

LCQ2: Relationship between tertiary institutions and intermediary agencies for overseas studies

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Hoey Simon Lee and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Dr Choi Yuk-lin, in the Legislative Council today (June 12):

Question:

It has been reported that some people are suspected to have falsified academic qualifications and have succeeded in enrolling in a tertiary institution in Hong Kong through intermediary agencies for overseas studies (agencies). Meanwhile, some agencies have claimed on the Internet that they, through connections, can ensure that their clients obtain quotas for direct admission of students to tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. There are views that such a situation creates negative impacts on Hong Kong's reputation as a clean society and its reputation in education. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether various tertiary institutions have granted any agencies any degree of authority for admission of students, made commitments to any agencies that the students whom they recommend can enjoy the right of priority admission or guaranteed admission, and entered into exclusive agency agreements with agencies; if so, of the details;

(2) whether employees and members of the Councils of tertiary institutions are required under the existing management regime to declare any relationship with agencies, and whether tertiary institutions have exercised regulation over such persons for receiving sponsorships, donations or interests from agencies or the consortia behind them; if so, of the details; and

(3) as it has been reported that some agencies have claimed that they obtain quotas for direct admission of students to tertiary institutions through making consistent financial donations to the institutions, of the measures put in place by the authorities to cope with the situation where any persons or organisations are offered quotas for admission of students through such means?

Reply:

President,

Hong Kong's higher education is internationally competitive, and Hong Kong is the only city across the globe with five universities in the world's top 100, achieving international excellence in terms of teaching and research. According to world university rankings published last week, the University of Hong Kong ranked among the world's top 20 for the first time,

securing the 17th position globally. The rankings of other universities have also risen, claiming spots between the 36th and the 62nd. The high-quality programmes offered by local institutions are all along very popular among both Mainland and overseas students. According to the information provided by the University Grants Committee (UGC), as far as the 2023/24 academic year is concerned, the eight UGC-funded universities have admitted over 38 000 non-local students.

Earlier on, a certain university disclosed that a very small number of cases were found where applicants allegedly submitted fraudulent documents when applying for admission. The university concerned reported the incident to the Police. As legal proceedings are ongoing, we are not in a position to comment on individual cases. Nonetheless, the university's disclosure of the situation indicates that the university is dealing with the incident seriously and is determined to adopt a zero-tolerance stance on the matter. Whether being out of misguided hopes or misled into believing in false publicity, anyone engaging in any dishonest practices will have to bear consequences. Those in serious cases will not only be expelled from the university but also even have to face criminal prosecution.

Hong Kong's higher education has unique advantages, including high teaching quality, strong basic research capabilities, extensive international connections, and close co-operation with the Mainland, representing a strong foundation. We particularly treasure the golden reputation of Hong Kong's higher education. Facing intense competition for admissions, universities have always established stringent admission procedures and mechanisms to ensure fairness and impartiality in selecting the best candidates. As the cradle of future talent, our higher education institutions must be well prepared for Hong Kong to develop itself into an international hub for post-secondary education, regardless of academic standards or the establishment of systems. I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the following.

First, upholding fair and stringent admission processes is universities' responsibility. Universities must ensure that the admission mechanism is non-discriminatory, merit-based, fair and impartial, with clear internal guidelines on admission standards and procedures. The academic qualifications, public examination results and relevant documents of students admitted are subject to stringent vetting by the respective academic units and graduate schools, which act as gatekeepers. Verification is made through various channels, such as direct communication with the awarding institutions, examination boards or official platforms concerned, and students may be required to provide originals or certified copies for checking when registering with the universities as and when necessary. At the same time, in the light of the ever-changing circumstances, the universities will continually improve the arrangements to maintain their academic reputation.

Second, the universities have zero tolerance towards dishonest or improper admission applications. They will take decisive disciplinary actions upon discovery of such violations, including rescission of admission offers or expulsion, and will refer such cases to the relevant law enforcement agencies and visa-issuing authorities for follow-up action as appropriate. We

solemnly remind all applicants not to break the law or undermine the fair and impartial system, as the consequences will be severe.

In response to the question raised by Dr the Hon Hoey Simon Lee, our key replies are as follows:

(1) The eight UGC-funded universities have made it clear that they have neither granted any intermediary agencies for overseas studies any degree of authority for admission, nor pledged to guarantee the admission of the applicants recommended by these agencies, not to mention a mechanism of internal recommendation for guaranteed admission of applicants. The universities have been paying closer attention to the unscrupulous intermediary agencies on the market or on the internet on their untrue claims of guaranteed admission and their abetting and other illegal activities. The universities actively make clarifications on their websites, social media and in application forms, as well as reminding applicants that all application materials must be accurate. Unlawful conduct will not be tolerated.

(2) The universities have put in place a rigorous regime for declarations of interests, under which members of the Councils and staff are required to declare any potential pecuniary advantage.

(3) The admission mechanism of the eight UGC-funded universities upholds the principles of merit-based selection, fairness and impartiality. The institutions have clearly stated that no intermediary agencies for overseas studies are engaged and the institutions do not allow students to obtain quotas for direct admission through making financial donations to the institutions. All UGC-funded universities are subject to the Prevention of Bribery Ordinance, and they have drawn up rigorous guidelines on declaration and provided internal training for staff responsible for admission matters, including collaborating with the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in this regard, inviting the ICAC to take part in reviewing or providing advice on the admission procedures, and formulating internal guidelines on corruption prevention, etc, with a view to raising anti-corruption awareness among relevant staff and ensuring the integrity of the system and fairness of the admission mechanism.

President, I would like to thank Dr the Hon Hoey Simon Lee again for raising this question so that we can take this opportunity to clarify the false information, and remind everyone to be wary of the publicity of those unscrupulous agencies. If applicants have any doubts, they should directly seek verification with the universities to avoid losses. At the same time, I also take this opportunity to reiterate that the Government, universities, and society have a zero tolerance stance towards using fraudulent academic qualifications to apply for admission, and we share the determination to safeguard the integrity of Hong Kong's society and the good reputation of higher education.

Thank you, President.