

LCQ11: Continuing Education Fund

Following is a question by the Hon Martin Liao and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

The Government set up the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) in 2002 to provide adults with learning aspirations with subsidies for pursuing continuing education and training. Due to the epidemic, some of last year's face-to-face classes of the courses covered by CEF had to be changed to online classes. The Government issued notices in March and December last year setting out the special arrangements, for those courses affected by the epidemic during the period from January 1 last year to April 30 this year, under which face-to-face classes may be changed to online classes, subject to the number of hours for the latter accounting for no more than 70 per cent of the total number of teaching hours (cap on online-class proportion). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of applications for reimbursement of course fees made to CEF in each of the past five years; the percentage of approved applications in the total number of applications, and the average amount of subsidy for each approved application, with a breakdown by course type;

(2) given that a course provider changed all face-to-face classes of a course to online classes, thus exceeding the cap on online-class proportion which resulted in the relevant course participants not being eligible for CEF's reimbursement of the course fees, of the number of this type of complaints received by the Government last year and the number of course providers involved;

(3) as online classes have become a new norm amid the epidemic, whether the Government will consider further relaxing the cap on online-class proportion; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) of the measures put in place to ensure that the quality of CEF courses in terms of contents, teaching methods, etc. will not be undermined by the fact that their face-to-face classes are changed to online classes, so as to safeguard the interests of course participants; and

(5) as quite a number of members of the public have relayed that the current scope of CEF courses is too narrow, making them unable to find a suitable course, whether the Government will review the scope of the courses covered by CEF; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government established the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) in April

2002 to provide subsidies to adults with learning aspirations to pursue continuing education and training to facilitate Hong Kong's transition to a knowledge-based economy and adaptation to an increasingly globalised economy. Hong Kong residents, irrespective of their education level, employment and financial status, are eligible to apply for opening CEF accounts. The Government injected an additional \$10 billion into CEF in May 2018 and implemented a series of enhancement measures on April 1, 2019, including doubling the subsidy ceiling to \$20,000 per person, lifting the restriction of four-year validity period for CEF accounts and reactivating frozen CEF accounts so that learners may fully utilise the additional subsidy ceiling, raising the age limit to 70, expanding the scope of CEF courses and implementing measures to enhance course quality and protect applicants. My reply to various parts of the Member's question is as follows:

(1) The number of applications for reimbursement of course fees, the approval percentage, the average subsidy amount and breakdown by course scope in the past five years is set out in Annex.

(2) To cater for situations of suspension or cancellation of classes of CEF courses due to the novel coronavirus epidemic, the Government implemented special arrangements from January 1 to August 31, 2020. Under the special arrangements, CEF course providers may deliver a maximum of 70 per cent of the total approved teaching hours of their courses on an online platform; the attendance requirement of CEF learners was lowered from 70 per cent to 60 per cent. Course providers who could not fulfil the above requirements (e.g. the total online teaching hours exceeded 70 per cent) are required to arrange make-up classes, arrange deferment for learners to the next cohort, or refund learners in accordance with established procedures. From January to December 2020, the Labour and Welfare Bureau and the Office of the CEF (OCEF) received 12 complaints involving nine course providers concerning face-to-face teaching arrangements. After OCEF's follow-up, all cases were resolved in accordance with the aforesaid mechanism.

(3)&(4) To cater for the latest situation of novel coronavirus epidemic, the Government has implemented, from December 8, 2020 to April 30, 2021, a new round of special arrangements which are the same as the previous round. To cater for advancement in technology and changes in learning mode in the longer run, the Government also plans to recognise online courses under CEF so as to provide learners with more diversified ways of continuing learning. The Government is now formulating the framework and operational details, including requiring that a course be provided by a local course provider and registered under the Qualifications Register (QR); imposing ceilings on online teaching hours having regard to the nature and assessment arrangements of the course and requiring course providers to set up common systems for authorities to collect learners' attendance record/monitor online teaching. The Government will consult stakeholders on the above in due course.

(5) Since April 2019, the Government has added, on top of the original nine course domains under CEF, courses of 14 classified areas of study and training registered under the QR. As at end December 2020, CEF offers about 10 000 registered courses by over 300 course providers covering 23 areas,

providing more choices for learners. Course providers may design and offer new courses and apply for registration under CEF to meet market demand. Recently registered CEF courses cover areas such as gemstone identification, property management, arboriculture and horticulture, fitness trainer, dance teaching and medical care support, etc.