

For discussion on
13 February 2017

Legislative Council Panel on Education
Discussion on
The Liberal Studies Subject under the New Senior Secondary Curriculum

Purpose

This paper aims to:

- (a) outline the rationale and nature of Liberal Studies as a core subject in the senior secondary curriculum;
- (b) report on the implementation of Liberal Studies and the continual review of the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies; and
- (c) highlight some concerns of the public regarding the implementation of Liberal Studies and the corresponding measures taken by the Education Bureau (EDB).

Rationale and Nature of Liberal Studies under the Senior Secondary Curriculum

2. Since the implementation of the new senior secondary (NSS) curriculum at secondary four in 2009, Liberal Studies has been one of the four core subjects as well as a public examination subject, making up about 10 percent of the total learning hours of the three-year senior secondary curriculum (i.e. about 250 hours). Liberal Studies and the other core subjects, elective subjects and Other Learning Experiences (OLE) are interrelated and complementary to each other

in ensuring a broad and balanced education for students at the senior secondary level.

3. The interdisciplinary and enquiry learning design of Liberal Studies aims to help students enhance their awareness of the developments in themselves, society, the nation, the world as well as in science and technology (such as public health and environment), broaden their knowledge base, connect the knowledge obtained across different subjects, view things from multiple perspectives, make analysis based on facts and evidence, enhance critical thinking skills and develop positive values, so as to help them become informed and responsible citizens (please refer to Appendix 1 “The Curriculum Aims and Content of Liberal Studies” for details).

Implementation of the Curriculum

4. Since the 2009/10 school year, the EDB has been gaining an understanding of the implementation of the Liberal Studies curriculum through curriculum development visits, school-based support services, school networks, external school reviews and focus inspections on Liberal Studies, and given suggestions to schools to enhance their self-improvement. As shown in observations from frontline visits during the past few years, most schools were able to master the rationale and skills for the curriculum planning of Liberal Studies, and the selected enquiry issues were closely related to the learning and assessment objectives. Teachers were able to connect the essential knowledge and concepts of different modules while setting the major enquiry questions, allowing students to grasp the concepts progressively, construct knowledge, and develop thinking, problem solving and enquiry skills. Students were also able to make reasonable analyses and judgements based on the information collected. In addition, schools were able to make use of a variety of life-wide learning activities to enrich students’ classroom learning, broaden their horizons as well as deepen their understanding of different issues in society.

Continual Review of the Curriculum and Assessment of Liberal Studies

5. The review of the curriculum and assessment of Liberal Studies, as part of the New Academic Structure review, is a continual process of renewal and refinement. It is jointly conducted by the EDB, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC), the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) and the related subject committees.

Learning Effectiveness

6. Since the first Liberal Studies public examination in 2012, views from students and teachers have been regularly collected by the EDB to keep abreast of the situation in the frontline. At the end of 2012 and 2013, the EDB conducted the “Opinion Survey on NSS Graduates’ Learning Experiences” on the first-year students admitted to programmes of universities/tertiary institutions with the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) qualifications. The findings revealed that over 70% of the respondents agreed that Liberal Studies had enhanced their knowledge base (77%), ability to think from multiple perspectives (76.1%), critical thinking skills (71%) and social awareness (73.6%). The survey conducted in 2013 also revealed that teachers and students expressed concerns about the workload of this subject.

7. The *Report on the New Academic Structure Medium-term Review and Beyond – Continual Renewal from Strength to Strength* released in 2015 further revealed that most teachers and students agreed that the curriculum aims and the learning outcomes of Liberal Studies were achieved in general. Most teachers agreed that the Independent Enquiry Study (IES) had a positive impact on nurturing students’ problem solving skills and independent thinking skills, as well as developing their confidence in learning. In the same year, the EDB conducted a sample survey on the Independent Enquiry Study (IES) topics undertaken by students. It was found that their IES topics were of a wide variety

and related to the issues of the six modules of the curriculum, showing that IES was able to broaden students' learning experience.

Curriculum Framework

8. Regarding the curriculum, relevant committees of the Liberal Studies curriculum affirmed that the existing curriculum structure was crucial to maintaining Liberal Studies as a core subject of the senior secondary curriculum. Therefore, on the premise that Liberal Studies would remain as a core subject in the senior secondary curriculum, it was recommended in the NAS Medium-term Review that revisions to part of the curriculum content were to be made to refine the scope and focus of the related areas, and to update some content and examples to keep abreast of the development in knowledge and society. The CDC and the Public Examinations Board jointly endorsed the above recommendations, which have also been implemented at secondary four since September, 2015. The endorsed revisions to the curriculum can help ensure the healthy development of Liberal Studies while maintaining its stability and keeping abreast of the latest development.

