

LCQ14: Guarding students from being corrupted by incorrect or biased teaching contents

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (May 20):

Question:

Recently, complaints have been lodged against a university lecturer about his making misrepresented and hatred-inciting comments in public, and a teacher for the subject of General Studies (GS subject) for primary education distorted historical facts when teaching the history of Opium War to students. Furthermore, some textbooks for GS subject for primary education and teaching materials for the subject of Liberal Studies (LS subject) for senior secondary education are alleged to have biased contents, e.g. overemphasising negative examples when mentioning the situation on the Mainland and deliberately exaggerating the conflicts between the Mainland and Hong Kong. With regard to guarding students from being corrupted by incorrect or biased teaching contents, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of complaints about teachers' professional conduct received by the authorities since June last year, with a breakdown by nature of complaints and type of schools in which the teachers were teaching; the criteria adopted by the authorities for handling such complaints; the number of cases under investigation; the number of cases the investigation of which has been completed and, among such cases, the respective numbers of those in which the complaints were found:

(i) substantiated; the number of complainers against whom follow-up actions have been taken, with a breakdown by type of such actions (e.g. issue of reprimand letters, warning letters and advisory letters, and interdiction); and

(ii) unsubstantiated, and the justifications for that;

(2) whether it has assessed if university lecturers' making misrepresented and hatred-inciting comments in public is within the scope of application of Article 137 of the Basic Law (which provides that educational institutions may retain their autonomy and academic freedom); if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the justifications for that; if the assessment outcome is in the negative, how the Education Bureau (EDB) will follow up on the relevant complaints;

(3) given that the EDB has indicated that in March this year, the EDB's professional team offered professional feedback and suggestions on the contents of textbooks of LS subject to the relevant publishers, of the details of such feedback and suggestions, the progress of revising the textbooks, and whether the revised textbooks can be published in time before

the commencement of the next school year;

(4) given that whether or not the contents taught in GS subject for primary education and LS subject for senior secondary education are accurate and fair is primarily monitored by schools at present, whether the EDB will strengthen its monitoring role (e.g. vetting the contents of teaching materials) so as to guard students from being corrupted by incorrect or biased teaching contents; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) given the absence of selection standards and outlines for teaching materials for LS subject, some parents of students have suggested that in order to guard students from being corrupted by the biased teaching materials selected by teachers with radical thinking, the EDB should (i) change LS subject from a compulsory subject to an elective one, (ii) compile standard teaching materials for LS subject, and (iii) request universities to remove LS subject from the list of subjects for which minimum entrance requirements have been set, whether the EDB will adopt such suggestions; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(6) whether, in order to address the problem of some teachers of LS subject instilling radical political ideas and negative values into students, the EDB will review the mechanism for sanctioning such teachers, and step up teachers' training in respect of moral education and awareness of abiding by law; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(7) whether the EDB will require all schools in Hong Kong to use a set of standardised textbooks for Chinese History subject so as to ensure that the contents of teaching materials are accurate in terms of historical facts, and make this subject compulsory for all levels of primary and secondary schools; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In secondary and primary schools, there are a wide range of learning and teaching resources for different curricula and subjects with diversified sources. In addition to textbooks, teachers would, based on teaching needs, develop and prepare supplementary materials on their own to enrich teaching, which is considered part of the routine teaching tasks. However, schools should perform a gatekeeper role by duly setting up well-defined school-based guidelines/criteria for the selection of learning and teaching materials and devising a review/monitoring mechanism for school-based learning and teaching resources. The Education Bureau (EDB) has been reminding schools, through various channels such as circular memorandum and school visits, that when developing school-based learning and teaching materials, the school management has the responsibility to monitor and ensure that the learning and teaching materials of various subjects (including senior secondary Liberal Studies (LS)) are in line with the aims and objectives of the central curriculum. The contents and information of the materials should be correct, complete, objective and impartial. Through effective teaching strategies, teachers should enable students to acquire relevant knowledge and skills, and

nurture students' positive values and attitudes.

Our reply to the question raised by the Hon Elizabeth Quat is as follows:

(1) From June 2019 to the end of March 2020, the EDB received 192 complaints about possible professional misconduct of teachers related to social incidents. We have substantially completed the investigation of 144 cases, of which 51 were found unsubstantiated. Roughly speaking, the majority of these 192 cases are related to teachers making inappropriate messages, such as hate or malicious messages, while the rest are about the use of extremely indecent or abusive language; use of inappropriate teaching materials; suspected engagement in illegal activities, etc. Most teachers involved are serving in secondary and primary schools, while a few of them are serving in kindergartens and other schools such as tutorial centres and evening schools.

Among these 144 cases, the EDB has taken follow-up actions on 54 of them in which investigation were completed, including issuing reprimand letters to 14 teachers and warning letters to another eight. The EDB may consider cancelling these teachers' registration pursuant to the Education Ordinance if they misconduct themselves again. We have also issued advisory letters to 17 teachers and verbal reminders to another 15, reminding them to refrain from activity that is detrimental to the image of the teaching profession and to show respect for the behavioural norms acceptable to society. For the remaining 39 cases, our initial view is that they are likely to be substantiated. In accordance with the established procedures, we are currently waiting for or considering the responses from the teachers concerned with a view to determining the appropriate follow-up actions.

