

Rejected in HK, Faiza graduated from Ivy League

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When she was in secondary school Pakistan-born Faiza Alvi was accepted by New York's prestigious Columbia University, but every university in Hong Kong rejected her application because her Chinese was not up to standard.

Now married and living in the United States, Faiza is the elder daughter of Asmat Hayat Alvi, who moved to the city 12 years ago with his two daughters and a son. All three children faced setbacks in the local education system because of their Chinese-language abilities.

His two daughters failed to advance as they wanted in tertiary education in Hong Kong, which places a priority on Chinese for admissions, but both succeeded in finding a place in American universities.

Faiza, now 28, graduated from the Ivy League Columbia University. She married in the US and stayed there. Her sister, Tamia, now 24, is still studying for her degree in the US.

Things were even worse for their brother, who failed to gain entry to any of Hong Kong's secondary schools. His father had to educate him at home and he still can't find a full-time job.

The fate of this ethnic minority family illustrates a problem that parents gathered yesterday to discuss.

"Hong Kong's universities are discriminatory to ethnic minorities," the father told Undersecretary for Education Kenneth Chen Wei-on in a forum on education for ethnic minorities.

The education chief replied that discrimination was too strong an

accusation. However, he admitted that more could be done to get more members of ethnic minorities into local universities.

Two years ago, the bureau advised universities that they should consider minority students' results in Britain's General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Chinese examination if they failed local HKCEE or A-levels.

However, two years on, it appears that university staff are not familiar with the arrangement.

Hong Kong's universities are discriminatory to ethnic minorities

Asmat Hayat Alvi, whose daughters had to turn to US universities

Statistics show that only 17 ethnic minority students were admitted to Hong Kong universities last year, according to Christian Action director Cheung-Ang Siew Mei.

Fermi Wong Wai-fun, director of Hong Kong Unison, an NGO that helps members of ethnic minorities, tried calling Baptist University and Chinese University, and said admissions staff did not seem to know much about the GCSE Chinese exam.

She argued that English is a second language for every student in Hong Kong, but minorities are at a great disadvantage when learning Chinese.