

## **Equal Opportunities Commission**

### **Submission for 2020 Policy Address Public Consultation on Education of Non-Chinese Speaking Students and Employment & COVID-19 Relief Support for Disadvantaged Racial Groups**

#### **Purpose**

This paper aims to provide the views and recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) for the 2020 Policy Address on education and career development for children and youth from disadvantaged racial groups and support for these communities in employment and COVID-19 relief to ensure equal opportunities for them in education, employment and access to services. These views are consolidated from diverse feedback from important stakeholders and racial groups; as well as empirical findings from a series of dedicated studies conducted by the EOC.

#### **Education & Career Development**

2. Some racial groups have been facing systemic barriers in education. This issue was raised by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in their concluding observations in May 2014<sup>1</sup>; and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination which recommended in its concluding remarks in September 2018 that the Government, “[f]acilitate the smooth integration of non-Chinese speaking students in Hong Kong, China into the education system, and ensure that children of all ethnicities enjoy their right to inclusive and Chinese-language education.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of China, including Hong Kong, China, and Macao, China*, 13 June 2014, E/C.12/CHN/CO/2, paragraph 52; available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53c77e524.html>

<sup>2</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), *Concluding observations on the combined fourteenth to seventeenth periodic reports of China (including Hong Kong, China and Macao, China)\**, paragraph 24(c), available at <https://urlzs.com/92Roy>

3. Noting that education is an effective means of empowerment, the EOC has long been focusing on this area for non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students as a strategic priority area. Last year, we made a submission for the Policy Address on the major concerns and recommendations from our Working Group on Education for Ethnic Minorities (the “Working Group”). We are pleased to see that some new measures announced in the last Policy Address on enhancing the funding model for schools, introducing longitudinal studies on NCS students’ progress and strengthening parent support were very much in line with our Working Group’s recommendations.

4. Following this submission, the EOC published the “Closing the Gap” Working Group Report in September 2019 and released two related studies, namely “A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong” conducted by the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong and Oxfam Hong Kong<sup>3</sup>; and “A Study on Education and Career Pathways of Ethnic Minority Youth in Hong Kong” conducted by the Centre for Youth Research & Practice at the Hong Kong Baptist University<sup>4</sup>, in January and June 2020 respectively. The Working Group Report delineated the key concerns and areas for improvement from diverse feedback while the two studies provided strong empirical evidence on the problems and required actions.

### **Key Concerns on Education & Career Development**

5. The Working Group concluded that the following eight areas were of major concern:

- i. Gaps in the Chinese Language Curriculum Second Language Learning Framework (the “Learning Framework”)
- ii. Unclear indicators to measure the progress of the Learning Framework

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<sup>3</sup> Oxfam Hong Kong, Loh Ka Yee Elizabeth and Hung On Ying, “*A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong*”, January 2020, [https://www.eoc.org.hk/eoc/upload/ResearchReport/researchreport\\_20200115\\_e.pdf](https://www.eoc.org.hk/eoc/upload/ResearchReport/researchreport_20200115_e.pdf)

<sup>4</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*”, June 2020, [https://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/upload/ResearchReport/20200619\\_em.pdf](https://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/upload/ResearchReport/20200619_em.pdf)

- iii. Insufficient teacher training and support
- iv. Available Chinese examinations either too hard for second language learners or too low in standard with not enough options in between
- v. Limited knowledge and access to information for EM parents in school choice and examination options for their children
- vi. Need for more integration in schools
- vii. Lack of continuing Chinese learning opportunities beyond secondary school
- viii. Inadequate support for parents and community

6. In “A Study on the Challenges Faced by Mainstream Schools in Educating Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong”, it was found that, among 612 Chinese language teachers in primary schools:

- i. Only 37.8% are confident in teaching NCS students to achieve the learning level of Chinese speaking students
- ii. 86% faced greater difficulties in ensuring NCS students keep up with the mainstream curriculum schedule; and making NCS students achieve the learning goals
- iii. 96% indicated that the Chinese language curriculum in use is too difficult for NCS students and there is a lack of resources for teaching Chinese-as-a-second-language for them
- iv. 91% believed it is difficult for NCS students to reach similar Chinese language level as their Chinese speaking counterparts before the internal assessment for the Secondary School Place Allocation exercise

7. In “A Study on Education and Career Pathways of Ethnic Minority Youth in Hong Kong”, a survey covering 483 NCS students and 426 Chinese students showed that NCS students have higher aspirations and self-efficacies as well as stronger family and peer support than Chinese students. However, in-depth interviews with 53 non-Chinese youth and 15 parents, teachers and social workers found that, despite this, non-Chinese youth face many difficulties in their career pathways. They reported limited job opportunities and options, due to their low Chinese language proficiency

and common stereotypes against their racial and cultural backgrounds among employers. Some non-Chinese youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds resorted to taking a gap year to earn school fees or simply abandoned aspirations of further education looking at the difficulties commonly experienced by their community people in finding jobs even after tertiary education. There is an evident gap between non-Chinese youths' career expectations and the school advice they get on when and how they should equip themselves to pursue their goals. Accuracy and sufficiency of information as well as availability of and accessibility to related resources are important determinants of their plans and decisions.

