

Executive Summary

In 2009, the New Academic Structure was implemented in Hong Kong. Liberal Studies (LS) was also introduced at Secondary 4 level as one of four core subjects for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE)¹.

According to the Education Bureau's 2015 updated Curriculum and Assessment Guide for Liberal Studies², the aim of Liberal Studies is to broaden student's knowledge base and enhance their social awareness, through studying a wide range of issues. Liberal Studies also enables students to make connections among different disciplines, examine issues from a variety of perspectives, and construct personal knowledge of immediate relevance to themselves in today's world.

However, there has been much discussion and debate regarding teaching and assessment methods since the implementation of a liberal studies curriculum in 2009, especially the 'issue-enquiry approach' for the learning and teaching process, as well as the assessment design made up of 'Public Examination' and 'School-based Assessment (SBA)'.

Indicated by the Education Bureau in an early document³, for using the 'issue-enquiry approach', teachers should provide opportunities for students to pose questions, search for information, formulate arguments, and in the process to develop reasoning skills and a familiarity with a variety of viewpoints, ultimately facilitating students to develop ability in practicing independent learning and critical thinking.

However, one might argue that as 'issue-enquiry approach' is not the main teaching and learning mode in Hong Kong, teachers and students may encounter difficulty during the teaching and learning process. Comments about

¹ The four core subjects refer to Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics (Compulsory Part) and Liberal Studies

² Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2007, updated Nov 2015). *Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 – 6)*. Retrieved 21 June, 2018 from:

³ The Education and Manpower Bureau (2004). *The New Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education - First stage consultation document*. Retrieved 21 June, 2018 from: <https://334.edb.hkedcity.net/doc/eng/main.pdf>

香港 01, 《反對必修? 通識科正好補新高中課程思考斷層》2016年5月20日。
網址: <https://www.hk01.com/反對必修?通識科正好補新高中課程思考斷層>

the 'no textbook' practice, teacher-dependent teaching and learning scheme are also observed, such as worrying the subject may become 'formalistic', and failing to meet the expected outcome.

In the 'Public Examination' part of the assessment scheme, two papers in total length of 3 hour and 15 minutes are accounted for 80% of the final HKDSE result of a candidate. Noises from teachers and students regarding to the examination have been received, including 'examination time being too short', 'too many questions', 'imbalanced distribution for issues between modules' and 'unable to accurately reflect students' thinking ability⁴.'

Independent Enquiry Study (IES), a self-directed learning experience in which student takes up the major responsibility, is adopted as the SBA of this subject and accounts for 20% of the student's final HKDSE result. Upon the update in School-based Assessment Teacher's Handbook by Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) in 2017⁵, teachers and students have had clearer guidance in conducting IES. Yet, critics over IES have been common, including its difficulty and workload, disproportionate teaching time allocation and the mechanism of grade moderating according to public examination performance. These all contributed to the questioning about the effectiveness of IES, and its function in relieving students' stress in examination.

This study attempts to understand the current situation of the Liberal Studies subject, especially the teaching-and-learning process and the assessment format. Through collecting the comments and opinions from students and teachers, possible measures in improving the subject can be explored.

⁴ 陳美齡，〈文憑試扼殺學生發展空間和可能〉，灼見名家，2017年5月10日。

⁵ The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2017). *Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination: School-based Assessment Teachers' Handbook (Liberal Studies)*. Available from:

Main discussions

1. The NSS Liberal Studies Subject is valued as highly meaningful, bringing in the effect of broadening students' perspectives of thinking and enhancing learning ability, to match up with the need of a knowledge-based society.

Of the 126 teachers polled in the teachers' survey, an overwhelming majority (94.4%) of them believed that the subject could nurture students thinking from multiple perspectives. Moreover, 60%-70% of teachers said the subject could help students communicate and express themselves better (77.0%), think independently (74.6%) and have better skills in connecting different disciplines (62.7%). A case from the in-depth interview even said he become a Liberal Studies teacher upon being inspired by the subject during secondary school.

Of the 861 youth participated in the online survey, 83.3% of them agreed the subject nurtured their thinking from multiple perspectives. But, only 30% to 45% of youth respondents agreed that the subject could help students communicate and express themselves better (33.1%), think independently (44.4%) and have better skills in connecting different disciplines (30.2%).

It is believed that the setup of Liberal Studies subject under the NAS is meaningful, as it can supplement the limitation of traditional subjects and serve as a new learning experience for students in developing common skills and acquire positive values. It can also build up students' foundation in practicing life-long independent learning, in response to the need of a knowledge-based society.

2. Teachers play a key role in the effectiveness of the Liberal Studies. Heavy workload, great extent of curriculum, students' difference in learning and mistrust of teachers are some of their key challenges.

