
Hong Kong teen's dreams of being a doctor dashed by education system's failure to teach Chinese to ethnic minority students

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Education group Unison claims ethnic minorities are losing out because teachers still don't know how to teach them the language

Siddhartha, a Hongkonger originally from Bangladesh, always wanted to be a doctor but an inability to speak Chinese ended his journey before it began.

The 19-year-old said his ability to speak and write in the language was at the level of a Primary 2 pupil, and admitted he had not known he would need to be proficient in both to pursue his chosen career.

He only found out his chances of becoming a doctor were slim when he went to the University of Hong Kong (HKU), and Chinese University (CUHK), the only two institutions in the city offering a degree in medicine – which is taught in English – before his Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) exams two years ago.



"Both schools' deans and admission officers told me that being able to speak Chinese is part of their interview process, which is understandable because patients in Hong Kong are mostly Chinese.

“But up until that point, I had no idea,” Siddhartha said.

While the teenager ultimately scored top or close to top marks for six of his eight DSE subjects, based on the previous year’s cut-off scores for admission to medical courses, it was not clear if he would qualify. So, he chose to do a bachelor’s degree in global business at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

Hong Kong’s ethnic minority pupils still struggling with Cantonese at school [1]

Siddhartha’s case highlights the ongoing challenge students who are members of Hong Kong’s ethnic minorities face in getting degrees and moving up the socio-economic ladder.

The city’s 2016 by-census found that, excluding domestic helpers, ethnic minorities made up 3.6 per cent of the population. More residents from among those groups were living in poverty than before, with the government noting that even those who were employed could usually obtain only low-paying jobs because of “low educational attainment and skill levels”.

The city’s eight government-funded universities require applicants to submit scores for five to six DSE subjects, including English, Chinese, Maths and Liberal Studies where they must get a minimum grade.

Those who meet criteria set by the Education Bureau are allowed to sit for alternative, easier Chinese exams and submit that score instead.

But, advocacy group Unison said the universities did not make clear how ethnic minority candidates with alternative Chinese qualifications were assessed for entry.



And, even when courses were taught in English, there could be other Chinese proficiency requirements imposed on students, limiting those from a minority background in their choice of courses.

HKU did not reply to queries from the *Post*, while CUHK stressed it would select medical degree applicants based on “fair competition” and merit.

“Hong Kong is a global city,” a spokeswoman said. “Our society needs doctors who are multi-lingual to look after patients speaking different dialects and languages. In CUHK Medicine, we welcome Hong Kong students irrespective of their mother tongue. Their ability to communicate with Cantonese-speaking patients will be substantially enhanced through college life and undergraduate medical training.”

In Hong Kong’s battle over language, ethnic minority children should get to learn Chinese in Mandarin, rather than Cantonese [2]

In Siddhartha’s case, classes at his school were conducted in English. He struggled with Chinese and decided to not do the DSE exam, but the alternative General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Chinese paper instead.

Unison campaign officer Kayla Tam said about 100 of the 1,000 students from ethnic minorities who sat for the DSE last year did the Chinese exam, but only 28 scored a passing grade.

She attributed this to the long-standing problem of schools not knowing how to teach the language to pupils who grew up in a non-Chinese speaking environment.

Ethnic minorities face uphill education fight in Hong Kong [3]

Since 2014, the government has devoted HK\$200 million (US\$25 million) a year on two funding schemes to teach children from an ethnic minority background Chinese as a second language, and boost their skills so they are on par with their peers who speak fluent Cantonese.

But, schools were being left to their own devices rather than being given a standardised curriculum proven to work for ethnic-minority children, Tam said.

“Even if teachers are willing to put in the effort, they are still experimenting and waiting for [proper] guidance,” she said.

Topics: Universities in Hong Kong
HKDSE - Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education

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