We have adopted a prudent approach in handling every complaint involving professional misconduct of teachers. We carefully consider and scrutinise the available information and evidence as well as the school's investigation report and representation from the teacher concerned before deciding on whether a complaint is substantiated. Before deciding on the actions to be taken for each case, full consideration will be given to the facts and circumstances of every case, including the background of the case, the incident that led to the complaint, the impact of the incident on the education sector and students as well as past precedents, in accordance with the Education Ordinance and from the perspective of education professionalism. In other words, the decision on every case is made only after comprehensive and thorough considerations. Of the 51 unsubstantiated cases, allegations involved in some cases were confirmed to be unfounded upon investigation, while some were not substantiated due to insufficient evidence. Besides, a few cases are not related to professional conduct of teachers.

(2) The Government and universities are committed to safeguarding the institutional autonomy and academic freedom as protected by the Basic Law, but it has to be pointed out that the teachers and students of universities should not abuse academic freedom by making remarks that are inaccurate, incite hatred or advocate inappropriate behaviour. The EDB expects university staff to uphold professional conduct and carry out teaching with an objective

and impartial standard.

Every university is an independent and autonomous institution. It has autonomy in the management of its internal affairs (including the employment and conduct of staff), and responsibility for properly handling the community's expectations for universities, ensuring that its operations are in the overall interests of students and society. If a complaint is received against a university staff member making remarks that are inaccurate, incite hatred or advocate inappropriate behaviour, the EDB will request the university to handle it in accordance with its established policies and mechanism. The EDB will also continue to maintain communication with universities to ensure that they uphold good governance with public accountability, so that the universities can operate effectively in accordance with their missions and roles, and in the best interests of society.

(3) and (5) LS under the senior secondary curriculum aims at helping students enhance their awareness of personal, social, national and global developments, as well as scientific and technological advancement; broaden their knowledge base; connect knowledge acquired from different subjects; and consider issues from multiple perspectives. It also seeks to develop students' positive values and attitudes towards life so that they can become informed and responsible citizens.

The so-called "textbooks" for senior secondary LS available on the market have not been reviewed by the EDB. The recent social incidents in Hong Kong have caused people's concerns that the teaching materials for senior secondary LS are not comprehensive, objective or impartial enough, and may cause negative impacts on students. The EDB is fully aware of such public concerns. To safeguard the well-being of students, we introduced a special measure to provide a one-off professional consultancy service for publishers of senior secondary LS "textbooks" in September 2019 with a view to enhancing the quality of LS "textbooks" already published.

As at May 2020, personnel responsible for rendering the professional consultancy service have finished reviewing the "textbooks" received in a professional manner in accordance with the aims and objectives of the senior secondary LS curriculum. The EDB has met with the publishers concerned and provided them with professional feedback for improving the quality of the senior secondary LS "textbooks". Publishers that participated in the professional consultancy service undertook to duly follow up the amendments suggested by the EDB and are now revising their "textbooks". It is expected that the publishers will complete the revision as early as possible so that the revised "textbooks" can be ready for schools' adoption in the coming school year. The advice given to the publishers will not be disclosed under a confidentiality agreement reached between the EDB and publishers.

The list of LS "textbooks" and the relevant volumes which have undergone the professional consultancy service will be published on the EDB's webpage in due course for the information of schools and the public. Upon completing the revision, publishers have to duly upload the revised contents to their websites so that the teachers and students using the relevant "textbooks" are

informed. Taking into account the experience of the professional consultancy service, the EDB will consider the quality assurance measures for the subject, including the feasibility of submitting LS "textbooks" for review.

Since the abilities and learning needs of students in different schools vary, teachers should, in the light of the curriculum aims and objectives of LS, exercise their professional judgement in selecting appropriate information for the development of teaching materials that can best suit students' needs. With a view to supporting the learning and teaching of LS, the EDB has developed different types of resources, such as the LS Curriculum Resources Booklet Series covering all the modules of the curriculum, and the LS Web-based Resource Platform (ls.edb.hkedcity.net) with a broad diversity of contents, for use by schools.

The EDB has implemented the senior secondary curriculum under the New Academic Structure since 2009 with Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and LS as core subjects. However, as the school curriculum renewal is an ongoing process, the Task Force on Review of School Curriculum is reviewing the primary and secondary curricula (including LS) and will submit its report to the EDB this year. We will carefully consider all recommendations by then.

In general, local post-secondary institutions adopt the Level of "3322" in the four core subjects as the General Entrance Requirements for admission to undergraduate programmes (i.e. Level 3 in Chinese Language and English Language, and Level 2 in Mathematics and LS in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE)). While upholding the principles of fairness and merit-based selection, these institutions enjoy autonomy in the selection of students and they are accountable for their decisions in the matter.

