

LCQ9: Youth exchange and internship activities on the Mainland

Following is a question by the Hon Martin Liao and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Caspar Tsui, in the Legislative Council today (November 4):

Question:

The Government has all along been encouraging and supporting Hong Kong's youth to go to the Mainland for exchanges and internships. However, such exchange and internship activities have been seriously affected and hindered by the travel restrictions imposed for coping with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the detailed situations to date of how Hong Kong's youth exchange and internship activities on the Mainland have been affected by the epidemic;

(2) of the measures in place to encourage, coordinate and support the schools and institutions concerned to make responses flexibly amid the epidemic and even adopt alternative modes, so as to continue with such exchange and internship activities;

(3) whether the Government will, when discussing with the Mainland and Macao authorities the implementation details of the mutual recognition system for health codes of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, strive to include those persons involved in youth exchange or internship activities as one of the priority categories of persons to be covered by the system; and

(4) of the measures in place to promote comprehensive exchanges among the youth of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, so as to enable Hong Kong's youth to gain a better understanding and experience of the development of the country and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Education Bureau (EDB), our consolidated reply to the question raised by Hon Liao is as follows:

The Government has been striving to provide local young people with exchange and internship opportunities in the Mainland. To help students understand their country and strengthen their sense of national identity, the EDB has been organising Mainland exchange programmes or subsidising those organised by schools with diversified themes to dovetail with the latest development of the school curriculum and the country. Through these programmes, students could gain first-hand experience of the development of their country in such aspects as history, culture, economy, education,

science and technology, understand the opportunities and challenges brought about by the country's development for Hong Kong, as well as enrich their life-wide learning experience. Mainland exchange programmes have always been popular among teachers and students. Since the 2017/18 school year, the EDB has provided about 100 000 exchange quotas every year, which is sufficient for every student to join at least one Mainland exchange programme in the respective primary and secondary stages. These programmes cover 22 provinces, four autonomous regions and four municipalities in the Mainland. The number of secondary and primary school students subsidised to participate in Mainland exchange programmes has continued to increase year by year, and positive feedback has been received.

Outside school, the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) currently subsidises non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to organise Mainland exchange projects for young people through the Funding Scheme for Youth Exchange in the Mainland, in order to deepen their understanding of the culture and history of the Mainland, the way of life of Mainland people, the developments of our country, etc., as well as foster their exchange with Mainland people. In 2018-19, about 15 000 local young people benefited from the Scheme. As regards internship, the HAB subsidises NGOs through the Funding Scheme for Youth Internship in the Mainland to organise Mainland internship activities for local young people, with a view to enabling them to obtain real experience in the actual workplace environment in the Mainland, as well as acquire a deeper understanding of the employment market, work culture and development opportunities therein. In addition to these funding schemes, the HAB also collaborates with top-notch scientific research and cultural institutions in the Mainland as well as major corporations in Hong Kong to implement the Thematic Youth Internship Programmes to the Mainland and the Scheme on Corporate Summer Internship on the Mainland and Overseas respectively, providing unique internship opportunities for local young people with different backgrounds, expertise and interests. In 2019, the three internship schemes altogether offered Mainland internship opportunities to over 4 000 young people.

(1) and (3) Young people's health and safety are our primary concern. In light of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic, all Mainland exchange programmes organised or subsidised by the EDB (including on-site exchange activities between Hong Kong and Mainland sister schools) have been suspended or postponed since early 2020. Depending on the development of the pandemic, the EDB will rearrange students to go to the Mainland for exchange. As for the Mainland Experience Scheme for Post-secondary Students (MES) under the EDB, we understand that local post-secondary institutions have suspended or cancelled about 80 per cent of MES-subsidised Mainland exchange activities in the 2019/20 school year due to the pandemic.

Outside school, the HAB also requested all funded organisations of Mainland exchange and internship projects to suspend or postpone their projects in late January this year. Regarding Mainland exchange, about 190 out of the 351 funded projects in the 2019-20 were successfully completed prior to the pandemic outbreak, whereas the remaining ones were postponed, involving an estimate of about 6 000 participants. As regards Mainland

internship, a total of around 160 projects scheduled for the summer of 2020 under the three internship schemes had to be postponed.

We are closely keeping in view the development of the pandemic, the cross-boundary quarantine requirements between the Mainland and Hong Kong as well as the implementation arrangements of the health code in future, and will arrange for the resumption of our exchange and internship activities in the Mainland when it is safe and practicable to do so.

(2) Even though student exchange programmes in the Mainland and on-site exchange activities between Hong Kong and Mainland sister schools under the EDB were suspended during the pandemic, sister schools will continue to organise exchange activities in other modes (such as video conferencing). The EDB will also organise online sharing sessions on the Sister School Scheme to disseminate good practices in arranging exchanges of sister schools during the pandemic, and continue promoting multi-faceted collaboration of sister schools in Hong Kong and the Mainland. As for MES, the EDB has earlier simplified the procedures for handling institutions' unspent funding for the 2019/20 school year. The simplified procedures will allow institutions to flexibly deploy the funding for resuming exchange activities after the pandemic situation has eased. The institutions have been informed of the arrangements. The EDB will continue to monitor the situation closely and consider providing other support measures as appropriate.

