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The Hon Mr John KC Lee GBM SBS PDSM PMSM
Chief Executive of the HKSAR
Office of the Chief Executive
The Government of the HKSAR
Tamar, Hong Kong

By email (ceo@ceo.go.hk and hk5yplan@cmab.gov.hk)

Dear Chief Executive,

Submission in relation to the First Five Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

The India Association Hong Kong would like to submit our policy proposals for the ongoing consultation in relation to the First Five-Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Our submissions are strictly confined to Parts 3 and 4 of the Consultation Document dealing with (i) Innovation, Technology, and Industry Development and (ii) People's Livelihood and Social Development.

Above all, we have borne in mind the obligation of the HKSAR Government to maintain sustainable fiscal prudence (Part 4 - Matters for Consideration). Our recommendations are therefore focused on improving the value obtained from public expenditure rather than seeking further funding.

We have also paid particular attention to the following policy directions and key proposals highlighted in the consultation document:

1. Retaining talents genuinely needed by Hong Kong and helping them integrate into the city (Part 3, point 2, 2nd bullet point);
2. Facilitating Hong Kong talents in travelling to and from the Mainland and working there, to allow greater room for advancement while serving and contributing to national development (Part 3, point 2, 3rd bullet point);
3. Attracting non-local students to study in Hong Kong (Part 3, point 2, 4th bullet point);

4. Continuously enhancing the quality of basic education, strengthening students' literacy in language (Part 4, point 1, 1st bullet point);
5. Providing students with diverse pathways for further studies and development (Part 4, point 1, 2nd bullet point); and
6. Strengthening the internationalisation of higher education (Part 4, point 1, 3rd bullet point).

A. Overview of submissions in relation to Chinese learning by ethnic minority students

Currently more than HK\$700 million a year is being spent annually to support Chinese learning for ethnic minority students. Despite this sizeable investment, we understand that only 5.7% of ethnic minority candidates in the 2024 HKDSE exams entered for the Chinese language paper. Moreover, many ethnic minority students are in schools with a very high proportion of ethnic minority students, sometimes over 70%, and therefore lack the language exposure to achieve high Chinese standards. Addressing this issue through a more effective use of public resources is important for at least seven reasons.

First, most of us in the Indian and other ethnic minority communities in Hong Kong view this city as home and have done so for generations. Because Hong Kong is home, the young in our respective minority communities need to be employable here.

Second, our suggestions are made not only for the benefit of our own communities but for Hong Kong as a whole. The size of the non-Chinese community in Hong Kong varies between approximately 4% and 8% depending on whether temporary workers are included. This is too large a group to be unable to contribute to the economy and potentially become dependent on public welfare.

Third, we are living in difficult times geopolitically. It is essential that all of us, regardless of race, religion or national origin regard ourselves as part of not just this great city, but also the broader nation as a whole. It is the Chinese language that will link us to the rest of the nation and therefore so important for ethnic minorities to learn.

Fourth, we note that innovations in teaching Chinese to ethnic minorities will likely also be transferrable to other important issues, such as integrating the children of Mainland talent into Hong Kong schools.

Fifth, an ethnic minority community that is proficient in Chinese will find it feasible to work in the Mainland and contribute to national development.

Sixth, international students are more likely to be attracted to come to Hong Kong for their higher education if local students sharing their ethnicity act as a bridge to the local student community.

Finally, we are not asking for additional funding. Instead, in keeping with the principles of financial prudence, we merely request that concerted efforts are made to improve outcomes from the substantial investment that is being made annually (and has been for over a decade).

B. Reasons for poor outcomes despite substantial investment in supporting Chinese learning

Diagnosing the causes of the problem is the first step in determining the appropriate solution. In particular, any proposals need to address the reality that:

1. Non-Chinese speaking (“NCS”) students simply cannot get enough exposure to the Chinese language in their home environment. Parents of NCS students recognise the importance of Chinese in Hong Kong but simply do not have the language skills (and also often lack the financial resources) to help their children.
2. Whilst the official system of designated schools has been abolished, many of the former designated schools continue to have most of their pupils coming from ethnic minority backgrounds. This is clearly detrimental to their Chinese learning as it exacerbates the lack of exposure to Chinese in their home environments.
3. Whilst there are now a lot of inexpensive technological tools (particularly for Mandarin) to assist children from NCS families to learn Chinese, knowledge of these tools is not widespread and families are left to fend for themselves.
4. Many ethnic minority students we have spoken to who beat the odds and acquired strong Chinese language skills at primary school have told us that they were discouraged from continuing onto DSE Chinese, presumably to avoid bringing down the school’s grade averages. Instead, they are pushed towards relatively weak overseas curricula such as GCSE Chinese (equivalent to approximately primary 3 in the local curriculum).

