

LCQ5: Nurturing foreign language talents

Following is a question raised by the Hon Benson Luk and a reply by the Acting Secretary for Education, Dr Sze Chun-fai, in the Legislative Council today (November 27):

Question:

In 2018, the State President stated at the National Conference on Education that vigorous efforts should be made to nurture international talents proficient in foreign languages and adept at Chinese-foreign negotiations and communications. There are views that as the country's super connector and super value-adder, as well as the premier international financial centre connecting the country and the Middle East market, Hong Kong needs to nurture a large pool of foreign language talents. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) when Government officials make overseas visits and when the Government releases videos and hands out publications overseas to promote Hong Kong, whether local mother tongues of the relevant places have been used as the medium of communication; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as it is learnt that there are a number of language universities in the country, such as Beijing Foreign Studies University, which is approved to teach more than a hundred foreign languages, whether the Government will study allocating more resources to tertiary institutions to strengthen training in foreign languages other than English, or establishing foreign language universities drawing on the models of the Mainland, with a view to nurturing multilingual talents in public and private organisations, so that they can tell the good stories of Hong Kong in different languages; and

(3) whether it will study enhancing the existing "biliterate and trilingual" policy by turning it into a "triliterate and quadrilingual" policy?

Reply:

President,

Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city. In recent years, various national strategies have even brought about tremendous development opportunities for Hong Kong, which require us to strengthen exchanges and co-operation with the Mainland and overseas regions and countries by capitalising on our advantage of "linkage with our Motherland and close connection to the world". To enhance our international competitiveness and strengthen our position as an international post-secondary education hub, we have been striving to nurture talents who are biliterate and trilingual, and proficient in other languages.

Having consulted the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau and the Information Services Department (ISD), I would like to reply to the Hon Benson Luk's questions as follows:

(1) Currently, in taking forward overseas promotion work, the overseas Economic and Trade Offices (ETOs) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government and Invest Hong Kong (InvestHK) will make appropriate arrangements taking into account the common languages of the relevant places. For instance, apart from the English version of the relevant ETOs' websites, languages commonly used in the countries/regions under their respective purview are also available, e.g. Japanese, Thai, German, Arabic to facilitate local people in understanding the information disseminated by ETOs. Also, for meetings between officials of the HKSAR Government and local officials/representatives of the political and business sectors and preparation of relevant promotional materials, the ETOs concerned will arrange interpretation and prepare and issue the relevant promotion materials in local languages as appropriate.

In addition, to facilitate investors from around the world to understand the latest information about Hong Kong's business environment, InvestHK's website is available in a number of major languages, including simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, English, Japanese, Spanish, French, Italian, as well as Arabic, which has been newly added. Separately, InvestHK's promotional videos are mainly in English and Putonghua. Depending on the origin of individual successful case studies, subtitles may be available in the local language. As for InvestHK's client meetings and promotional materials, Putonghua and simplified Chinese are used on the Mainland, while English and the local language where necessary are used in overseas markets. Interpretation will also be arranged at investment promotion seminars.

On external promotion, the ISD produces a series of creative contents in multiple languages for placement in overseas and Mainland cities through digital and social media platforms, as well as outdoor advertising, in the form of short videos and banner advertisements to tell the good stories of Hong Kong. These creative contents are available in Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Thai, Vietnamese, etc. The ISD also translated and printed the promotional booklet entitled "HK Connect" into foreign languages such as Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay and Thai for distribution to target recipients at promotional activities during senior officials' overseas visits.

Moreover, the ISD has held the "Immersive Hong Kong" promotional roving exhibitions in Jakarta, Indonesia; Bangkok, Thailand; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Guangzhou, China since July 2023. It will also be staged in Dubai, the Middle East next month. In addition to English, the exhibition information is also available in the local languages of each stop to enhance the publicity effect.

(2) The eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities have all along been making flexible use of their resources to offer a wide range of publicly-funded programmes with regard to their respective roles and

positioning, as well as providing diversified learning opportunities for students in response to market demands. Learning foreign languages can help students to understand multiculturalism and strengthen their connections with different parts of the world, thereby enhancing their competitiveness in entering the workforce, pursuing further studies or starting their own businesses in the future. University education also aims to encourage students to acquire knowledge and skills in different fields, and nurture the high-calibre talents required by different industries, so as to inject impetus into the development of Hong Kong.

In recent years, the eight UGC-funded universities have offered as many as 12 contemporary foreign languages for learning, including Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Kiswahili, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Swedish, Spanish and Thai. They also offer a range of specialised programmes majoring in individual foreign languages or cultures for students who aspire to become professionals in relevant fields in the future. As for students pursuing undergraduate programmes in other areas such as engineering technology, business or social sciences, a number of universities also offer minor options or foreign language courses as free electives for interested students to pursue having regard to their personal aspirations and abilities. In addition, a number of self-financing institutions at present offer post-secondary programmes related to different foreign languages and relevant elective subjects according to market demand.

The above arrangements for major, minor and free electives enable students to study foreign languages having regard to their learning objectives in an appropriate manner. The existing arrangements meet practical needs with flexibility; hence the Government has no plans to set up a foreign language university. Nevertheless, we will continue to encourage the UGC-funded universities to provide students with opportunities to learn foreign languages, and through various avenues, such as student exchange programmes and experiential learning activities, enable students to gain exposure to the cultures of more places, broaden their horizons, seize Hong Kong's unique advantages, and be better prepared for their future development.

(3) Over the years, the Government has been collaborating with the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, other advisory bodies and stakeholders to enable the Hong Kong people, particularly students and working adults, to become biliterate and trilingual, through sponsoring and implementing various measures using the Language Fund. Moreover, the Education Bureau (EDB) endeavours to develop students' multilingual competence, enabling them to make life planning based on their own interests, abilities and aspirations, and to connect to the world. Over the years, the EDB has offered "other languages" courses (Note 1) (Category C of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination) for senior secondary students to study as an elective subject. As announced in the 2024 Policy Address, the EDB will implement a pilot scheme to invite schools to apply for additional resources to provide opportunities for junior secondary students to learn "other languages" (Note 2), in order to facilitate a stronger articulation in their learning of "other languages" as an elective subject at the senior secondary level.

Thank you, President.

Note 1: The EDB subsidises schools to offer courses of the six "other languages", i.e. French, German, Japanese, Korean, Spanish and Urdu, for secondary four to six students.

Note 2: Schools can use the funding to offer junior secondary courses of the six designated "other languages" (i.e. French, German, Japanese, Korean, Spanish and Urdu), which are the senior secondary elective subjects. Arabic and Russian could also be considered.