

# Promotion of Chinese Language Education and Career Planning for Non-Chinese Speaking Students

## Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission

### Purpose

This paper aims to provide the views and recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) on addressing the education challenges, specifically the learning of Chinese language, facing non-Chinese Speaking (NCS) students in schools. It also aims to highlight the importance of career planning for NCS students. All matters raised below reflect feedback gathered from important stakeholders, including a group of Chinese language teachers of NCS students, youth group leaders from diverse races and organisations serving the non-ethnic Chinese community.

### Background and Developments in Education for NCS Students

2. Subsequent to the implementation of the Race Discrimination Ordinance in 2009, the EOC released the “Education for All” Report of the Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities in 2011. Meanwhile, a range of measures was put forward by the Government in 2014 for the education enhancement of NCS students, including increased funding for schools, introduction of the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework (Learning Framework) and setting-up of the Applied Learning (Chinese) Subjects under HKDSE Examination.

3. Coincidentally, the population profile of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong has changed significantly over the recent decades. The *2021 Population Census Thematic Report: Ethnic Minorities*<sup>1</sup> indicates a 53% growth of non-ethnic Chinese population since a decade ago, with South Asian numbers having increased by 56%. The proportion of non-ethnic Chinese inhabitants in Hong Kong rose from 6.4% of the whole population in 2011 to 8.4% in 2021.

4. 30% of the non-ethnic Chinese population are born locally and its education level is improving, with the proportion of 18-24 age group in education

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<sup>1</sup> Census and Statistics Department, *2021 Population Census Thematic Report: Ethnic Minorities* (Hong Kong, Census and Statistics Department, 2022), 49-51.  
<https://www.census2021.gov.hk/doc/pub/21c-ethnic-minorities.pdf>

having risen from 43% in 2016 to 50% in 2021, compared to 53% and 56% respectively for the overall population. Also reported in the Census is an increase in the ability to read and write Chinese over the last five years, going up from 35% to 40% for reading and from 31% to 36% for writing. For the 5-14 age group, the proportion has gone up to 65% for Chinese reading ability.

5. The Government's support to the education of NCS students is exemplified by its substantial funding allocation towards a variety of supportive initiatives. Additional funding for public sector and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools to facilitate Chinese learning of NCS students and create an inclusive learning environment is estimated to be \$410 million in 2024/25. With such extensive resources, data from the Education Bureau (EDB) indicates a rise in the number of mainstream schools admitting NCS students - 66 more kindergartens, 35 more primary schools and 14 more secondary schools in 2022/23 school year than in 2018/19. Meanwhile, the number of local NCS admitted to UGC-funded undergraduate degree programmes (via JUPAS and non-JUPAS combined) also increased from 233 in 2019/20 to 290 in 2021/22. Nevertheless, the proportion of those admitted via JUPAS remains relatively low. For instance, among 1,251 NCS students who took the HKDSE Examination in 2022/23, only 149 got admitted through JUPAS, i.e. about 12%.

6. Feedback from teachers and community members indicates ongoing barriers for NCS students to reach the Chinese literacy level required for the mainstream workplace. According to an EOC Study released in 2020<sup>2</sup>, 86% of Chinese language teachers had "greater difficulty in making non-Chinese speaking students achieve the learning goals of the mainstream curriculum". Meanwhile, another EOC Study, also released in 2020<sup>3</sup>, concluded that "young people with ethnic minority background are experiencing obvious obstacles in their school-to-work transitions... mainly due to structural difficulties in acquiring the Chinese language in a less favourable language environment and system". The study also identified factors other than Chinese literacy that significantly impact the education and career pathways of NCS students, namely

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<sup>2</sup> Oxfam Hong Kong, *A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, Oxfam Hong Kong, 2020)

<https://www.eoc.org.hk/en/policy-advocacy-and-research/research-reports/2020-4>

<sup>3</sup> The Centre for Youth Research and Practice, Hong Kong Baptist University, *A Study on Education and Career Pathways of Ethnic Minority Youth in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2020)

<https://www.eoc.org.hk/en/policy-advocacy-and-research/research-reports/2020-3>

accuracy and sufficiency of career development information, availability of and accessibility to social resources, personal capacity and initiative, financial situation and cultural stereotypes.

