

Preparing for the Changes in the Senior Secondary Curriculum

In April 2021, the Education Bureau (EDB) officially announced changes in the senior secondary curriculum at Secondary 4 level from the beginning of the 2021/22 school year¹. The changes in curriculum and examination formats affect four core senior secondary subjects: Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies, now called Citizenship and Social Development (CSD). The policy aims of “Optimising the Four Senior Secondary Core Subjects” are to create time for students and cater for learner diversity.

According to the EDB, after the implementation of the measures, the total number of lesson hours for core subjects at senior secondary level will not exceed half of the total lesson hours. Schools can take this opportunity to review and plan the curriculum in a holistic manner, and release time (of varying amounts) in order to cater for students’ diverse learning and development needs with regard to each school’s own context. The lesson time released can facilitate schools’ provision of more diversified options e.g. enabling students to take an additional elective subject (including Applied Learning); engage in more in-depth study of subjects; study the Mathematics Extended Part; participate more actively in Other Learning Experiences by pursuing other personal interests that cater to their abilities and/or aspirations².

The extent of the changes will differ for each of the four core subjects. For Chinese Language, the reading and writing elements will be strengthened across the curriculum. However, the speaking and listening papers will be removed from public examination. For English Language, the changes include integrating the compulsory and elective parts of the curriculum. In Mathematics, schools are advised to use the existing division between "Foundation Topics" and "Non-Foundation Topics" in the compulsory part to cater for students with different learning abilities. For Liberal Studies, it will be renamed "Citizenship and Social Development", and the updated curriculum will include three modules on Hong Kong, China and The Contemporary World, as well as a Mainland study tour. The subject content and lesson time will be approximately halved, and the public examination results will be reported as "Attained " or "Not Attained "³.

¹ Education Bureau (2021). EDBCM No.39/2021 Measures to Optimise the Four Senior Secondary Core Subjects. <https://applications.edb.gov.hk/circular/upload/EDBCM/EDBCM21039E.pdf>

² Education Bureau (2021). Optimising the Four Senior Secondary Core Subjects. [edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/renewal/opt_core_subj.html](https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/renewal/opt_core_subj.html)

³ Same as 1.

When implementing the measures, schools need to consider and plan the senior secondary curriculum in a holistic manner, such as rearranging lesson time and providing subject choices to cater for students' learning needs. The renewal of core subjects has far-reaching implications for teaching and learning. With less than a year between the announcement and implementation, do schools, teachers and students fully understand the curriculum changes and are they well prepared for the new school year? How to provide adequate support in the implementation process is a matter of concern.

This study gathered information from several sources, including literature reviews, a teacher questionnaire with 395 senior secondary core subject teacher respondents; a student questionnaire with 975 junior secondary student respondents, and interviews with 11 teachers and 3 secondary school principals during June and July 2021.

Discussion

1. Schools' comprehensive planning, teachers' teaching and psychological preparation, and students' awareness of the subject changes are all important when implementing curriculum changes.

According to the results of the teacher survey, four-core-subject teachers generally understand the curriculum changes. On a scale of 0-10 ("10" = fully understand), the average score was higher than 6. As for the preparation of teaching materials, the mean scores of Chinese Language (4.80) and Liberal Studies teachers (2.49) were both lower than 5 ("10" = prepared very well). As for the psychological preparation, the interviewed Liberal Studies teachers were less confident in teaching, with an average score of 3.63 ("10" = very confident). In addition, apart from teaching materials, the most important support teachers wanted was to have enough time to adapt to the new curriculum (40.0%), reflecting that the details of the curriculum changes had yet to be finalised and explained, so that teachers and students would have sufficient information to adapt to the changes.

The results of the student survey also showed that they are not that aware of the curriculum changes. On a scale of 0-10 ("10" = fully understand), the mean score of students' clarity on the changes in the four core subjects was below 5.

When implementing the curriculum changes, schools and the EDB need not only to plan well, but also to communicate with various stakeholders: teachers, students, parents and

the community. This will help them all to better understand and agree on the concept of curriculum renewal to facilitate effective teaching and learning.

2. Teachers' and students' opinions on the changes of the four core subjects

2.1 Chinese Language:

The teachers interviewed believed that the changes would help students better understand the Chinese classics and culture, but were concerned that the changes would weaken students' speaking skills. Students though, felt that they needed to strengthen their writing skills.