8. Another important finding of this study was the co-relation identified between concentration of non-Chinese students in a school and the sense of social inclusion and belongingness (*Perceived Host Receptivity*) among them. It showed that students studying in schools with lower concentration of non-Chinese students had significantly higher perceived host receptivity which is strongly associated with their aspirations and very important for the successful transition of non-Chinese youth in their education and employment pathways.

### **Key Recommendations on Education & Career Development**

9. All the three study reports pointed to a major gap in the current education system for NCS students. The EOC recommends the gap be plugged by:

- i. Developing a full-fledged Chinese-as-a-second-language curriculum complete with specific pedagogy, corresponding teaching tools and textbooks, systematic teacher training, etc., which are inadequate in the current Learning Framework
- ii. Making it essential for Chinese subject teachers to have undergone pre-job training on teaching second language learners; providing intensive and progressive in-service training courses for practicing Chinese subject teachers; and requiring every school to have a certain ratio of trained teachers

- iii. Revising the Chinese language examination options for second language learners and developing a qualification ladder with progressive levels between GCSE/IGCSE and HKDSE, through which a range of language proficiency among NCS students can be better reflected and recognized

10. It was also recommended to strengthen manpower resources for schools in the following areas:

- i. Introduce an independent coordinator position in schools to co-ordinate learning support resources and needs as well as promote cultural inclusion, mirroring the established coordinator position for students with special educational needs
- ii. Formalize the support teacher position (currently short-term non-Chinese teaching assistants in many schools) to be an established post to recognize their roles in supporting group teaching of NCS students, communication with their parents and cultural integration with mainstream students

11. On career planning and counselling for NCS students, guidance, training and resources should be strengthened for career teachers to provide timely and culturally responsive advice for the students to make realistic assessment of their career needs and take early actions to equip themselves with the necessary skills, including language learning.

12. We also called for the Government to address the following disadvantages faced by NCS students in their education process:

- i. The Learning Framework may not go in line with the Secondary School Place Allocation exercise. As schools are required to use a uniform test in assessing the Chinese level of both Chinese and NCS students, many teachers abruptly shift from the Learning Framework to teach the mainstream curriculum in Primary 4 even though the NCS students cannot cope with the leap.
- ii. NCS students studying in schools with a high concentration of non-Chinese students felt less accepted by and less integrated into the

mainstream society. This gravely impacts their career aspirations and development. Even worse, it reinforces a detachment mindset which, together with their low social-economic background and Chinese language incompetency, creates a perfect breeding ground for intergenerational poverty.

- iii. As the majority of primary schools and many secondary schools teach non-language subjects in Chinese/Cantonese, the deficiency of NCS students in Chinese language impacts almost all subjects, leading to an overall underachievement in school.

13. Last but not least, the following infrastructural improvements should also be made to provide a level-playing field for NCS students to flourish in schools:

- i. All the three study reports indicated that NCS students who start learning Chinese at the pre-school stage and get concerted support from family, school and community have a better chance of catching up with their Chinese counterpart. While the Government has granted an additional funding for kindergartens to support NCS students since 2017, the Hong Kong Jockey Club also launched a 5-year C-for-Chinese@JC pilot project in 2016 to develop an evidenced-based culturally responsive curriculum and home-school-community support model for 20 kindergartens. With positive empirical data from the pilot project on its effectiveness in the Chinese learning and school performance of NCS students under the scheme, the model should gain Government support to be expanded to all kindergartens and also extended to primary schools.
- ii. A school environment that embraces racial diversity and respects cultural differences is key to promoting NCS students' sense of belonging and inclusion and at the same time preventing racial discrimination and harassment. There should be clear instruction and guidance for all schools to develop their policies on racial inclusion and curriculum in equipping all students, Chinese and NCS, with cultural understanding, awareness and sensitivity towards people from different racial backgrounds.