7. In 2019, the EOC conducted a review of the progress following the education measures implemented for NCS students and made 22 suggestions for improvement through the “Closing the Gap” Report of the Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities. Some of the recommendations were taken up by the Government while suggestions on the outstanding issues are outlined as below.

### **Key Issue (a): Chinese Teaching Support and Training**

8. A key recommendation for the Government in the EOC’s 2019 Working Group Report is **to fill the gaps in the existing Learning Framework to develop it into a full-fledged Chinese-as-a-second language curriculum complete with specific pedagogy, corresponding teaching tools, assessments, qualifications and teacher training** so as to reduce the disparity between required Chinese language levels for mainstream jobs and the levels attained by NCS students. A set of textbooks has been published by EDB for the teaching of Chinese under the Learning Framework for NCS students in primary schools, which is a good start. In addition, it is worth mentioning that some publishers have started providing supplementary guides for mainstream textbooks to facilitate teaching NCS students.

9. While ongoing textbook development beyond primary education level is considered crucial for bridging NCS students to secondary schools, we reiterate the need to add the other elements mentioned above in order to make it a holistic and effective second-language curriculum, without which real long term impact may be hard to achieve.

10. Many Chinese language teachers are struggling in closing the gap for NCS students in learning Chinese. A group of teachers we have consulted shared that the materials developed by the EDB are useful but much more are needed to cater to student diversity in learning and to cover different stages. Some schools are making use of technological advances and are partnering with innovative

organisations to strengthen their Chinese teaching for NCS students, e.g. reading pen, writing practice software, online pinyin tools, community mentors, etc.<sup>4</sup>

11. For example, an NGO promotes Chinese book reading among NCS students using technology. They have adapted a set of 30 Chinese story books by adding audio in Cantonese accessible via a digital pen and providing corresponding English language glossaries. At the same time, extensive materials with audio support in Putonghua are available in the market.

12. Another organisation in our connection has developed multiple levels of curriculum with teaching guides and a mobile App for dispensing homework that caters to the diversity of students' Chinese level and facilitates self-learning and self-correction in Chinese reading, writing and speaking.

13. In exploring potential digital support for NCS students, it was found that most customised service providers are facing obstacles in reaching out to schools, especially those with fewer NCS students. **A platform for sharing such technology and innovative approaches as well as partnership among teachers of NCS students will be hugely helpful in spreading good practices. It is also suggested that EDB focus on certain noteworthy tools and programmes and put in centralised efforts to make them compatible for schools and classes with different concentrations and backgrounds of NCS students.**

14. Another crucial element of effective Chinese teaching is skills and capacity building for teachers. The EOC strongly believes that consistent and progressive training in teaching Chinese-as-a-second-language would greatly enhance teachers' capacity in supporting their NCS students to opt for higher level Chinese language qualifications, giving them better chances of success in the workplace. An NGO we have consulted with enrolls prospective teachers studying at The Education University of Hong Kong to conduct online after-

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<sup>4</sup> Some Cantonese learning tools are available as follows:

- Typeduck: <https://typeduck.hk>
- Survival Cantonese - Self-Learning Package: <https://www.eduhk.hk/cle/resources/cep/cantonese-survival-package/index.html>
- The Education University of Hong Kong Cantonese Self-Learning Website:  
- [https://corpus.eduhk.hk/cantonese/e\\_index.html](https://corpus.eduhk.hk/cantonese/e_index.html)
- The Education University of Hong Kong Online Classes Platform | Cantonese  
<https://eocp2.eduhk.hk/en/video/language/cantonese/view.html>
- App | Learn Cantonese with Big Data:  
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=hk.eduhk.lml.cantonese>

school consolidation classes for NCS students to equip them with the respective experience and training.