According to the teacher survey, the average score of teachers who agree "it is important for students to learn Chinese Language while balancing the ability to read, write, listen and speak" was 7.72 ("10" = strongly agree). In addition, Chinese Language teachers interviewed thought that the changes would enhance students' ability to appreciate the Chinese classics (50.6%). The teachers were concerned that the changes in the public examination would weaken students' speaking ability (61.4%). In some case interviews, teachers said that the curriculum changes would put some students at a disadvantage, especially those with lower reading abilities or those with dyslexia.

In some case interviews, teachers wished that more information on teaching and reference examination papers could be released, especially on the scope of practical writing. The student survey result showed that writing was the most important skill to be strengthened in Chinese Language (52.2%).

2.2 English Language:

According to the teachers interviewed, approximately 10% said that their schools would offer Applied Learning (Vocational English) in the new school year. Students wanted to strengthen their writing and speaking skills.

Just over 10% of the teachers surveyed (10.8%) said their schools would offer Applied Learning (Vocational English) course in the new school year. In terms of diversified learning activities, most teachers reported that their schools would hold "Cross-Curriculum Learning activities" (55.4%), followed by "Drama" (45.8%).

According to the student survey, "writing" and "speaking" were the most important skills to be strengthened in English; 33.3% and 32.8% respectively. Schools could make more

reference to students' ideas and abilities when planning creative English-learning activities.

2.3 Mathematics:

More than a quarter of teachers interviewed revealed that their school would offer students the option to study some "Non-Foundation Topics". More than 45% of the students interviewed said that they might/would choose the above option. Some teachers reflected that it might not good to separate the curriculum purely into Foundation and Non-Foundation topics.

According to the teacher survey, more than a quarter of teachers revealed that their school is going to offer the option for students to only study some "Non-Foundation topics" of the curriculum (26.3%). In terms of implementation, teachers were most concerned about parents' perceptions (57.1%) and the impact on students' further education pathway (51.9%).

As for the student survey, 46.4% of the students surveyed thought they would (15.5%) or might (30.9%) choose to only study some curriculum "Non-Foundation topics". The survey result reflected that the changes have provided students with flexibility to study Mathematics.

However, some teachers reflected that to separate the curriculum into purely Foundation and Non-Foundation topics may be detrimental to students and may reduce the opportunities for students to learn different topics. It is crucial to have effective grouping of classes to balance different students' abilities and aspirations.

2.4 Liberal Studies:

Teachers' confidence in teaching was low and stress levels were high. The biggest challenge was the lack of detailed course content and the shortage of time. Nearly 75% of the teachers interviewed felt that the new curriculum would reduce the ability of students to analyse from multiple perspectives. Students were less interested in the modules on Hong Kong and China.

The teacher survey revealed that the Liberal Studies teachers interviewed were not confident in teaching, with a mean score of 3.63 ("10" = very confident). While the average stress level was 7.97 ("10" = very stressful). The biggest challenge identified was the lack of detailed curriculum content (67.7%). As for the three modules, most teachers considered "Hong Kong under One Country, Two Systems" to be the most difficult module

to teach (72.9%). In addition, 74.0% of the teachers interviewed thought that the new curriculum will reduce students' ability to analyze from multiple perspectives. Two-thirds (66.6%) agreed that: "When [the] curriculum content [is] reduced by half, [the] students' knowledge acquired is not broad enough".

According to the student survey, the mean scores of interest in the 3 modules: "Hong Kong under One Country, Two Systems", "Our Country since Reform and Opening-up" and "Interconnectedness and Interdependence of the Contemporary World" were 4.37, 4.20 and 5.71 respectively (10 being very interested). For the Mainland Study Tour, students were most interested in interacting with local Mainland students (33.7%) and exploring the development of innovative technologies (32.0%).

3. Curriculum changes affect schools' timetable re-arrangement as a whole. Factors such as university admission requirements, students' abilities and parents' perception all affect schools' planning. There is the need to pay attention to future planning to cater students' diversity, while also rationalising policy implementation.

Schools can cater to students' diverse learning needs through overall curriculum planning. According to the teacher survey, most teachers indicated that their schools would allow students to "take an additional elective subject" (35.9%), followed by "take Mathematics Extension Part (Module 1/ Module 2)" (32.4%) and "increase the lesson time of current elective subjects" (31.6%).

