

Minorities need Chinese to succeed

Pakistani born in the city struggles to join police because he was taught to read and write Chinese so badly at school

A Hong Kong-born Pakistani faces difficulty becoming a policeman because, despite speaking Cantonese and four other languages, he has never been taught how to read and write well in Chinese.

Umar Aftab, 22, is among a handful of people from **ethnic** minorities who are receiving training for police job interviews from Hong Kong Unison, a group which campaigns for minorities' rights.

"I want to be a policeman because I want to serve Hong Kong," he said. "I want to set an example to others that even though I am not Chinese, I can serve Hong Kong people."

Unison is preparing a lawsuit against the government for failing to provide **ethnic** minorities with adequate educational opportunities. It comes after the Education Bureau was criticised by the Equal Opportunities Commission for failing to help **ethnic** minorities integrate into society and achieve the Chinese-language skills necessary to succeed.

Aftab, who knows English, Cantonese, Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi, said he had difficulty finding good jobs because he was not taught Chinese well in primary school.

As a boy, almost 20 mainstream primary schools had rejected him, with some saying it was because of his race. Aftab eventually got into a school designated for **ethnic** minorities, where only simple Chinese was taught. He later picked up enough Cantonese from conversations to be fluent, but his Chinese reading and writing is still poor.

"From the day I was not admitted to a conventional primary school, I knew I had no chance to learn proper Chinese and I would have problems job-seeking in the future," he said.

He later dropped out of university because of financial problems, and spent seven to eight months looking for a job, ranging from clerk to delivery man. But Aftab failed to be employed because of his lack of adequate Chinese skills.

"The government does not require us to learn Chinese," he said. "But when we grow up, we find that all jobs require the ability to read and write Chinese."

Aftab said he did not want to see the next generation repeating his experience, and that the government should have a separate syllabus for students who learn Chinese as a second language, and provide more resources to assist them.

An Education Bureau spokeswoman said a series of support measures has been implemented, and a pilot scheme would be launched to help **ethnic minority** students learn workplace Chinese.

Aftab is now working as a teaching assistant in a secondary school for **ethnic** minorities, and is enhancing his Chinese language proficiency to prepare for the police interview.

He could use his GCSE Chinese language qualification to apply, but the interview still requires candidates to write a short Chinese report. Aftab hopes **ethnic** minorities can be exempt from the written test. "All we need is a chance," he said.

EMPLOYMENT

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Umar Aftab has struggled because of his poor Chinese skills. Photo: May Tse

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