

**INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMITTEE**

**Funding Scheme under  
the Workplace English Campaign**

**Purpose**

This paper sets out for Members' information the background and current situation of the Workplace English Campaign administered by the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR).

**Background**

2. Proficiency in English is no doubt an important success factor for Hong Kong in maintaining its competitiveness as an international business, financial and trading centre. There is a growing demand for improved English to enable Hong Kong people to engage in the globalization process.

3. The language education policy of the HKSAR government since 1997 has been to enable Hong Kong people, particularly students and working adults, to become biliterate (in written Chinese and English) and trilingual (in spoken Cantonese, Putonghua and English). The Government has been making continuous efforts to enhance the English language proficiency of both our students and our working population. For instance, we are strengthening the vocational English competence in the transition from schools to workplace through the implementation of New Senior Secondary (NSS) Curriculum in which the English curricula includes an elective module of "Learning English through Workplace Communication". Furthermore, under the new senior secondary Applied Learning courses, students have the opportunity to acquire the communication skills and vocabulary in broad professional and vocational fields.

4. Apart from major initiatives carried out in schools aiming to improve the learning and teaching of English, various initiatives have also been implemented for the working community, including the Workplace English Campaign (WEC). Government subsidized training courses and subsidies to learners that aim to help members of the workforce adjust to

economic restructuring and changes in the employment market, or provide incentives to learners to acquire a foreign language, including English, are also available. Those which help raise the English proficiency of the workforce are set out in paragraphs 13-15.

### **Workplace English Campaign**

5. The roles of SCOLAR are to advise the Government on language education issues in general and on the use of the Language Fund. On the advice of SCOLAR, the WEC was launched in 2000 to heighten public awareness of the importance of having a good command of English in a workplace environment and to improve the knowledge of English among the working population in Hong Kong. \$95 million from the Language Fund was earmarked for the purpose.

6. The Campaign comprised three components, namely -

- (a) **Publicity and public education programme** to promote the spirit and content of WEC;
- (b) The **Funding Scheme for Workplace English Training** (the Funding Scheme) which provided financial subsidies to encourage employees to undergo English language training and attain the relevant benchmarks for their job types through taking specified international business English examinations; and
- (c) the **Hong Kong Workplace English Benchmarks** (HKWEB) which spells out the expected and desired English standard for six common job types in Hong Kong.

### ***The Funding Scheme***

7. The Funding Scheme was launched in 2000. \$50 million was earmarked for the Scheme. It (i) funded individual employees to study in English training courses and to take specified international English examinations; and (ii) subsidized trade associations and professional bodies in developing English training courses for employees of specific trades and professions. The maximum grant per applicant employee was 50% of the employees' training costs and examination fees, up to a maximum of \$4,550 per employee.

8. SCOLAR reviewed the Funding Scheme in 2003<sup>1</sup>. Noting the availability of alternative subsidy at that time and that the number of applications from individuals for the Funding Scheme has since been declining, SCOLAR recommended that, for better use of public funds, the resources of the Funding Scheme should be channeled to subsidizing companies to organize in-house English training courses tailor-made for their employees only. Another \$3 million was injected and the revised scope was implemented in 2005. Subsidy level was at 50% of the training and examination cost for each employee, subject to a maximum of \$3,000 per employee.

9. SCOLAR further reviewed the Funding Scheme in 2007. It was noted that, with the increasing number and types of English enhancement courses in the market, the need to run in-house tailor-made training was diminishing. Applications for the Funding Scheme had been low, at a rate of an average level of 13 applications per month since January 2005, and the number of beneficiaries per application was 12 employees. A survey done on employers also showed that the demand for running in-house courses was low. SCOLAR therefore advised in 2008 that the Funding Scheme should be terminated by giving one-year notice. However, as the publicity campaign under the WEC had been effective in raising public awareness of the importance of improving English proficiency, SCOLAR at the same time advised that the publicity drive under WEC should continue.

10. Relevant stakeholders, including past applicants of the Funding Scheme, Course Providers, Examination Organizers, and some of the trade and industry organizations which have collaborations with WEC, were informed of the decision. The Funding Scheme closed for applications in January 2009. During the one-year notification period, 181 applications were received.

11. As of September 2009, more than 30,000 applicants have been subsidized by the Funding Scheme, involving a total disbursement of over \$52 million. Another 273 applicants are still undergoing their English training.

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<sup>1</sup> In the review, SCOLAR noted that the Continuing Education Fund introduced in 2002 also covered English language training and provided a more attractive level of subsidy than the Funding Scheme. It subsidized 80% of the tuition fee, subject to a maximum of \$10,000.

### ***Publicity and public education programme***

12. The publicity and public education programme of the WEC will continue in order to raise the public's awareness of the importance of English proficiency in the workplace. The publicity and public education efforts that have been or to be launched in 2009 include:

- (a) two radio Announcements in Public Interest to remind people the importance of English;
- (b) 17 exhibitions at major shopping malls to promote the Campaign's online self-learning platform, which provides on one website direct links to various English self-learning materials produced by WEC and SCOLAR over the years;
- (c) two workshops hosted by a professor of the Hong Kong Institute of Education at public libraries;
- (d) one TV programme featuring some Legislative Councillors to discuss some of the English errors commonly found among Hong Kong people;
- (e) a series of radio and video programmes to introduce some English phrases and vocabularies commonly used in receiving overseas visitors, which are produced in support of the Hong Kong 2009 East Asian Games; and
- (f) a number of promotional programmes on the Internet to draw the attention of our younger working population to enhancing their English proficiency.

### **Other Relevant Initiatives**

13. It is relevant to note that there are other relevant Government subsidised training courses/subsidies. The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) provides training and retraining courses and related placement services. Those pursuing ERB part-time courses are eligible for varying levels of course fee subsidies depending on their monthly income. Currently, the ERB offers 18 part-time courses in Workplace English. Since 1992 and up to 31 August 2009, a total of about 59,000 people have taken these Workplace English courses.

14. The Skills Upgrading Scheme (SUS) aims to provide targeted skills upgrading training to elementary workers in 26 selected industries. English Language courses for in-service workers are offered in 16 of the selected

industries. Since 2001 and up to October 2009, over 600 English language classes have been conducted, 11,640 in-service workers have benefited. The Government subsidises 70% of the costs of SUS courses.

15. Eligible applicants under the CEF can apply for reimbursement of 80% of the fees of any registered course upon successful completion of the course, up to a ceiling of \$10,000 for each applicant. At present, language is one of the eight specified domains of registered CEF courses. This domain covers English as well as seven other languages. As at 30 September 2009, 288 English language courses are registered under the CEF. Since 2002, some 42,000 students, who have completed these English language courses, have benefited under the CEF.

### **Way forward**

16. The Government is committed to enabling Hong Kong people to be biliterate and trilingual. Notwithstanding that the focus of the WEC is now on publicity and public education programmes, Members are assured that raising English proficiency of our students and working population will continue to be high on our agenda, and that we and SCOLAR will continue to explore areas and initiatives worth pursuing, taking account of changing circumstances and changing need of the community.

Education Bureau  
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