

For discussion on
12 November 2012

Legislative Council Panel on Education

Extension of Examination Fee Remission Scheme for Needy Non-Chinese Speaking Students

Purpose

This paper seeks Members' views on the proposed improvements to the Examination Fee Remission Scheme (EFRS) administered by the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) for needy non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students at senior secondary level with effect from the 2012/13 academic year.

Existing Arrangements under EFRS

2. The Government is committed to encouraging and supporting early integration of NCS students into the community, including facilitating their adaptation to the local education system and mastery of the Chinese Language.

3. Since the 2010 sitting, the EDB has been providing a subsidy to the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) to bridge the difference between the examination fees of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (Chinese) Examination¹ and the defunct Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) (Chinese) or the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSEE) (Chinese) such that eligible NCS students sitting for GCSE (Chinese) Examination, irrespective of means, only have to pay a "subsidised examination fee" on par with that of the defunct HKCEE (Chinese) or the HKDSEE (Chinese). To be eligible for the "subsidised examination fee", NCS students should be certified by the last attending school to have learnt Chinese Language for either –

- (a) less than six years while receiving primary and secondary education; or

¹ In the 2012 Examination, the examination fee for GCSE (Chinese) Examination is \$1,100.

- (b) six years or more in schools, but have been taught an adapted and simpler curriculum not normally applicable to the majority of students in local schools.

4. To ensure that needy NCS students will not be discouraged from sitting for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination because of lack of means, the ambit of the EFRS has been extended since the 2011/12 academic year with the approval of the Finance Committee (FC) on 27 May 2011 to allow eligible needy NCS students to apply for fee remission for the GCSE (Chinese) Examination. Eligible NCS students passing the means test of the SFAA receive either full or half fee remission of the “subsidised examination fee” for taking the GCSE (Chinese) Examination. They are also eligible for fee remission for a second examination entry of the GCSE (Chinese) Examination to be taken in the immediate following year as a school candidate.

Proposed Changes and Improvements to EFRS

5. In addition to the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, the HKEAA also administers a number of other non-local Chinese Language examinations, including the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) Examination, the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Subsidiary (AS)-Level Examination and the GCE Advanced (A)-Level Examination in the 2012/13 academic year. There have been calls from NCS students that the Government should expand the scope of the examination subsidy to cover more types of non-local Chinese Language examinations. Some of these students consider the GCSE (Chinese) Examination not challenging enough given their proficiency in Chinese and their aspiration for further education and employment.

6. The Government is committed to facilitating the mastery of the Chinese Language by NCS students and is pleased to note that some NCS students have the aspirations to take up the challenge of sitting for more advanced Chinese examinations. As the relatively high examination fees²

² The examination fees per candidate for the Chinese subject in the 2012 Examination Series in respect of IGCSE, GCE AS-Level and GCE A-Level are as follows –

Examination boards	IGCSE	GCE AS-Level	GCE A-Level
Fee charged by Edexcel, London	\$1,115	\$2,720	\$4,080
Fees charged by Cambridge International Examinations	\$1,060	\$1,355	\$1,945

could be a deterrent for some NCS students to sit for these non-local Chinese examinations, the EDB will, starting from the 2012/13 academic year, enhance the coverage of the “subsidised examination fee” for NCS students at senior secondary level who participate in the IGCSE (Chinese) Examination, the GCE AS-Level (Chinese) Examination and the GCE A-Level (Chinese) Examination. Similar to the arrangement of the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, EDB will provide a subsidy to the HKEAA to bridge the difference between the fees of these three examinations and the HKDSEE (Chinese), such that eligible NCS students can take the aforementioned non-local examinations at the “subsidised examination fee” on par with that of the HKDSEE (Chinese) (i.e. \$567 for 2013). We hope that the expansion of the “subsidised examination fee” will encourage NCS students to set higher targets in the learning of the Chinese Language.