## **Employment & Poverty Problem**

14. The Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2014 brought to light the disturbingly high poverty rate among South Asians, with the report stating that “their poverty situation warrants concern”. Among the South Asians, it was the Pakistanis with a poverty rate of 50.2% that are worst off followed by the Nepalese with a poverty rate of 13.6%.<sup>5</sup>

15. According to the 2016 Population By-census, the labour force participation of non-Chinese population (64.5%) is higher than the overall population (60.8%), with some South Asian groups exceeding 70%; but the median monthly incomes of most South Asian and some South East Asian populations are much lower than the whole population. In view that a significantly higher rate of South Asians work in elementary occupations (30.2% vs 20.9% of the whole working population), in the construction industry (14.9% vs 8.5%) and accommodation & food services (19.1% vs 8.2%), the COVID-19 pandemic doubtlessly hits them harder with more lay-offs in catering and hospitality industries and more Chinese competing for their jobs.<sup>6</sup>

## **Key Concerns on Employment and Economic Crisis under COVID-19 Pandemic**

16. Feedback collected from over 400 employers in “A Study on Education and Career Pathways of Ethnic Minority Youth in Hong Kong” indicated that there is an expectation gap of Chinese proficiency between non-Chinese job-seekers and mainstream employers. Chinese literacy is one of the employers’ major considerations in hiring non-Chinese people. Most employers were not prepared to provide language accommodation in recruitment and showed low intention to use employment services for non-Chinese provided by the Labour Department and NGOs. Non-Chinese young people finish their education only to find that their Chinese level

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<sup>5</sup> Financial Secretary’s Office and Census and Statistics Department, “*Hong Kong Poverty Situation: Report on Ethnic Minorities*”, December 2015, 14, para 2.9, [https://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/eng/pdf/2014\\_EM\\_Report\\_Eng.pdf](https://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/eng/pdf/2014_EM_Report_Eng.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Census and Statistics Department, “*Hong Kong 2016 Population By-census - Thematic Report: Ethnic Minorities*”, December 2017, 86 &94, <https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B11201002016XXXXB0100.pdf>

is too low for common jobs and there is no available formal channel for them to continue their Chinese learning.

17. The employment and poverty problems of the South Asian grassroots community is further exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the feedback from our ongoing communications with different racial groups, we are deeply concerned about the huge difficulties of many South Asian families in sustaining their livelihood due to job and income loss especially in catering, accommodation and construction industries. We have received reports of families failing to pay their rent and struggling for the internet connection fee for their children's online schooling. Their basic needs and rights are threatened in this health crisis and the looming economic depression.

### **Key Recommendations on Employment & COVID-19 Relief Support**

18. On addressing the employment issues, the EOC recommends the Government to:

- i. Provide continuing Chinese language classes for non-Chinese students at universities and adults in the community to suitably equip them for local employment
- ii. Launch financial incentive schemes for employers to undertake positive actions such as encouragement for job-seekers from different racial groups to apply for their employment, language classes, mentorship scheme, skills training, etc.
- iii. Further intensify the review of the Chinese language proficiency requirements in civil service recruitment, especially in professional grade positions, with the consideration of introducing in-service language enhancement schemes for candidates not meeting the Chinese requirement but excelling in other skills and expertise for the jobs. The review should measure the response to language relaxation policies in



terms of the actual recruitment of non-Chinese candidates since the introduction of the revised criteria.

19. Noting that the Labour Department will soon introduce a number of pilot teams for supporting non-Chinese job seekers in conjunction with NGOs, we strongly advise the teams to strengthen their outreach efforts towards racial groups for promoting their job-matching services and adopting a tailor-made approach to encourage local employers to address the language and cultural barriers of their job requirements.

20. Regarding COVID-19 relief support, the Government is suggested to:

- i. Launch dedicated relief programmes for families further disadvantaged by language and cultural barriers
- ii. Address cultural factors in developing, promoting and delivering relief and financial support programmes (for example, some Muslims may be averse to financial support schemes that involve paying interest; certain racial groups highly value self-reliance and may hesitate to apply for monetary assistance; etc.)
- iii. Make sure that information regarding the relief schemes in languages used by major disadvantaged racial groups are available and readily disseminated in the communities to encourage and facilitate their usage
- iv. Clearly instruct staff to actively cater to the needs for interpretation in handling enquiries and applications from disadvantaged racial groups

## **Conclusion**

21. People from all races should enjoy equal opportunities in maximizing their abilities and pursuing their goals. However, it is evident that some racial groups remain disadvantaged especially in the critical areas of education and employment. These disadvantages will inevitably get exacerbated in the current health and financial crisis.

22. In the immediate short run, it is essential for the Government to address the problems arising from these disadvantages as they are livelihood and survival related. In addition, there needs to be a long-term view at cultivating an equality mindset that runs the length and breadth of all government and public policies and services. Of equal importance is the engagement of stakeholders from different sectors including businesses, educational establishments, racial community groups and civil society so as to be able to capitalize on the potential and talent of the resource pool that people from the non-Chinese races represent.

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