

UN raps lack of focus on minorities

Education chiefs are under growing pressure to address the Chinese-language learning needs of minorities after a member of the United Nations team scrutinising Hong Kong's human-rights performance criticised the local approach.

Yuji Iwasawa, a professor of international law at the University of Tokyo, told Hong Kong officials at last week's hearing in Geneva that because the curriculum used in mainstream schools treated all students as native speakers of Chinese, it was unsuitable for the ethnic minorities living in the city.

He was quoted by Fermi Wong, of minority-rights group Hong Kong *Unison*, who was among non-government representatives and government officials who met the UN Human Rights Committee last week to discuss the city's progress in implementing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Wong said Iwasawa urged the government to introduce a Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) curriculum for minority students, as a lack of Chinese-language proficiency had a "dire impact" on their access to higher education, employment and promotion.

"Mr Iwasawa and other committee members repeatedly sought clarification of the motivation for not implementing a CSL curriculum in light of the serious limits the absence of such a programme placed on ethnic minority students, their families and future generations," Wong said.

The government representatives' argument that a CSL curriculum would merely limit the range of these students' learning opportunities was not accepted by the committee, which expressed "dissatisfaction".

"I was quite surprised that Mr Iwasawa would address the issue, as I used to think this was more a children's rights issue rather than a political one," Wong said.

"But he said access to education was crucial in striving for one's political rights."

Iwasawa also asked the government to explain how it planned to address the problem of permanent residents from ethnic minorities being left out of political life, Wong said.

The Education Bureau replied that it was "committed to supporting the integration of non-Chinese speaking students into the community, including facilitating their early adaptation to the local education system and mastery of the Chinese language."

It said schools were already working on an alternative curriculum for students learning Chinese as a second language.

But citing figures from the Equal Opportunities Commission, Wong said the current situation was still far from satisfactory as less than one per cent of ethnic minority students secured government-funded places in tertiary institutions last year.

EDUCATION

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Chinese language curriculum is not suitable for ethnic minorities, says human rights team

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FERMI WONG, NGO REPRESENTATIVE

DOCUMENT ID: 201303190270024

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