C. Recommendations to support Chinese learning by NCS students

In formulating our suggestions, we have had regard to not only the experiences of members of our own community but have also considered the views of other interested parties. In particular, we have had regard to the submissions on this subject made by the EOC in August 2024 and the EOC’s report “Closing the Gap” issued in September 2019.

Encouraging integration of minority students in the mainstream student population

We are given to understand that there are 17 primary schools and 15 secondary schools in which more than 50% of the students are from non-Chinese backgrounds and 9 primary schools and 7 secondary schools where this proportion exceeds 70%. Put another way, just under half of ethnic minority students study in schools where a majority of their classmates are from non-Chinese speaking backgrounds. Addressing this, perhaps through changes in the funding mechanism is key to addressing the learning difficulties. The current funding mechanism (as set out in Education Bureau Circular No. 8/2020) provides incentives to increase the enrolment of NCS students which leads to the undesirable outcome of NCS students being concentrated in a small number of schools. It is essential that the structural barriers to strong Chinese language achievement by NCS students are dismantled.

Support for Chinese language learning

The following tools provide significant support that can help achieve high levels of fluency. These and similar products should be publicised to ethnic minority families who are seeking to support their children to learn Chinese. They should also be made readily available, for instance, through schools and public libraries. Some of these

materials primarily support learning Mandarin and could be adapted with Government support for Cantonese. We provide particular product names only to give examples of the resources that are available rather than to promote them. We would be delighted to see this list expanded with any competing products that are available.

- Reading materials with audio support. Examples for younger children include the Luka reading robot, Basic Chinese 500 (Sagebooks) and the Le Le Chinese Reading System. Examples for older children include the “Sunny Campus” student newspaper (published by Sing Tao Group), Top 945 magazine and the Youdao reading pen.
- Apps and games which help children learn how to write characters. Examples include Skritter and Maomi Stars.
- Tutors who support their language acquisition by engaging in regular everyday conversation with them. We understand that individual tuition may not be cost effective but there is no reason why after-school support cannot be provided in larger groups.
- As noted above, many existing technological tools are designed for Mandarin. To align with the Government's goal of developing Hong Kong into an international I&T centre (Part 3 of the Consultation Document), we recommend establishing a targeted I&T grant or fund. This would incentivise local tech start-ups and universities to develop AI-driven Cantonese learning apps, gamified platforms, and translation tools specifically tailored for the local NCS student population.

Incentivising secondary schools to support the Chinese learning of ethnic minority students and developing a bespoke curriculum

There are many possible solutions to the current culture of discouraging ethnic minority students from taking DSE Chinese.

A basic and easy change would be to discourage students who have been educated in Hong Kong from a young age from taking easy foreign exams such as GCSE Chinese. Whilst such a qualification might be appropriate for children of Hong Kong permanent residents who move to the city in their teenage years, it is not a sensible option for those who have been schooled in local primary schools. If a foreign qualification is to be taken, students who have grown up in Hong Kong should be encouraged to take Chinese at GCE Advanced Level or equivalent rather than GCSE. Even better would be to encourage NCS students to take Applied Learning Chinese (for non-Chinese speaking students). At the moment, there is insufficient incentive for NCS students to take A-level Chinese - whether they achieve a grade C on GCSE or a grade E for A level, they have met the entry requirement for JUPAS.

Another possibility would be to allow NCS students to take a modified version of the HKDSE (Chinese Language). The current version requires a native level of proficiency plus a high level of knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture and traditions for certain parts of the curriculum. This is difficult for an NCS student to achieve. If the cultural component could be separated into a separate optional paper that could be attempted only by those seeking the highest grades, it might allow ethnic minority students to at least achieve a pass at HKDSE (Chinese Language).

Importantly, it should also be publicised to ethnic minority families and schools that it is the right of all students to continue with their Chinese studies following the local curriculum and that it is against public policy to dissuade students who wish to attempt the Chinese language portion of the local curriculum from doing so.

Ultimately, it would be strongly preferable for a bespoke Chinese as a Second Language curriculum to be developed. This would remove concerns that schools might have in relation to affecting overall results whilst allowing NCS children to develop the language skills required by the local employment market.

We are convinced that with the appropriate support, there is no reason why ethnic minority students cannot achieve results in Chinese that are similar to those in the majority population. Children of Chinese immigrants to English speaking countries often achieve native level fluency in English and there is no reason why the reverse should not also be true.