(4) The EDB has been explaining the requirements and criteria for selecting learning and teaching resources (including textbooks and school-based teaching materials) to schools through various channels such as circular memorandum, seminars for teachers and school visits, emphasising that teachers of various subjects are required to select the teaching resources in a professional and prudent manner. Meanwhile, the EDB has put in place a rigorous and effective textbook review mechanism to provide quality teaching materials for schools. For school-based teaching materials, we will continue to enhance the awareness of school management and professional accountability under the existing quality assurance mechanism for schools, while strengthening the professional training of teachers and enhancing the quality of school-based teaching materials. Apart from the EDB, school management should assume the monitoring responsibility to ensure that its teachers have professional knowledge in selecting teaching materials that are in line with the curriculum aims and objectives. Besides, accuracy of information adopted, completeness of contents as well as objectivity and impartiality should be ensured. Through effective teaching strategies, students should be equipped with relevant and proper knowledge and skills, while developing positive values and attitudes at the same time. Upon receiving a complaint, the EDB would review if the school's school-based materials are arranged in a professional manner with full justifications, and follow up on the school's

monitoring mechanism as well as the teacher's professional conduct. In case negligence is found on the part of the school as regards its management and monitoring of learning and teaching, or if the school has not fulfilled its professional duty properly, the EDB will seriously follow up the case.

(6) Teachers play a vital role in passing on knowledge and nurturing students' character. They should possess not only solid professional knowledge but also high standards of morality. When selecting teaching materials and conducting lessons, teachers should thoroughly consider whether the teaching materials are suitable, and assist students in making analyses from multiple perspectives as well as expressing their opinions in an unbiased and rational manner. Teachers should definitely not allow their personal political stance to affect their teaching, or even mislead students and instill negative values in them.

Upon receiving complaints alleging teachers to have violated professional conduct, the EDB conducts investigation according to the established procedures. Each decision is made after thoroughly considering the facts, evidence and representations from the teacher. If any allegation is found substantiated, the EDB will take appropriate follow-up actions having regard to the gravity of each case. These include issuing an advisory, warning or reprimand letter to remind the teacher concerned of the need to uphold professional conduct for meeting the expectations of parents and the general public for teachers. For serious misconduct cases, we may consider cancelling the registration of the teacher concerned pursuant to the Education Ordinance.

The EDB has all along been committed to maintaining a teaching profession of high quality and with professional conduct in Hong Kong. To encourage teachers and school leaders to demonstrate the professional roles and conduct expected of them, we have embedded the elements of Professional Standards for Principals and Professional Standards for Teachers of Hong Kong (T-standard+) in teacher training programmes as appropriate (including training programmes for aspiring principals and newly-appointed principals, as well as serving teachers and newly-joined teachers). Meanwhile, among the professional misconduct cases of teachers handled by the EDB, some can be adopted for reflection by teachers. In this connection, we will consolidate the contents of some cases to design teaching materials for reflection with the aim of enhancing the ethical standards of teachers.

(7) Over the years, schools have been using textbooks (including Chinese History textbooks) written by publishers. The EDB has established the textbook review mechanism and is playing a gate-keeping role in ensuring textbooks' quality so that the content of textbooks is appropriate for the learning needs of students, in line with the curriculum aims and objectives of the relevant subjects, as well as meeting the needs of students in terms of learning, teaching and assessment. In the process of writing textbooks, publishers are required to make reference to the Subject Curriculum Guides, developed by the Curriculum Development Council, the latest guidelines on textbook printing and review issued by the EDB, as well as the Textbook Writing Guidelines for each subject. Upon the completion of the textbook

review by the EDB, publishers should undertake to duly follow up the suggestions for improvement in the textbook review reports to ensure that the content of the textbooks is accurate and does not deviate from the curriculum aims and learning goals.

The existing textbook review mechanism allows publishers and authors to write textbooks which are varied in terms of levels of difficulty in content, ways of presentation, teaching strategies, and supplementary learning and teaching materials, for teachers' selection, as long as they align with the curriculum aims and objectives. This practice helps ensure the quality of textbooks, maintains the competitiveness of the market and is also conducive to the development of quality textbooks. Moreover, since different textbooks are available to schools, teachers can, based on their students' abilities and learning needs, select the most suitable textbooks to enhance learning and teaching effectiveness. As the EDB is of the view that the existing textbook review mechanism can satisfy the needs of various stakeholders and has been operating smoothly for many years since its implementation, requiring all schools in Hong Kong to use a standardised Chinese History textbook may not be the best way to meet the local needs.

To strengthen Chinese history education, the EDB has implemented Chinese History as an independent compulsory subject at the junior secondary level since the 2018/19 school year. The revised curriculum of Junior Secondary Chinese History will be implemented progressively starting from Secondary 1 in the 2020/21 school year, so as to enable students to learn Chinese history and culture holistically and systematically. The work associated with the vetting of textbooks for the revised Chinese History curriculum has also been completed. As for primary education, the General Studies subject contains a strand titled "National Identity and Chinese Culture". Through the learning of important dynasties and their chronological sequence in Chinese history, and some major historical events that have had significant impacts on society today, all primary students can enhance their understanding of Chinese history and the nation as well as its culture and development, and enrich their knowledge of the country and strengthen their sense of belonging through enquiry learning.