15. In another example, an NGO runs culturally responsive and interactive Chinese extracurricular programmes for NCS students in primary schools, through small group teaching with different levels of Chinese materials that reflect the differentiated abilities of the students. HKU students, among them some from the Education Faculty, are trained and engaged to run the programme. According to its pre- and post-assessment, an average increase of 156% in listening and speaking skills and 215% in reading and writing was recorded. More essentially, students reported increased enthusiasm for learning Chinese.

16. We should be mindful that the above informal participation by prospective teachers cannot replace formal training to fully equip teachers with both skillset and mindset in teaching second language learners. It is therefore important to reiterate the recommendation under EOC's 2019 Working Group Report for **introducing dedicated modules in PGDE Programme; making it mandatory for Chinese language teachers of NCS students to undertake training in second language learning; and providing systematic, intensive and longer-duration in-service training courses for practicing teachers.** Mandatory specialised professional training for teachers of NCS students mirroring the requirement for those teaching students with special educational needs is highly advisable.

17. Data is essential to measure the success of any initiative and make changes as necessary. An important observation in the work of all NGOs contacted for good practices was their diligence in measuring pre- and post-intervention progress. **In monitoring the use of funding on NCS students in schools, it is highly encouraged that evidence-based progress measurement be adopted as a prioritised criteria in assessing effectiveness.** While EDB has commissioned a tertiary institution to conduct a longitudinal study to gauge the progress of Chinese language learning of P1-P3 NCS students, with its finding to be released in 2024/25, we strongly encourage that it is taken as the first phase of **an extensive review on NCS students' learning progress and experience throughout their education journey in primary and secondary schools with the ultimate goal of identifying the missing link between the teaching efforts and students' performance in Chinese learning.**

## **Key Issue (b): Chinese Learning & Examination in Secondary Education**

18. The option of taking overseas Chinese examinations is essential, in particular, for those NCS students who join the local education system midway or those who are notably deprived of a Chinese language environment. However, more than a few locally born NCS students who have gone through the mainstream curriculum in primary schools and are keen to continue this level of learning in secondary school report that they are directed towards opting for the overseas curricula right after their promotion to secondary schools, thus nullifying what has been taught in the previous six or more years.

19. EDB data showed that in 2022/23, among 1,251 NCS students sitting for the HKDSE Examination, only 108 (i.e. 8.6%) entered for the HKDSE (Chinese Language). NCS students commonly reported a drop in their Chinese literacy, especially in writing and reading, in secondary education, which hugely limits their academic and career choices. It is believed that the **Chinese language levels of these NCS students would be significantly higher if they continued learning mainstream Chinese (leading to the HKDSE Chinese examination) either all the way or for a few more years, rather than switching to alternative curricula soon after Primary 6.**

20. Clearly, improving beyond the levels attained till P6 should be the way forward. There are a few factors which if resolved may result in more NCS students continuing to study mainstream level Chinese for longer thereby improving their Chinese proficiency<sup>5</sup>. Some of these considerations are: when they have to make the decision to switch to alternative curriculum, the availability of higher level alternative curriculum options, university admission criteria with regards to Chinese language<sup>6</sup>, etc.

21. In this regard, it is suggested **that the current funding mechanism which is primarily intended for Chinese language support be revisited, and more funding be geared towards higher level Chinese learning, i.e. HKDSE (mainstream or Applied Learning) which is tougher than overseas curriculum, and for which students would need more intensive help.**

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<sup>5</sup> One suggestion provided by youth group representatives from diverse races is to create a guideline for teachers and students on the pros and cons of taking HKDSE Chinese vis-a-vis alternative Chinese curricula in guidance and decision-making.

<sup>6</sup> For example: If more points were awarded to Chinese language qualifications of a higher level, more students may be incentivised to opt for them.

22. Apart from keeping NCS students in mainstream Chinese curriculum longer, **it is also advised to strengthen the Applied Learning (Chinese) subjects so as to make it a preferred option vis-a-vis overseas curricula** as an additional channel to obtain a Chinese language qualification suitable for further studies and career pursuits. Though tagged at Qualification Framework Level 3 and focusing on the workplace context, it is not commonly taken by NCS students (11.7% in 2022/23). A review is highly suggested to sort out the operation and curriculum issues that prevent NCS students from choosing Applied Learning (Chinese) subjects.

