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Panel on Education

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 12 April 2010

Financial Assistance Scheme for Designated Evening Adult Education Courses

Purpose

This paper summarizes the concerns of members of the Panel on Education (the Panel) on the Financial Assistance Scheme for Designated Evening Adult Education Courses.

Background

2. Before September 2003, evening adult education courses were operated by the former Education and Manpower Bureau (reorganized as the Education Bureau (EDB) on 1 July 2007). They included the Adult Education Course (General Background) at primary level, the Government Evening Secondary School Course (GESSC) at secondary level, and the English Course at both primary and secondary levels. These courses adopted the traditional school curriculum and followed a rigid schedule. As they were not flexible enough to meet the changing social needs and the demands of a knowledge-based economy, the enrolment rates had been declining and the drop-out rates were increasing. The Administration therefore decided to cease operation of these courses with effect from September 2003.

3. To minimize the disruption to students already enrolled on these courses, the Administration commissioned non-profit-making operators to run the courses for two years from September 2003 with subvention so that the students could continue to pay the course fees at the level of the 2002-2003 school year until their completion of the relevant key stages of study. For example, a learner in Secondary 3 (S3) in the 2002-2003 school year would have completed S5 by the end of the 2004-2005 school year.

4. Before the expiry of the service contract, the Administration introduced in April 2005 the Financial Assistance Scheme for Designated Evening Adult Education Courses (the Scheme) for three years from 2005-2006. The Scheme provided financial assistance to adult learners attending evening senior secondary courses (i.e. S4 to S7) offered by the approved course providers in designated centres. Students aged 17 or above who attended these courses and fulfilled the following minimum attendance requirements were eligible for a basic subsidy of 30% of the course fees, regardless of their financial position -

- (i) at least 80% attendance; or
- (ii) at least 60% attendance plus an overall pass in the final examination; or
- (iii) at least 60% attendance plus an exemption for 20% attendance to be proved by prescribed means including medical certificates or employers' certification of work commitment.

5. Adults fulfilling the above attendance requirements and passing the standard means test administered by the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) were eligible for full reimbursement of the course fees.

6. The Administration proposed in March 2008 to continue the Scheme, expand its scope to cover junior secondary courses (i.e. S1 to S3) and add a 50% tuition fee reimbursement assistance level from the 2008-2009 school year onwards.

Deliberations of the Panel

7. The Panel had discussed the Scheme before the Administration submitted its proposals to the Finance Committee for consideration in 2005. The Panel had also received views from deputations on the Administration's proposals to continue and enhance the Scheme in 2008. Members supported the launch of the Scheme and its enhancement to provide financial assistance for adult learners. Nevertheless, members had raised concern on a number of issues the deliberations on which are summarized below.

Mode of financial assistance

8. Members noted with concern the substantial increase in tuition fees after the outsourcing of GESSC to non-profit-making service providers in September 2003, resulting in a significant decline in student enrolment. Members considered that as most adult learners attending evening courses came from low-income families, members requested the Administration to review the mode of financial assistance for adult evening education. There was a suggestion that the mode of assistance should follow that for the previous GESSC, i.e. with the Administration subsidizing

all the courses, and students being offered full or partial remission of the course fees. There was also a view that adult learners would benefit most from the Scheme if they were allowed to enrol on evening secondary courses or other courses offered by any non-profit-making course providers which could meet the quality standard and teacher qualification requirements set by the Government for running the evening adult education courses. The financial assistance should be provided in the form of education voucher so that adult learners could choose the types of courses and service providers which best suited their needs.

9. The Administration acknowledged a steady decline in the student enrolment of evening adult education courses from about 6 800 in the 2002-2003 school year to about 3 200 and 1 500 in the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years respectively. The Administration pointed out that since the implementation of the Scheme in 2005-2006, the enrolment figures for mainstream evening secondary schools (including approved courses under the Scheme and courses offered by private evening schools) had hovered around 5 000 each year. Of the 5 000 students enrolled on mainstream evening secondary schools in the 2007-2008 school year, about 4 000 were taking courses offered by private evening schools. The substantial enrolment figures for private evening schools showed the merits of having different modes of service provision for evening secondary education, i.e. through private course providers and approved course providers receiving Government subvention.

10. The Administration advised that more and more adult learners had chosen to enrol in other Government-subsidized training programmes, such as Project Yi Jin the total student intake of which was over 7 000 in 2007-2008. There were different subsidy schemes for adult learners of different backgrounds to pursue academic studies and vocational training. The Administration did not consider it appropriate to follow the previous subsidy model adopted for Government evening secondary schools. In the Administration's view, providing subsidy to adult learners direct was the right way forward and should be continued.

11. Members requested the Administration to consider lowering the attendance requirement for reimbursement under the Scheme. The Administration considered that further relaxation of the attendance requirement might affect the incentive for adult learners to complete the courses.

