the 2014-2016 cohort, there were 30 students taking ApL courses and 199 students taking Adapted ApL courses. To encourage students from special schools to take ApL courses, the Administration was reviewing the implementation arrangement, strengthening its support and publicity to schools to facilitate student enrolment.

Latest position

32. The Administration will brief the Panel on the progress of the NAS Medium-term review at the meeting to be held on 15 July 2015.

Relevant papers

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

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NAS Medium-term Review Major Issues

School-based Assessment (SBA)

- As part and parcel of the whole-school curriculum and public assessment, a holistic refinement on the total impact of SBA would be conducted to explore the possibility of further streamlining in order to address the workload issues while maintaining international recognition and the underlying principles of SBA.

Core Subjects

- **Chinese Language** - explore introducing classical set texts and assessment of these texts in the examination
- **Liberal Studies** – refine the curriculum and assessment design
- **Mathematics** – refine the senior secondary Mathematics curriculum framework

Elective Subjects

- **Business, Accounting and Financial Studies** - explore the feasibility of ‘splitting’ the subject and/or separate grading and reporting
- **Chinese Literature** - explore revision of set texts
- **Economics** - (i) consider the feasibility of incorporating a news commentary type question / data response question in the examination to replace SBA and (ii) explore further development of the topics of the curriculum
- **Ethics and Religious Studies** - explore reduction of SBA workload
- **Geography** - study the need to revise the senior secondary Geography curriculum; and to study the issue of insufficient lesson time for learning and teaching and to propose possible solutions
- **Health Management and Social Care** - refine the curriculum and assessment designs and SBA, including the format of the report in SBA (written / audio-visual) and weighting of SBA

Applied Learning Courses (ApL)

Apart from the regular review of ApL courses, the medium-term review will include:

- refining the grading mechanism; and
- evaluation of early commencement of ApL in S4 and linking ApL to the Qualifications Framework.

Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination

Further exploration on the HKDSE Examination to better accommodate learner diversity, if deemed appropriate, which may include:

- introduction of half subjects in some suitable senior secondary subjects; and
- revisiting the grading system.

Other Related and Emerging Issues

Further ongoing studies on emerging issues which include:

- unintended impact, e.g. whether the student programme has achieved a broad and balanced curriculum with specialization achieved in a broad knowledge base;
- some curriculum design/assessment principles, e.g. whether values have been appropriately applied in public assessment; whether the admission requirements and scoring system should be further improved;
- professional capacity and sustainability, nature of support for schools and teachers;
- catering for learner diversity and need to support schools (both lower achievers and more able students);
- Other Learning Experiences and Student Learning Profile (e.g. How is it affected by 2400±200 lesson hours?);
- some emerging issues related to other senior secondary subjects such as Visual Arts and Chinese History; and
- other issues related to curriculum and assessment but outside the curriculum and assessment development cycle which would be suitably discussed and communicated to relevant partner organisations and stakeholders.

List of relevant papers

| Committee | Date of meeting | Paper |
|---------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Panel on Education | 30.4.2010 (Item II) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Panel on Education | 12.7.2010 (Item IV) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Panel on Education | 13.6.2011 (Item VII) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Panel on Education | 12.3.2012 (Item IV) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> <u>CB(2)1681/11-12(01)</u> |
| Panel on Education | 20.4.2012 (Item V) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Legislative Council | 9.5.2012 | <u>Official Record of Proceedings</u> <u>Pages 48 – 55 (Question 6)</u> |
| Panel on Education | 11.6.2012 (Item VI) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Panel on Education | 10.7.2012 (Item IV) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Panel on Education | 12.11.2012 (Item VI) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> <u>CB(4)385/12-13(01)</u> |
| Panel on Education | 25.1.2013 | <u>CB(4)318/12-13(01)</u> |
| Panel on Education | 30.5.2013 (Item IV) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Panel on Education | 9.6.2014 (Item V) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> <u>CB(4)803/14-15(01)</u> |

| Committee | Date of meeting | Paper |
|--------------------|------------------------|--|
| Panel on Education | 8.12.2014 (Item V) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> <u>CB(4)805/14-15(01)</u> |
| Panel on Education | 9.2.2015 (Item V) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> |
| Panel on Education | 16.3.2015 (Item V) | <u>Agenda</u> <u>Minutes</u> <u>CB(4)924/14-15(01)</u> |
| Panel on Education | 8.6.2015 (Item IV) | <u>CB(4)1098/14-15(01)</u> |

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