Publication and analysis of school performance

We suggest that schools obtaining public funding to support NCS students should be asked to publicise the results attained by NCS students (including the proportion taking the DSE or A-Level exams and the grade achieved). This would give schools an incentive to ensure that the funds are wisely invested, allow NCS families the ability to choose schools that attain strong results and allow the Administration to identify practices which are working well to be recommended to other schools so that best practices are uniformly adopted.

D. Employment

Hong Kong's ethnic minority communities were particularly vulnerable to job losses during the coronavirus pandemic. This was a symptom of a wider problem which will persist given the increased focus of the economy on the Greater China region. We would propose the following:

- Enhance the available resources at the Labour Department to assist those who are not fluent in Chinese.
- Design courses for youth not fluent in Chinese to help them enter other industries such as accounting, marketing, design, maintenance and health care.
- We suggest efforts should also be taken to ensure the availability of vocational training courses in English as well as Chinese as many adults who are not fluent in Chinese are unable to access the existing vocational training courses.
- We would also like to see Chinese language courses for adult non-ethnic Chinese become more accessible and better publicised. For instance, information could be disseminated through organisations associated with Hong Kong's various ethnic communities, including our own.
- We recognise the importance of a trilingual and biliterate civil service but hope that the Government will lead by example and hire more non-ethnic Chinese Hong Kong people into the civil service. We welcome the on-going review of language proficiency requirements since 2010 which has led to 53 civil service language requirements being lowered and urge that this process continue.
- We also suggest that we consider the experience of other bilingual jurisdictions such as Canada where each civil service position is analysed to consider whether bilingual proficiency is required. Even where bilingual proficiency is required, consideration is given to whether language requirements must be met at the time of appointment or satisfied later through language training at Government expense.

- We say this not just because it is desirable that the composition of the civil service should look like Hong Kong. In addition, there may be particular benefits in increasing cultural diversity in certain departments such as the Police, Customs and Immigration which frequently deal with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, given the city's aging population and healthcare manpower shortage, having culturally competent frontline medical staff and translators is critical for ethnic minority elderly and patients who frequently interact with these services.
- We also suggest ethnic minorities who are presently employed in the civil service be given opportunities to advance to more senior positions. This we believe will demonstrate the Government's genuine desire to improve the lives of the ethnic minority population. It will also encourage others to truly understand how Hong Kong is integrating its people from all walks of life.

E. Care of the aged

Members of the ethnic minority communities consider Hong Kong their home. Therefore, many ethnic minority elderly are spending their twilight years in Hong Kong. Of these, most have extreme difficulty in Mainstream Elderly Homes for the following reasons:

1. Linguistic needs as many are not fluent in Chinese, some are not fluent in English.
2. Dietary needs both in terms of usual cuisine and sometimes specific needs for instance for Halal or vegetarian food.
3. Religious needs for instance with respect to prayer rooms or accommodating fasts.
4. Cultural needs which in part reflect the language abilities referred to above but also impact entertainment and activities for the residents concerned.

We therefore urge that the Administration give thought to the following:

- In the short-term, to improving access to information on care homes for ethnic minority elderly in English and other languages. For instance, the Social Welfare Department website (in English) provides an interactive list of elderly community centres and a list of care homes but most of the associated publicity materials are in Chinese only.
- In the longer-term, to consider whether it is possible to create "Culturally Responsive Care Hubs" or "Culturally Inclusive Care Clusters" within specific mainstream facilities, where staff are specifically trained in diverse dietary (Halal/Vegetarian) and cultural needs.

F. Integration and Racial Harmony

There is much yet to achieve to foster integration and racial harmony in society. Our specific recommendations are as follows:

- Publicity campaigns should be run showing pride in a diverse Hong Kong.
- Training courses among frontline staff in the civil service should be formulated to promote understanding of the various cultures of different ethnic minorities.

- Information about different cultures and religions should be incorporated into the education curriculum.

G. Conclusion

We make these suggestions because of our community's long history in Hong Kong and our recognition of the important role our city plays in the nation and internationally.

We are convinced that Hong Kong's best days are yet to come. Hong Kong's Indian and other ethnic minority communities hope to play a part in the exciting opportunities that will be created going forward by increased integration with the Greater Bay Area and the rest of the country.

We are confident that under your leadership, Hong Kong will develop policies that ensure that each and every resident can perform to their potential and, equally importantly, contribute to a city of which we are all proud.

Yours faithfully



Vishal Melwani
President
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