23. To steer more NCS students towards learning Chinese under the mainstream curriculum, another suggestion worth exploring is to categorise that part of the Chinese curriculum involving classical or ancient texts as an extended module under the HKDSE Chinese examination. Students can, based on their ability, opt for it or not, similar to the current HKDSE Mathematics curriculum.

24. A further suggestion is to allow students from non-native language backgrounds to use Chinese character input software during examinations. We fully appreciate that actual writing skills are an indispensable element in the acquisition of Chinese but also realise that it is the digital input that is widely applied in common workplaces.

25. We are pleased to see that a pilot scheme was introduced to offer after-school Chinese language courses for lower primary NCS students using adapted learning materials for the Youth Chinese Test (YCT), an international standardised test on students' abilities to use Chinese as second language. Some teachers we met even recommended taking reference of the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), under the same umbrella as YCT, to develop a curriculum and examination for university admission with well-recognised Chinese language qualification and well-established second language curriculum structure.

26. With all the above suggestions on Chinese curriculum and examinations, it is recommended to **set up a task force under EDB with diverse stakeholders to look into the issues that deter NCS students from taking mainstream Chinese examination and work through systemic challenges to initiate potential solutions.**

## **Key Issue (c): Career Planning for NCS Students**

27. The 2020 EOC Study on non-ethnic Chinese youth identified factors other than Chinese literacy that significantly impact the education and career pathways of NCS students, namely accuracy and sufficiency of career development information, availability of and accessibility to social resources, personal capacity and initiative, financial situation and cultural stereotypes.

**28. Guidance<sup>7</sup>, training and resources need to be strengthened for career teachers to provide timely and culturally responsive advice for the students to make realistic assessments of their career needs and take early action to equip themselves with the necessary skills, including language learning<sup>8</sup>.**

29. An NGO working in this area uses young professionals and university students from diverse races to serve as mentors and community instructors for NCS secondary school students from underserved communities. Through personal experience, these community instructors understand the situation of the students and work towards raising the students' expectations of what they can achieve. Students are inspired to aim high in their education and explore futures as professionals, entrepreneurs and administrators. The NGO also partners with local corporations to develop professional internship opportunities for these students. More of such partnership and internship opportunities should be encouraged.

## **Conclusion**

30. This paper has focused on education issues which we see as the cornerstone of any society and the foundation for growth. It is our collective responsibility to bring down barriers that stop a section of the population, i.e. the ethnic minorities, from accessing equal opportunities for productive livelihoods of their choice. While appreciating all the work and resources put in, we need to acknowledge that more needs to be done to achieve the objective of language adequacy for equal opportunities.

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<sup>7</sup> A youth group working with NCS secondary students highlighted the importance of ensuring NCS students' opportunities for JUPAS application guidance. This is based on their observations that quite a few NCS F6 students in their services were not well prepared for their JUPAS application.

<sup>8</sup> A suggestion by NCS youth group members is to subsidise post-secondary Chinese learning programmes that focus on workplace Chinese in different industries and fields e.g. law, engineering, etc. for tertiary students to continue their language learning and prepare them for the workplace.



31. We hope the gaps in language proficiency will be fixed and the field leveled so no NCS student in Hong Kong is made to feel inadequate. Such efforts will yield bountiful returns not just for non-ethnic Chinese youth but for Hong Kong overall as it gains from adding this under-utilised group to its talent pool. Closing this language gap will also help unleash the potential of these youth to becoming powerful connectors between their places of origin and Hong Kong, the Great Bay Area and China.

32. Many non-ethnic Chinese people in Hong Kong call this city home. Proficiency in the Chinese language serves not only as a tool for them for learning and employment but also as a crucial means to cultivate a sense of belonging to Hong Kong and strengthen cultural ties to China. Efforts must be consolidated to tackle their language challenges effectively.

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