The survey result showed that teachers had experienced heavy workload, particularly in coordinating IES for students (8.22, on a 0-10 scale), preparing for LS lesson (7.98) and handling assessment in multiple formats (7.73) (on a 0-10 scale). Other challenges included taking care of students' diversified learning needs and dealing with a curriculum with great depth

and width.

Unlike Chinese, English and Mathematics, Liberal Studies is a new core subject and teachers have to spend a lot of time and energy in preparing themselves. Therefore, the Bureau should think of how to alleviate teachers' stress level and help them counter the difficulties, to ensure smooth implementation of the subject.

3. Teachers showed a better appraisal towards Liberal Studies than students did. To achieve good outcome of Liberal Studies education, using a variety of teaching-and-learning methods is essential.

Most teachers polled praised the value of "Interactive discussion" (91.3%) and "group discussion" (90.5%) teaching method for engaging class participation. A lot of them also thought "research and presentation" (83.3%) and "teachers lessoning" (68.3%) to be useful in stimulating students to learn independently and develop cross-curricular thinking.

In the eyes of youth, "interactive discussion" was the best strategy in developing multi-perspectives thinking (72.1%) and engaging class participation (65.9%), while "group discussion" could help students communicate and express themselves better (62.0%). Despite statistical results reflected a fair satisfaction towards "teacher lessoning", the effort of teachers in making the learning process vivid are noted by several cases from the youth in-depth interviews.

Under the NAS, teachers are encouraged to use lively, flexible and multivariate methods in teaching, in contrast to the traditional one-way teaching. With suitable teaching-and-learning strategies adopted, positive effects like enhanced students' learning interests and teaching qualities, better class participation and facilitation of independent learning can be brought.

4. Room for improving IES is observed, as its original aim of serving as an independent learning process for knowledge integration fails to be delivered

Integrated opinions towards IES were observed among the 12 in-depth

interviewed teachers. Some agreed with the concept of IES as a student-initiated learning experience, praising it to be an essential part of Liberal Studies for helping students to develop independent thinking. However, some teachers claimed that IES was too demanding for both students and teachers. Moderating results of IES according to the public examination performance was also criticized by the teachers because of unfairness, as well as being contradictory to the original aim of IES (as a school-based assessment).

Among the 12 in-depth interviewed youth, some agreed that IES could accurately reflect students' ability, and could act as a 'cushion' for public examination. Oppositely, some youth questioned the effectiveness of IES as an objective assessment, expressing concerns over issues like plagiarism and substitution. Other worries also included disproportionate time spent and marks gain and creating extra stress on students. Furthermore, the mechanism of moderating IES scores according to public examination performance was also criticized to be lack of transparency.

The setup of IES is good on theory, but fails in implementation, ultimately brings students and teachers great challenges to be faced. Despite the implementation of new IES guideline (for examinations from 2017 onwards) may provide clearer direction for teachers and students, barriers like deviation in marking and an overemphasis of written communication remains to be strong. How to better modify IES, is a topic worthwhile for further exploration.

5. Different attitudes towards the assessment formats of Liberal Studies were observed between teachers and students, in particular towards the HKDSE examination.

Among the 126 teachers polled in the survey, nearly 60% of them (59.2%) agreed that examination could accurately assess student's ability, while 12.8% of them expressed disagreement. More than one-fourth of teachers (26.4%) believed that the distribution of examination questions was imbalanced among modules, while 40.8% of them objected the idea. Regarding to the examination time, only 18.4% of respondents believed students had enough time to complete the paper, whereas more than half of them (51.2%) believed the amount of time provided was not enough.

In contrast to the teachers, only 26.5% of the 861 youth respondents agreed that examination could accurately assess student's ability, with more than 40% of them expressed disagreement (43.3%). Over one-third of respondents (37.5%) believed distribution of examination questions was imbalanced among modules, while under 20% of them declined the idea (17.0%). Regarding to the examination time, 39.9% of youth respondents claimed having not enough time to complete the examination paper, around 5% higher than those claimed having enough (34.6%).

The results highlight difference in opinions towards the HKDSE Liberal Studies examination between teachers and students. This indicates the importance of listening to voices of different stakeholders during the curriculum reviewing process, in particular the viewpoints of students, who are one of the major stakeholders.

6. Simplifying the grading system into pass-or-fail may not be useful in relieving students' stress. Yet, it may lower the significance of the subject and the learning motives of students, hindering its long-term development.

Recent news reports claimed that the Education Bureau is planning to initiate a review over the Liberal Studies subject, including simplifying the grading system from a 7-point scale of "1" to "5**" to a pass-or-fail system. This discussion has attracted much attention from the society.