7. To enhance the support for needy NCS students who may have difficulties in paying the “subsidised examination fee”, we propose to expand the ambit of the EFRS to cover the three non-local Chinese examinations as set out in paragraph 6 that will be covered by the “subsidised examination fee” arrangement of EDB as from the 2012/13 academic year. An NCS student at senior secondary level having met the eligibility criteria for the “subsidised examination fee” in paragraph 3(a) or (b) will be eligible to receive full or half fee remission of the “subsidised examination fee” for taking the non-local Chinese examinations as a school candidate if he/she passes the means test of the SFAA.

8. In considering the maximum sittings of non-local Chinese examinations eligible for fee remission under EFRS for each needy NCS student, we have taken into account the learning needs of NCS students and looked at the different designs and relevant requirements on Chinese proficiency of these non-local Chinese examinations. We note that normally NCS students would take these examinations at Secondary 5 and/or 6. In addition, there is a significant diversity among NCS students’ proficiency of Chinese. Some may wish to go for the prudent approach of aiming higher only after having secured a certification at an elementary level. Some may wish to take the same examination twice particularly if they have failed at their first attempt. Of the four types of examinations (including the GCSE (Chinese) Examination approved in 2011), the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, the IGCSE (Chinese) Examination and the GCE AS-Level (Chinese) Examination are for students at the elementary/intermediate level while the GCE A-Level (Chinese) Examination is for students at more advanced level of learning the Chinese Language.

9. We propose that eligible NCS students may, during their Senior Secondary school years, receive examination fee remission for –

- (a) up to two times in respect of the GCSE (Chinese) Examination, the IGCSE (Chinese) Examination and the GCE AS-Level (Chinese) Examination; and
- (b) up to two times the GCE A-Level (Chinese) Examination.

We believe that this will facilitate students, and provide them with greater choices, in meeting the basic language requirements in applications under the Joint University Programmes Admission System, as the University Grants Committee-funded institutions have, since 2008, provided flexibility for acceptance of alternative Chinese Language qualifications which also include IGCSE (Chinese) and GCE (Chinese), apart from GCSE (Chinese), for NCS students meeting the specified circumstances in paragraph 3(a) or (b) above. At the same time, we allow NCS students the choice of taking the above examinations in place of or in addition to the HKDSEE (Chinese) so as to encourage NCS students to attempt the Chinese Language paper in the HKDSEE as their local counterparts.

10. SFAA will arrange payment of the “subsidised examination fees” to the HKEAA direct on behalf of the NCS students eligible for full or half level of assistance.

Number of Beneficiaries

11. We estimate that in the 2012/13 academic year, about 1 630 senior secondary NCS students will take the three types of non-local Chinese examinations. They will only need to pay the “subsidised examination fee”, i.e. a fee that is on par with that of the HKDSEE (Chinese). Of these students, we estimate that about 330 NCS students would be eligible to receive full or half examination fee remission.

Financial Implications

12. Based on the current number of NCS students in local public sector schools, the additional financial implications for the Government for expanding the subsidy to cover three more types of non-local Chinese examinations for NCS students will be around \$3 million in the 2012/13 academic year. The additional disbursement under the EFRS as a result of expanding the ambit to cover three more types of non-local Chinese

examinations for needy NCS students will be about \$0.2 million a year. Nevertheless, the actual amount of disbursement each year will depend on such factors as the size of the NCS student population, the number of applications, the actual result of the means test of the applicants and any change in the examination fee levels, etc. The financial implications will start to be reflected in the 2012-13 financial year. We would absorb the additional expenditure from within the approved provision in the 2012-13 financial year and include the necessary provision in the Estimates of the subsequent years to meet the requirements of this proposal.

Implementation Plan

13. We aim to implement the above improvements to the EFRS from the 2012/13 academic year. Registration for the Chinese examinations under the IGCSE, GCE AS-Level and GCE A-Level Examinations to be held in May 2013 will start in early December 2012. We will brief schools and NCS students of the enhanced coverage of the examination subsidy as well as details of the proposed improvements to the EFRS before the registration of these examinations.

Advice Sought

14. Subject to Members' views, we would seek approval from FC on 16 November 2012 so that the proposed improvements to EFRS as detailed in paragraphs 5 to 9 above can be implemented starting from the 2012/13 academic year.

Education Bureau
Student Financial Assistance Agency
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