The various youth exchange and internship programmes in the Mainland organised by the HAB aim at enabling young people to experience the culture and the living and working environments in the Mainland by visiting there in person, thereby broadening their horizons and helping them develop and learn. Even though the funded exchange and internship projects cannot be held for the time being due to the pandemic, we have permitted the funded organisations to organise local activities that do not involve crowd gatherings, such as online briefing sessions, seminars and training courses, for participants to learn about the culture, history, social features, people's way of life, latest development, etc. in the Mainland (particularly the exchange/internship destinations). Furthermore, given that quite a number of funded exchange and internship activities have been affected by the pandemic, the HAB has introduced one-off special arrangements such that the organisers can flexibly deploy the funding and postpone the implementation of their projects accordingly, revise the particulars of activities under funded projects, etc.

(4) The Government will continue to enhance and expand the various youth internship, exchange and entrepreneurship programmes in the Mainland with a view to providing young people in Hong Kong deeper, wider and more diversified opportunities to explore the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) as well as other provinces and cities in the Mainland. By experiencing the local culture and conducting in-depth exchange with local young people, Hong Kong youth could gain a better understanding of and seize the opportunities in the GBA as well as those arising from integration in the overall development of the country.

Since 2017, the HKSAR Government has been working in collaboration with

top-notch cultural and scientific research institutions, such as the Palace Museum, the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Wolong National Nature Reserve in Sichuan, to organise different Thematic Youth Internship Programmes to the Mainland. Through unique, in-depth and valuable internship opportunities, young people in Hong Kong could deepen their knowledge in relevant disciplines and professional fields as well as the country's development. These programmes are well-received by the participants. With the staunch support of Mainland counterparts and authorities, the number of thematic programmes has increased from two in 2017 to seven last year, providing high-quality internship places for participants.

Furthermore, being one of the major cooperation initiatives between Hong Kong and Guangdong, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Hong Kong Youth Internship Scheme launched under the Funding Scheme for Youth Internship in the Mainland has been expanded to cover all GBA cities in the Mainland since last year. Approximately 950 young people have taken up internship placements in the GBA under the scheme, from which they have gained a deeper understanding of the labour market, workplace culture and career prospects in the Mainland. It has also helped our young people set their career goals ahead, accumulate work experience and build interpersonal networks, thus facilitating their future development in GBA.

In recent years, the HAB has introduced several enhancement measures to our funding schemes for exchange and internship in the Mainland, including extending the funding period for funded organisations with good track record, increasing fundable duration of internships, as well as encourage the organisations to reduce/waive participants' fees, offset by an increase in funding, with a view to attracting more young people to participate in exchange and internship activities in the Mainland (including GBA) for greater understanding of their country and GBA through personal experience.

As for schools, the EDB will continue to organise exchange programmes to the nine GBA cities in the Mainland and the Macao Special Administrative Region. They include the Mainland Exchange Programme for Junior Secondary and Upper Primary Students, An Exploration into the Economic Development and Guangdong-Hong Kong Cooperation in Nansha and Qianhai and An Exploration into the Prospects for Further Studies and Employment in the Mainland and Macao. These programmes enable students to visit the entrepreneurial bases for young people in Nansha and Qianhai and innovative enterprises in Shenzhen, learn about Foshan's Lingnan culture and the natural landscape of Zhaoqing, as well as visit universities under the Scheme for Admission of Hong Kong Students to Mainland Higher Education Institutions. With the opening of the Hong Kong Section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (XRL) and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB), An Exploration into the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Cities was organised for the first time in the 2019/20 school year to enable students to experience the Hong Kong Section of XRL and HZMB, learn and gain first-hand experience of the planning and development of GBA cities and the convenience of transportation, as well as reflect on the opportunities brought about by GBA development for Hong Kong. In addition, a considerable number of schools in Hong Kong have formed sister schools with their counterparts in various provinces and cities in the

Mainland either on their own initiative or through coordination of the EDB. Currently, most sister schools are located in GBA, amounting to about 900 pairs. They have been organising mutual visits and multi-faceted exchange activities based on their school-based development needs. Through exchange and contact, Hong Kong students could build friendships with Mainland students and deepen their understanding of different aspects of the Mainland. Looking forward, the EDB will continue to enhance and explore diversified exchange programmes in alignment with GBA development. In parallel, we will continue to encourage more Hong Kong schools to form sister schools with schools in the Mainland, as well as broaden the exchange modes and enhance the effectiveness.

Apart from internship and exchange, the HKSAR Government has made concerted efforts with various sectors of the community in recent years to provide steadfast support to youth innovation and entrepreneurship. Funding schemes under the Youth Development Fund (YDF) benefit young people by helping them meet their initial capital needs. To further assist them to explore the opportunities from GBA development, the YDF has rolled out a new funding scheme to encourage young people to make good use of the innovative and entrepreneurial bases in GBA and help them develop their businesses in both Hong Kong and GBA cities in the Mainland. It will allocate over \$100 million to sponsor some ten NGOs in organising youth entrepreneurship projects, which will provide capital funding to about 200 youth entrepreneurial teams and relevant start-up support and incubation services to more than 4 000 young people, with a view to further facilitating young people to start their own businesses in Hong Kong as well as GBA cities in the Mainland.