

LCQ4: The Liberal Studies subject under the senior secondary curriculum

Following is a question by the Hon Mrs Regina Ip and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (December 5):

Question:

The Liberal Studies (LS) subject, which has been offered since 2009 under the senior secondary curriculum, is one of the four core subjects (compulsory subjects) in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSEE). There have all along been controversies on issues of the LS subject such as curriculum, mode of assessment and its retention or otherwise. Moreover, it is learnt that in the admission of students, universities do not give priority consideration or extra credits to the results of the LS subject, and that a number of universities have announced that from the next academic year onwards, they will no longer set the "3322 results" (which include attaining level 2 or above in the LS subject in HKDSEE) as the minimum entrance requirements. It has been reported that the Bachelor's degree and Diploma in Education programmes which tie in with the LS subject will cease operation in the next academic year. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will consider changing the LS subject from a compulsory subject to an elective one, so that students may freely choose whether or not to take the subject; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that, and whether it will change the grading of this subject from the current seven-level scale to a two-level scale of "pass" and "fail" so as to reduce students' pressure in preparing for the examination; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will reform the curriculum of the LS subject, including the incorporation of more modules on classic literature and theories of natural sciences, so as to nurture students' critical thinking skills; and

(3) whether it will reform the mode of assessment for the LS subject so as to avoid unduly focusing on assessing students' language proficiency; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Liberal Studies, which is designed as a cross-curricular subject, aims to broaden students' knowledge base and horizons through the study of a wide range of issues, so as to enable them to make connections with and integrate the knowledge across different disciplines. Liberal Studies also helps students develop positive values and attitudes towards life, so that students can become informed and responsible citizens of society, our country and the

world. Since 2009, Liberal Studies has become one of the four core subjects of the Senior Secondary Curriculum.

The general entrance requirements of bachelor degree programmes of tertiary institutions are set at the level of 3322 in the four core subjects, including Level 3 in Chinese Language and English Language and Level 2 in Mathematics and Liberal Studies, plus Level 2 or 3 in one or two specified/unspecified elective subject(s) (depending on the requirements of individual academic departments or programmes). The general entrance requirements have been endorsed by the sector before adoption. The relevant requirements have not been changed up till now. The special admission arrangements mentioned by various universities recently are in line with the flexibilities provided under the merit-based admission principle to cater for individual exceptional cases, and should not be seen as an alteration of the general entrance requirements. Besides, some programmes offered by local universities, such as those related to social sciences, do give extra weighting to Liberal Studies.

As for teacher education, there is sufficient provision of Liberal Studies teachers in the school sector at present and this will continue be the case in the foreseeable future. The Education Bureau (EDB) has been keeping in view the changes in the number of training places of relevant teacher education programmes. After taking into account various factors such as the school-aged population trend as well as the supply and demand of teachers, the EDB will propose, to the Universities Grants Committee, different programmes to universities offering teacher education to ensure that the manpower training for various subjects (including Liberal Studies) will closely align with the learning needs of students and the development needs of schools.

Regarding the question of the Hon Mrs Regina Ip, our consolidated reply is as follows:

At the time of planning the senior secondary curriculum under the New Academic Structure, Liberal Studies had been adopted as a core subject, as it can play a unique role in the new senior secondary curriculum. Liberal Studies enables students to make connections with and integrate the concepts and knowledge across different disciplines; and see things in multiple perspectives. It also enables students to investigate issues that cannot be covered by single discipline subjects, such as personal development and Chinese culture, so as to address the bias towards discipline subjects in the previous senior secondary curriculum, and to provide students with cross-curricular learning opportunities. Liberal Studies becoming a core subject under the Senior Secondary Academic Structure was the result of extensive discussion, and gained the public support before its implementation.

To enhance students' understanding of themselves, their society, their nation, the natural and human world from multiple perspectives, the Liberal Studies curriculum comprises three Areas of Study, namely "Self and Personal Development", "Society and Culture" and "Science, Technology and the Environment". The topics selected for each module under these three Areas of Study are important issues to the students and society and suitable for

students at senior secondary level to study. For instance, the topic on the "impact of globalisation" has great significance for students to understand themselves, their society and the world as well as make connections across different fields of knowledge and broaden their horizons.

Regarding public assessment, the public examination for Liberal Studies was designed in accordance with the Curriculum and Assessment Guide. The whole examination consists of two papers: the data-response questions in Paper 1 mainly assess candidates' abilities such as identification, application and analysis of given data; the extended-response questions in Paper 2 assess various higher-order thinking skills through source materials which may arouse discussion. Candidates are required to substantiate arguments from multiple perspectives and draw logical inferences when exploring the questions raised, in order to demonstrate various higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, creativity, comparison, synthesis, evaluation, problem solving and communicating in a systematic manner. Same as the assessment requirements of the public examinations for other non-language subjects, those for Liberal Studies mainly concern application of the relevant knowledge, concepts and thinking skills acquired from the subject, instead of language and writing skills. From the perspective of assessment, Liberal Studies is not different from other core subjects, therefore the 5-level reporting of results has been adopted.

Implemented in 2009, the Senior Secondary Academic Structure has been in operation for nearly ten years. To keep pace with rapid social and global changes, the whole school curriculum, including but not limited to Liberal Studies, has to be renewed timely in order to equip our students with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for them to take on future opportunities and challenges, and achieve the goal of promoting whole-person development and life-long learning.

In this connection, the EDB set up the Task Force on Review of School Curriculum (Task Force), which comprises experienced educators, academics, professionals and representatives of the business sector. Under the principle of "Led by Professionals", the Task Force is responsible for holistically reviewing the primary and secondary curricula, so that the school curricula at the primary and secondary levels can be rigorous and forward-looking in enhancing students' capacity to learn and fostering the values and qualities desired for students of the 21st century to meet future challenges as well as the needs of society. The Task Force hopes to, through refining the curriculum design, create space and opportunities for students' whole-person development, so as to better cater for students' diverse abilities, interests, needs and aspirations.

The Task Force is conducting a review on the school curriculum framework and assessment as a whole, without any pre-determined position on individual or overall curriculum arrangements. In the course of the review, it will approach different stakeholders where necessary and collect views extensively in an open-minded manner. The Task Force is expected to make directional recommendations to the Government by end-2019.

Upon receiving the report of the Task Force, the EDB will study the

recommendations in detail. By then, if there are any recommendations from the Task Force on the curricula or assessment of individual subjects, the EDB will conduct detailed discussions and take follow-up actions with the sector in accordance with the established mechanism through the existing advisory structure/bodies such as the Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority.

Thank you, President.