Public Assessment

9. Regarding the assessment, concrete and streamlining measures on the implementation and assessment of the IES were proposed in the Medium-term Review on Liberal Studies. Other enhancement measures included the provision of the "*Curriculum and Assessment Resource Package*" for explaining the breadth and depth of the curriculum as well as adjusting the length and complexity of the public examination papers (please refer to Appendix 2: Summary of the Medium-term Review of Curriculum and Assessment of Liberal Studies in 2015" for details). In 2015, the EDB also commissioned a tertiary institution to conduct a study on the HKDSE candidates' live scripts. The findings revealed that students were able to demonstrate good critical

thinking skills and the ability to think from multiple perspectives, which were positively correlated with the candidates' results in the public examination.

10. While considering ways to improve the assessment design of the public examination to cater for students' diverse abilities, the feasibility of including more short questions or multiple-choice questions in the written examination was discussed with the purpose of enabling candidates who are weaker in written presentation to demonstrate their strengths. Although the above suggestion was not fully accepted at the time, it should merit continual exploration as a possible direction for further development. Apart from this, adjustments on the public examination could also be made to align with the possible changes in the curriculum in future (such as dividing the curriculum content into core and non-core components) and to help students become more focused on their learning.

The General Public's Concerns regarding the Implementation of Liberal Studies and the Response from the EDB

Subject Impact and Effectiveness of Learning and Teaching

11. There is a general concern that the implementation of Liberal Studies has deviated from its original rationale, which leads to students' groundless empty talks. However, various data and newspaper commentaries revealed that the education sector and even the public at large generally recognised the rationale and nature of Liberal Studies, which emphasise helping students develop a balanced knowledge base, view things from multiple perspectives, make unbiased and rational analysis based on facts and evidence, enhance critical thinking skills and nurture positive values. According to the data collected from our curriculum development visits and focus group meetings regarding schools' implementation of Liberal Studies, Liberal Studies teachers were able to adhere to the principle of professionalism to achieve the rationale

of the Liberal Studies curriculum design. In recent years, as teachers have accumulated quite a lot of experience and achieved positive outcomes, they have not only exhibited enhanced confidence but also a better grasp of the teaching content and assessment requirements.

12. On the other hand, some members of the public have expressed concerns that the learning and teaching resources of the subject are biased towards discussing current affairs and political issues. Some even think that the learning and teaching of Liberal Studies makes students blindly or radically participate in political activities. However, a recent study conducted by academics in 2016 affirmed the importance of Liberal Studies and revealed that Liberal Studies had a positive impact on students' rational thinking and communication skills, as well as reducing their radical behaviours.

Teachers' and Students' Workload

13. The past survey results revealed that teachers and students had expressed concerns about the workload of the subject. With the provision of the *Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Resource Package* jointly compiled by the EDB and the HKEAA in 2013, and the implementation of the streamlined measures on the school-based assessment in 2014, teachers' workload had been alleviated, their understanding of the breadth and depth of the curriculum and their mastery of the requirements of the public examination had also been enhanced.

The Review of Textbooks and Learning and Teaching Resources

14. There is a concern that the EDB does not review any Liberal Studies textbooks, so the "textbooks" available in the market have not been reviewed and approved by the EDB. In fact, the EDB has launched the Web-based Resource Platform for Liberal Studies (ls.edb.hkedcity.net) since the 2009/10 school year. The resources are updated and enriched regularly in order to cater

for students' diverse learning needs and to facilitate the teaching of Liberal Studies. Currently, over 2 700 items have been uploaded to the Web-based Resource Platform, and the average downloading rate in the 2016/17 school year is 2 640 times per month.

15. Using the *Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Resource Package (2013)* as the blueprint, the EDB published the *Liberal Studies Curriculum Resources Booklet Series* containing six booklets in 2015 and organised a series of related professional development programmes. Each of the modules in the resource booklet series provides teachers and students with the essential basic knowledge and concepts, the learning focuses and exemplars, learning and teaching materials, exemplars of issue enquiry, suggestions for school-based adaptation, extended reading, reference materials, etc. of the respective module to be covered in the three-year curriculum. An updated version will be published every year in due course.

16. All the above measures are effective in reducing teachers' and students' reliance on the Liberal Studies "textbooks" which are not reviewed by the EDB. The EDB will explore the feasibility of reviewing textbooks for Liberal Studies and establishing the textbook review requirements and criteria in order to meet the subject's unique requirements and contents for learning as well as for quality assurance.

Teacher Training

17. Another focus of the public's concerns is the professional development of Liberal Studies teachers and whether the support provided by the EDB is sufficient. From 2005 to the present, over 5 500 teachers have received more than 30 hours of related professional development organised by the EDB for Liberal Studies. Among them, 1 500 teachers have accumulated over 100 hours of professional development. The number of teachers

participating in the training programmes provided for the subject has amounted to nearly 10 000 headcounts. The tertiary institutions have also been offering degree and post-graduate diploma courses for pre-service and in-service teacher training on the subject. The EDB will continue to organise a greater number and a wider range of professional development programmes to address teachers' needs.

