

Ethnic entry list could be ready in months

All EMB has to do is ask and we'll prepare GCSE faculty requirements, says academic

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Universities could compile a comprehensive list of faculties that would accept GCSE Chinese as an ethnic entrance requirement "within two months or a semester at most" but haven't been asked to, according to a leading academic.

Tam Kar-yan, associate vice-president for academic affairs at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said HKUST had accepted English Schools Foundation and international students with GCSE Chinese, but the question of recognising it for second-language learners in local schools had not been raised by the Education and Manpower Bureau or the University Grants Committee.

He was speaking after controversial accusations that a senior education official exaggerated government efforts to encourage universities to accept the qualification in her reports to Legco last week.

In a letter published in the *South China Morning Post* on Wednesday, Deputy Secretary for Education and Manpower Bernadette Linn Hon-ho defended her statements to Legco, calling *Education Post's* report on the issue "deeply regrettable" and saying she had "not exaggerated or tried to exaggerate the extent" of the discussion.

Professor Tam said HKUST welcomed the idea of using the GCSE as an entrance requirement. "But we would need details about the syllabus, course content and level." It wouldn't take very long to produce a list of the faculties that could accept it but the government had made no attempt to persuade the university to produce one.

Professor Tam's comments add weight to rights and minorities groups' claims the government has not been working as quickly as it could to ensure university recognition of the qualification since agreeing last July to offer it this year.

At a meeting of Legco's education panel last Monday, Ms Linn said the EMB had been discussing the subject with universities and had received initial responses but declined to give legislators details.

But as reported in *Education Post* last week, this was not borne out by registrars who said there had been little or no mention of the GCSE in official communications over the past six months.

Ms Linn's letter did not provide further details of the content or nature of the contact with universities other than to say that it constituted "initial" contact and feedback and "was not limited to the GCSE". She called for the public to trust the bureau's intentions.

"While we welcome comments on how we could do better, attempts to cast doubt on our sincerity are discouraging."

Ms Lin this week turned down repeated requests for an interview on the subject and refused to provide evidence.

Jonathan Chan Ching-wa, services co-ordinator at SKH Lady Macle hose Centre, said: "We need to know if this was a simple breakdown in communication or whether [Ms Lin] deliberately misled Legco. She may not have lied but her comments were misleading."

Mr Chan called on the EMB to release a "paper trail" to back up Ms Linn's comments. "If it cannot produce any evidence, then we have the right to suspect it."

Fermi Wong Wai-fun, director of Hong Kong Unison, said she was "very, very happy" that HKUST had shown interest in recognising the GCSE, but felt frustrated by the EMB's lack of progress.

"I have been hearing this line about 'initial contact' for a long time," Ms Wong said. "The EMB needs to grasp this opportunity of a positive response from universities, and push for the GCSE."

University recognition 'crucial for success'

University recognition of GCSE Chinese as an entry requirement is crucial to its success in offering a viable alternative to ethnic students, according to the head of a school with a large intake of non-Chinese-speaking pupils.

Chan Kui-pui, principal of Delia Memorial School, Broadway, Mei Foo, said knowing what grades were required by

the various faculties at local universities would give students something to aim for and encourage them to study the language more seriously.

"It would be a great benefit to students and teachers alike if we could have a clear table of entry requirements from the universities," Dr Chan said. "In the past, we had no clear aims in teaching Chinese to our students. We simply hoped to be able to equip them with some basic life skills. If we knew what the universities were looking for, our teachers would have a clear idea of what level they needed to reach."

Students were often discouraged from taking Chinese at HKCEE because they felt they would never be able to pass. "With an entry requirement for GCSE, they would have something to aim for and be encouraged to continue learning the language to a higher level," he said.