Level of subsidy

12. While welcoming the addition of a 50% tuition fee reimbursement assistance level under the Scheme, members considered it inadequate for adult evening education. Members pointed out that most adult learners attending evening secondary courses were low-income earners, and many of them were new immigrants who did not have the opportunity to receive basic education in Hong Kong. To support the development of Hong Kong as a knowledge-based economy and world-class city, the Administration should uphold the principle of life-long learning and provide favourable conditions for upward mobility. With

the implementation of 12-year free education, all adult learners attending evening secondary courses should be eligible for full reimbursement of tuition fees. Members noted an unspent balance of about \$29 million earmarked for the Scheme by the end of the 2007-2008 school year. As the estimated expenditure of the Scheme would only be about \$3.1 million per year starting from the 2009-2010 school year after the extension of its coverage to include junior secondary levels and the introduction of a 50% tuition fee reimbursement, members saw no reasons for not increasing the subsidy level to 100% of the tuition fees. Members requested the Administration to provide free evening secondary education.

13. The Administration explained that it shared members' wish to help adults who were most in need to upgrade themselves. In working out the improved Scheme, the Administration had carefully considered all relevant factors, including the need of adult learners and cost-effectiveness. In the Administration's view, the broad direction was to maintain the provision of direct financial subsidies to adult learners by reimbursing the tuition fees up to a certain percentage, as such an arrangement could enhance the dedication and determination on the part of students to complete the courses.

14. The Administration further clarified that when it first proposed the Scheme in 2005, the annual expenditure of the Scheme was estimated to be in the region of \$12 million to the benefit of up to about 3 600 adult learners. Although the actual demand for the Scheme was only one-third of the original projection, the Administration believed that with the introduction of the new improvement measures, the demand for the Scheme would increase. The proposed extension of its coverage to include junior secondary levels would increase about 300 to 400 beneficiaries per year, and it was estimated that about 1 500 adult learners would benefit from the improved Scheme. The Administration considered that as the provision of free adult evening education would involve fundamental changes to the Scheme, it was necessary to carefully assess factors, such as whether it represented an effective use of public resources, its possible impact on other private evening schools and any read-across implications on other financial assistance schemes for adult learners, before taking a decision. The Administration would make arrangement to review the Scheme shortly after the completion of the 2008-2009 school year.

Mode of operation

15. Members pointed out that according to a survey conducted by the Hong Kong College of Technology, many adult learners had difficulty in making upfront payment of the initial tuition fees for evening education courses. Instead of reimbursing the tuition fees at the end of a school year, members requested the Administration to consider the feasibility of providing the financial assistance before the commencement of a school year.

16. According to the Administration, there were practical difficulties in disbursing subsidies to students before the commencement of a school year as a

student's eligibility for receiving financial assistance could only be ascertained at the end of the school year. Besides, if a student eventually failed to meet the attendance requirements, there was a possibility of non-recovery of the financial assistance granted. The Administration stressed that students with genuine financial hardship could apply for loans under the Non-means-tested Loan Scheme administered by SFAA.

Designated centres

17. Members called on the Administration to establish more designated centres to facilitate adult learners to attend courses. Some deputations were of the view that the Administration should take into account the latest development in new towns and arrange for the opening of more designated centres in remote areas such as Tin Shui Wai and Tseung Kwan O.

18. The Administration took note of members' concern and agreed to explore the possibility of establishing more designated centres. The Administration advised that subject to adequate demand, a new designated centre would be established in Tseung Kwan O in the 2008-2009 school year.

19. Member sought information on the reasons for choosing Tseung Kwan O as the location for establishing a new designated centre. The Administration explained that there were currently 10 designated centres under the Scheme, one on Hong Kong Island, three in Kowloon and six in the New Territories. However, no courses were run in five centres, including the Lung Cheung Government Secondary School situated in Wong Tai Sin, in the 2007-2008 school year due to insufficient enrolment. The Administration recommended the setting up of a new designed centre in Tseung Kwan O to cater for the needs of adult learners living in that area.

Relevant papers

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

**Relevant papers on Financial Assistance Scheme for
Designated Evening Adult Education Courses**

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Education	17.2.2003 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	26.3.2003	Administration's replies to Members initial written questions (Reply Serial Nos. EMB012, EMB017, EMB038, EMB062 and EMB076) Administration's replies to Members' supplementary written questions (Reply Serial No. S-EMB004)
Panel on Education	7.4.2003 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	28.4.2003 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	1.4.2004	Administration's replies to Members initial written questions (Reply Serial Nos. EMB052 and EMB054)
Legislative Council	2.2.2005	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 31 - 41 (Question)
Panel on Education	6.4.2005 (Item III)	Minutes Agenda CB(2)1344/04-05(01)
Finance Committee	12.4.2005	Administration's replies to Members initial written questions (Reply Serial No. EMB043)
Finance Committee	6.5.2005	Minutes FCR(2005-06)7
Finance Committee	14.3.2006	Administration's replies to Members initial written questions (Reply Serial Nos. EMB058, EMB076, EMB078 and EMB139)

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Finance Committee	20.3.2007	Administration's replies to Members initial written questions (Reply Serial Nos. EMB073, EMB191 and EMB198)
Legislative Council	24.10.2007	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 49-51 (Question)
Panel on Education	26.3.2008 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	14.4.2008 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda

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