All the interviewed experts believed that a simplification of grading system for Liberal Studies examination would greatly affect the learning atmosphere. It would lower the significance level of Liberal Studies in students' and teachers' eyes, as well as being contradictory to the objective of implementing Liberal Studies in the NAS curriculum. If the grading system was simplified into pass-or-fail, students might eventually transfer their stress to the other traditional subjects. Regarding some experts' opinions, to alleviate students' stress, modifying the whole NAS curriculum as a whole was the fundamental way. Some teachers also stated their worries for being disregarded after the simplification of the grading system, fearing that schools would put in less resources for Liberal Studies, further hindering its long-term development.

Assessment is an important part of education. Any changes towards the assessment scheme will result in huge impact on students, teachers or even universities, and should only be made under wise and detailed consideration.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following suggestions are proposed to improve the teaching-and-learning process and assessment mode of the Liberal Studies subject.

1. Establish a new “Liberal Studies Resources Centre” for free usage of students and teachers, to supplement students with multivariate viewpoints when studying a wide range of issues.

Teachers and students are required to search for an enormous amount of information when preparing for new issues. Even though some media organizations or education resource sites have provided similar functions, bias or limitations of organizations in gathering information may hinder teachers and students from getting all-rounded, objective information. Besides, the current copyright policy also limits the circulation of videos and literatures among teachers and students.

Therefore, it is suggested that the Education Bureau should collaborate with local universities in setting up a new ‘Liberal Studies Resources Centre’. Based on the 6 modules of Liberal Studies, the centre should collect resources from multiple perspectives in different forms (including written literature, statistics and multi-media resources). After being assorted according to the issues, the resources should be presented for free usage of students and teachers.

2. Compose “Concepts building blocks” for each of the 6 modules, enabling students for easier understanding of basic concepts and knowledge.

Comprising 6 modules under 3 Areas of study and covering issues on multiple level (interpersonal, social and international level), the extent of current Liberal Studies curriculum is both wide and deep. However, in order to facilitate discussion and strengthen students’ ability in thinking from multiple perspectives, equipping students with an all-rounded knowledge base should be the preliminary step.

It is suggested that the Bureau may work together with local universities

to compose “Concepts building blocks” for each of the 6 modules. Teachers may then teach those concepts as early as at Secondary 4 level, before adopting the issue-enquiry approach for teaching. Therefore, students can have both an extensive knowledge base, and the ability to formulate arguments, upon completing the whole Liberal Studies curriculum.

3. Provide professional training courses for Liberal Studies teachers to enhance their ability in coaching students for conducting IES in non-written format (e.g. Documentary producing).

Currently, students can choose freely to conduct IES in either written or non-written format. For students having weaker written communication ability, completing an IES report in written format may be a difficult job.

The Bureau is recommended to provide training courses for Liberal Studies teachers, to enhance their ability in coaching students for conducting IES in non-written format (e.g. Documentary producing). As a result, students’ difficulty in completing the report because of weaker language ability can be alleviated.

4. Annual subsidies of HK\$200,000 for liberal studies teaching assistants are also recommended.

Based on teachers’ challenges like heavy workload and the constant need in updating information, the Bureau is recommended to provide an annual subsidies of HK\$200,000 for liberal studies teaching assistants (diploma level).⁶ These newly-employed teaching assistants can help with the preparation of lesson materials, as a mean to relieve teachers’ workload, creating space for them to improve teaching quality.

5. Review the curriculum of Liberal Studies. Re-emphasize the subject’s focus on training students’ cross-curricular thinking mindset and ability in conducting discussion from multiple perspectives.

All of the experts, teachers or youth interviewed believed that the

⁶ According to the Non-civil Service Contract Vacancies under the Education Bureau, the monthly salary for a teaching assistant (diploma level) is HK\$ 15,545

current curriculum of Liberal Studies is too wide and deep, and which would be affecting teaching effectiveness and making teachers and students stressful at the same time. To reach the aim of strengthening students' ability of thinking analytically, the curriculum of Liberal Studies should be wisely and finely tailored.

A review over the curriculum of Liberal Studies is suggested. Multivariate discussion and building of cross-curricular thinking mindset should be the core elements of the subject, instead of one-way information dumping. This can equip students with the skills in learning independently, in response to the developmental need of a knowledge-based society.

6. Establish a platform to collect students' opinions towards Liberal Studies.

Liberal Studies as a core subject for study and examination is still a concept on the early stage of development. Therefore, it is essential for the Bureau to hear voices from different stakeholders, to improve the subject continuously. Apart from education practitioner, post-secondary education institutions, employers and parents, students' comments towards Liberal Studies should always be valued. Thus, establishing a platform in collecting students' opinions is recommended. By understanding the issue from students' point of view, the long-term development of the Liberal Studies can be facilitated.