

Filibuster blocks aid for minority exam takers

A pressure group has accused the Education Bureau of creating panic among ethnic minority students by not spelling out how or when an examination subsidy stalled by a Legislative Council filibuster will be paid.

The proposed extended subsidy for four international Chinese competency exams popular with minorities is unlikely to be presented to Legco's Finance Committee as scheduled tomorrow because of the delay.

This has left students waiting to be told how they can bridge the gap between the application deadlines for the tests – some as early as December 17 – and availability of the subsidies.

The government is seeking legislators' approval for HK\$200,000 a year to extend the scheme, now covering one exam, to a further three.

Unison, a group that works to help minorities, said yesterday that the government should find a way around the delay.

“This is such a small matter,” Unison executive director **Fermi Wong** said. “Why can't officials provide a solution?”

It is unlikely the proposal will be scrutinised tomorrow unless lawmakers agree to put it ahead of the proposed new old-age allowance, which is being held up by filibustering lawmakers.

Subsidies are offered for international exams because Hong Kong has no home-grown tests for students whose Chinese is not good enough to take the local ones under the Diploma for Secondary Education system.

The government usually pays the difference between the cost of the overseas tests and the HK\$600 for the local exam.

The Education Bureau said last night that those affected would be students who pass a means test that qualifies them to have the full fees refunded. For the others, the bureau would use its own resources.

Subsidies are already offered for the General Certificate of Secondary Education exam, which cost HK\$1,100 last year.

The three further tests to be covered cost up to HK\$4,080.

Wong said some students had already applied for exams without knowing who would pay the bill, causing panic among schools, parents and students. "A few thousand dollars for the government is a small matter. But it's a big matter for a family."

Islamic Kasim Tuet Secondary School vice-principal Ho Sau-yin said the government should create its own curriculum for Chinese as a second language.

Meanwhile, Finance Committee chairman Tommy Cheung Yu-yun said he had agreed with government request to extend Friday's meeting to four hours from two and to scrutinise the old-age allowance first.

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Group says subsidy for test fees is in limbo as lawmakers stall old-age allowance plan

Dennis Chong and Colleen Lee

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