For the student survey, most students wished to use the released lesson time to "explore their personal interests" (45.4%), followed by "engage more in experiential learning" (34.4%) and "engage in more subject-related Life-wide Learning activities" (32.8%). This may be different from the results of the teacher survey. In addition, 65.3% of the students surveyed thought that "experiential learning" was most effective in enhancing their learning interest (65.3%).

According to the Principals interviewed, the biggest challenge faced by the schools was the overall planning, which involved the re-allocation of teacher manpower for core subjects and elective subjects. In addition, university admission requirements, students' abilities and parents' perception also affected the use of lesson time.

In addition, some Principals interviewed believed multiple pathways in tertiary education and future employment should be in line with curriculum renewal. Such measures required detailed research and long-term planning, as well as adequate consultation with

various stakeholders. In the future, there is the need to encourage more parents to recognise the goal of curriculum change, so that students can achieve diversified development through taking courses they are interested in.

Suggestions

Based on the above findings and discussion points, the study makes the following recommendations to help teachers adapt to the changes, and facilitate the development of diversified teaching and learning.

1. The Education Bureau needs to promote and thoroughly explain the curriculum renewal so the community can understand the rationale and details of the changes.

The EDB needs to explain the curriculum renewal concepts and related details to the education sector (including students, teachers, and parents) and the community through various channels, such as promotional videos, leaflets and various multi-media. When the public support the objectives of the changes and understand the implementation details, easier and more successful policy implementation can be facilitated.

2. Provide more teaching guidelines and examples for core-subject teachers as early as possible.

The EDB should provide teachers with more reference materials as early as possible to help them with lesson planning. There is also the need to organise workshops for teachers to deepen their understanding of how to apply curriculum concepts to practical classroom teaching. In addition, The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority should also provide more examination sample papers and guidelines that are in line with the curriculum, also as early as possible, to improve teachers' confidence to cope with changes.

In terms of support measures for the four core subjects, the study recommends that:

2.1 Chinese Language

A. Provide more assessment information and examples of practical writing.

2.2 English Language

A. Review the demand and supply of Vocational English Applied Learning courses.

B. Provide more cross-curricular activity samples with practical work elements, e.g. internship and experiential activities to help students apply what they learnt in real-life scenarios.

2.3 Mathematics

A. Explain clearly the assessment criteria and review the public examination question formats with reference to past student data.

2.4 Citizenship and Social Development (CSD)

A. Provide adequate reference materials, interactive workshops, and reference papers.

B. Provide guidelines and support for the Mainland study tour: consider adding elements of innovative technologies and interaction with Mainland students.

C. Provide resources to assist Liberal Studies' teachers so they can transit to teach other subjects or focus on student development work. For example, the EDB can provide funding, increase the quota of teacher scholarships (to pursue Master's programmes), and review the supply of various teacher-training programs.

3. Enhance the recognition and time allocated to Other Learning Experiences and Applied Learning, and to provide schools with the flexibility to use the Diversity Learning Grant during the pandemic.

The EDB should discuss with stakeholders (such as secondary schools and tertiary institutions) enhancing the recognition of and time allocated to Other Learning Experiences and Applied Learning, changing parents' perceptions and letting students engage in more diversified activities.

In terms of resources, it is seen that the EDB regularly disburses the Life-wide Learning Grant⁴ to schools. The study suggests that the EDB can organise resource sharing sessions to let schools understand how to make better use of the existing Life-wide Learning Grant during the pandemic. The EDB can also extend the expiry date of the subsidy and provide schools with flexibility in using the Grant.

⁴ Education Bureau (2019). EDBCM No.16/2019 Life-wide Learning Grant.
<https://applications.edb.gov.hk/circular/upload/EDBC/EDBC19016E.pdf>

4. Set-up a regular review mechanism, comprising the EDB and front-line education professionals to review curriculum renewal in the long-term.

The study recommends the EDB to establish a regular review mechanism, consisting of the EDB and front-line educators to regularly track and explore the implementation and effectiveness of curriculum renewal to enhance long-term planning.

The review should also consider the trend of teacher and student numbers, future talent demand and other macro factors when planning. The review should also explore the diversifying development of students, including taking care of disadvantaged students' needs and reviewing the development of Other Learning Experiences. In the process, data analysis and projections are needed, alongside consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including Principals, teachers, students, and tertiary institutions.