18. Apart from this, the EDB has provided considerable assistance to schools receiving school-based support services, including enhancing the school-based curriculum, developing learning and teaching resources, strengthening learning and teaching strategies, catering for learner diversity, enhancing assessment for learning, developing experiential learning and strengthening the vertical interface between junior and senior secondary education. At the same time, professional communication and collaboration across schools have also been enhanced through an array of professional learning communities and district-based network activities. In the past three years (i.e. from the 2013/14 to 2015/16 school years), a total of 126 secondary schools received school-based support services on Liberal Studies. The district-based networks also organised more than 100 diversified exchange activities to further enhance and disseminate good practices and examples.

Concluding Remarks

19. The EDB has always reviewed the areas of concern of teachers and other stakeholders in an open and pragmatic manner, including the implementation of the curriculum, teachers' workload, the breadth and depth of the teaching content, the balanced coverage of the interpretation of the knowledge content of different modules, the balance of the enquiry content and perspectives, students' knowledge foundation at junior secondary, whether there is any bias in the public examinations and the "backwash effect" on the learning and teaching of the curriculum. Generally speaking, revisions proposed

by the relevant Liberal Studies committees were supported by schools. The EDB, CDC and the HKEAA will continue to uphold the principle of professionalism and “learner-centredness”, listen carefully to views from different stakeholders, review and update the curriculum, as well as provide enhanced support measures in a timely manner.

Education Bureau

February 2017

The Curriculum Aims and Content of Liberal Studies

Curriculum Aims

Liberal Studies emphasises supporting students' development of higher order thinking skills and providing the context for an integrated application of different generic skills to construct knowledge. When students are engaged in the issue enquiry process, they need to grasp the objective facts and evidence, identify views stated or implied in the information, analyse issues using appropriate thinking skills, and apply multiple perspectives in making judgements and decisions. Students are never encouraged to criticise for criticism's sake in Liberal Studies. On the contrary, when students are stating their own views, they are expected to present arguments clearly and demonstrate respect for evidence, open-mindedness and tolerance towards views and values held by others, so that they become lifelong learners with sound critical thinking.

As a core subject in the NSS Curriculum, Liberal Studies ensures laying a sound foundation of lifelong learning for students, regardless of the subject combination at the senior secondary level and whether they will pursue further studies or enter into the workplace, to interface smoothly to vocational education, post-secondary education and the foundation year of university education, to equip them with related self-learning skills, and to develop positive values to cope with the ever changing contexts and issues in daily life and the workplace.

Curriculum Content and Overall Structure

The Liberal Studies curriculum comprises the following six modules:

- Personal Development & Interpersonal Relationships
- Hong Kong Today
- Modern China
- Globalization
- Public Health
- Energy Technology & the Environment

There are themes and enquiry questions listed under each module to indicate the focus and pathways of enquiry, and to provide specific contexts to facilitate students' learning. The design of the contents of these modules is based on the foundation of the essential knowledge and skills that students have acquired from different Key Learning Areas at the primary and junior secondary levels. Important contemporary issues from the six modules are also taken as entry points for students to connect different disciplines of knowledge (such as science, technology, history and geography), view things from various perspectives and continue to construct knowledge through the enquiry learning process, so that students broaden their knowledge base and extend the breadth and depth of their learning.

**Summary of the Medium-term Review of
Curriculum and Assessment of Liberal Studies in 2015**

Design of the Curriculum and Assessment	Recommendation	Progress
<u>Curriculum Aims</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance students' awareness of society, the nation, the world and the environment; broaden their knowledge base and perspectives towards issues; and connect knowledge across different disciplines and enhance their critical thinking skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remain unchanged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implemented
<u>Curriculum Framework</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprising six modules under three Areas of Study; an Independent Enquiry Study (IES) to be completed by students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short-term recommendation: Maintain the existing curriculum and provide the "<i>Curriculum and Assessment Resource Package</i>" to clarify the breadth and depth of the curriculum Medium-term recommendation: Maintain the existing curriculum framework; revise/update the "questions for enquiry" and "explanatory notes" of different modules to become more concrete, focused and to keep abreast of the developments in knowledge and society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implemented Implemented

<p><u>Public Assessment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper 1 (Data-response questions, all questions compulsory) 50% • Paper 2 (Extended-response questions, answer one question only) 30% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term recommendation: Adjust the length and the complexity of the public examination papers • Medium-term recommendation: Conduct extended consultation on public assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented and carried out continuously • Implemented and carried out continuously
<p><u>School-based Assessment (SBA)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Enquiry Study 20% • Three stages of assessment, including the ‘Process’ and ‘Task’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term recommendation: Implement the streamlined IES so that schools are not required to submit assessment records on the process • Medium-term recommendation: Adopt a structured enquiry approach and provide clear guidelines for conducting IES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented • Implemented
<p><u>Support Measures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development programme for teachers • Curriculum resources (Teachers’ handbooks, web-based resource platform) • School networks • School-based support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen and update various support measures • Short-term recommendation: Publish the <i>Curriculum and Assessment Resource Package</i> in June 2013 • Medium-term recommendation: Publish the <i>Liberal Studies Curriculum Resources Booklet Series</i> in 2015 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented and carried out continuously • Implemented • Implemented and carried out continuously