

Minorities tested to the limit

Etilib Saga says she is facing an uphill battle to enter university.

The 18-year-old, who will today sit the compulsory liberal studies examination in the new Hong Kong Diploma for Secondary Education (HKDSE), has been finding it hard to do well.

It's a big headache for me. It is just hard to understand the questions, said the **ethnic** Sudanese student, who was born in Shenzhen and is studying at the Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College in Chai Wan.

The government does not have data on the number of **ethnic** minority students who have applied to sit for the HKDSE exams this year. But according to data from the Education Bureau, 600 non-Chinese-speaking students will complete Form Six education this year.

Non-Chinese-speaking students are allowed to sit for the easier Chinese-language exam under the General Certificate of Secondary Education system as they labour through the HKDSE.

However, they must sit for the liberal studies exam - which is compulsory for all students - as they compete for university places with 70,000 local students.

While she understands that liberal studies will broaden her knowledge, Saga said there were some challenging topics.

I know who Mao Zedong, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao are, but I'm not very familiar with politics, she said of a syllabus requirement to study modern China. If I was given a chance, I would not take the exam, although I would still sit in the classes because I know they are beneficial to me.

Gurung Sonu, an **ethnic** Nepali who came to Hong Kong about three years ago, attends the same Chai Wan school as Saga, and she is prepared to fail.

She has been grappling with her revision due to limited access to English study materials. I am not too confident, she said. I want to study business management in university. I don't know what I would do if I fail.

Their teacher, Andy Fung, said they were disadvantaged in taking the exams due to their lack of local knowledge. One day, we were talking about pollution from the Pearl River Delta and we talked about Shenzhen. But the best students in class did not know what Shenzhen is, Fung said.

Fermi Wong Wai-fun, founder of Unison, a **minorities** support group, said the government should not ignore the needs of **ethnic** minority students. If language becomes the only barrier to learning, the city cannot tout itself as a multinational hub.

The government, she said, should narrow the scope of the liberal studies curriculum, give students more options to choose what questions to answer, and consider making the subject

an elective for all senior secondary students.

For the Chinese, they feel the subject is difficult; for the **ethnic minorities**, it's even more so, she said. According to official figures, there are about 12,000 students from **ethnic minorities** in Hong Kong.

In the past few years, the government has increased the number of designated primary and secondary schools for non-Chinese students. But these schools are struggling, with high dropout rates and they are failing to produce graduates who qualify for universities.

According to a report by the Equal Opportunities Commission, **ethnic** minority students, excluding Caucasians, comprise 3.2 per cent of pre-primary school pupils and just 1.1 per cent of senior secondary students. The figure plummets to 0.59 per cent for tertiary education.

If they lose hope, they will become a burden to society, which is not going to be beneficial to our society, Wong said.

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EDUCATION

MINORITIES TESTED TO THE LIMIT

Ethnic Sudanese student is struggling to cope with the new liberal studies exam – as are thousands more disadvantaged pupils

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FERMI WONG WAI-FUN, UNISON

Ethilb Saga is finding it hard just to understand the questions in liberal studies, a compulsory part of the new diploma she must pass to enter university. Photo: Edward Wong



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