

# Government responds to media enquiries on Employment Support Scheme

The Government spokesman responded today (August 19) to media enquiries in respect of the Employment Support Scheme:

## (1) Complaints on breaches and the handling method

Under the Employment Support Scheme (ESS), all employers who have received the first tranche of wage subsidies have made two undertakings: (i) the number of paid employees in any one month during the subsidy period (June to August) should not be less than the total number of employees (regardless of whether they are paid or not) in March 2020; otherwise employers have to pay a penalty to the Government; and (ii) all the wage subsidies received must be used for paying employees' wages but not for other purposes.

To ensure that the employers who have received subsidies will comply with the above terms, the ESS Processing Agent has required the Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) trustees to provide employers' MPF record certificates for June and July before August 31, so as to check whether employers have spent all wage subsidies of a particular month to pay wages of employees, and whether the total number of paid employees has reached the total number of employees in March (i.e. "committed headcount of paid employees").

"Employees who are on (or are required to take) no-pay leave are not regarded as 'paid employees', so they are not counted towards 'committed headcount of paid employees'", the spokesman reminded the employers again.

In addition, the ESS Processing Agent is adopting a risk-based approach (for example, if complaints and reports are received) based on the characteristics of employers (for example, the number of employees etc.) to conduct sample on-site checking of employers. So far the Processing Agent has carried out sample checking at 241 employers' organisations, including 36 employers with zero "committed headcount of paid employees". It will carry out sample checking of another over 60 employers which are considered high risk in the coming week.

Apart from taking investigation actions proactively, the monitoring by the public and employees are of paramount importance. Since June 22, the ESS Secretariat (the Secretariat) has uploaded by batches the lists of employers who have received wage subsidies, and so far information about the subsidies of 137 500 employers has been uploaded. As at August 18, the Secretariat has received a total of 407 reports or complaints. These cases involve primarily unreasonable staff reduction and/or dismissal of employees before/during the subsidy period, late payment of wages or pay cuts, and suspected company closure or change of operators.

"We attach high importance to every single report and complaint. The

Secretariat and Processing Agent are following up and investigating the cases. The Review Panel set up by the Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Office (PICO) will examine the investigation report on each of the cases. Informants will be notified of the relevant result after the completion of investigation," the spokesman said.

Apart from the above, the Secretariat so far has referred 52 reports or complaint cases to the Labour Department. Labour Department has taken follow-up action immediately and has received 12 claims related to employment rights and benefits, mainly involving underpayment of terminal payments, disputes on wages and unilateral change of contract terms by the employers. Among the 12 claims, the employers and employees of four claims reached a settlement after the reconciliation of the Labour Department; legal arbitration of another six cases has to be sought through the Labour Tribunal; the remaining two cases are being processed. If information shows that the employers may have breached the Employment Ordinance, the Labour Department will carry out investigation. If there is sufficient evidence, the employers will be prosecuted, in order to combat crimes breaching the Employment Ordinance.

## (2) New arrangements under the second tranche of the ESS

Taking into consideration that some employers have not provided to the MPF trustees information about the wages or voluntary contribution of employees aged 65 or above who have MPF accounts in the past and hence not being able to apply for wage subsidies in respect of those employees under the first tranche of the ESS, we have relaxed the requirements under the second tranche: if the MPF record certificates show the employment of employees aged 65 or above, the Secretariat will provide a monthly wage subsidy of \$5,000 per employee. In setting this subsidy amount, we have made reference to the average wage subsidy amount in the "specified month" of the 15 700 employees aged 65 or above who are eligible for wage subsidy under the first tranche. However, if the MPF record certificates show the wages or voluntary contribution of the employees aged 65 or above, the Processing Agent will continue to calculate the wage subsidy based on 50% of the relevant wages or 10 times of the voluntary contribution, with the maximum capped at \$9,000 and the minimum being \$5,000. This is a very generous arrangement for employees aged 65 or above. Making an estimate with reference to the application figures of the first tranche, the employers who have employees aged 65 or above but have not got subsidies for them (involving 6 350 employees) will be able to receive wage subsidies of \$15,000 (September to November) for each of such employee under tranche 2 of the ESS. For the employers who received a monthly subsidy less than \$5,000 per employee for those employees aged 65 or above under the first tranche, they will receive \$5,000 subsidy per employee under the second tranche.

Having considered the public's views on the first tranche of the ESS, we will require the major property management companies who apply for wage subsidies of the second tranche to undertake to give back at least 80% of the wage subsidies to owners/owners' associations.

"We note that the public in general welcome this proposal, and are grateful to have the positive response of the Hong Kong Association of Property Management Companies and some major property management companies, who agree to the objective of the proposal and will discuss with owners/owners' association how to make better use of the sum given back," the spokesman said.

Concerning the additional undertakings by the two major chained supermarkets, Wellcome and PARKnSHOP, to give back to customers and donate to Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and the underprivileged during the subsidy period of the second tranche (September to November 2020), the spokesman emphasised that the Government will listen carefully to the public's views about the implementation of the relevant undertakings. PICO has invited relevant organisations to discuss the preliminary thought of implementing the undertakings next week, and will require them to submit a proposal on how to give back to customers and donate to NGOs at the same time when making an application for the second tranche of the ESS.

### (3) Effectiveness of the support measures by the Government

The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for May – July 2020 announced by the Census and Statistics Department today is 6.1%, representing a slight decrease of 0.1% compared with that of April – June, whereas the underemployment rate is 3.5%, representing a decrease of 0.2% compared with April – June. We are of the view that the first tranche of the ESS in general fulfills its original purpose, i.e. preventing the worsening of the unemployment and substantial redundancies.

To reduce the impact of the epidemic on various industries, in the past half year, the SAR Government implemented numerous measures to support the economy and provide relief to citizens through the 2020-21 Budget and two rounds of Anti-epidemic Fund (including the ESS), amounting to a total of HK\$280 billion, or 10% of our gross domestic product. This will provide cushion to the economic downturn by about 5 percentage points.

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, also announced yesterday that the Government will launch the third round of the Anti-epidemic Fund to support industries hard hit by the epidemic. However, although employers are receiving subsidies under the ESS to preserve the jobs of their staff, it is still difficult for them to continue their operation because the third wave of outbreak remains severe and employers are unable to pay rent. If a substantial number of employers need to close their operation and dismiss their employees because they cannot pay rent or fulfil other obligations under the lease, the purpose of implementing the ESS to preserve jobs will not be achieved, and the speedy recovery of the economy cannot be facilitated after the epidemic stabilises. As a result, the Chief Executive yesterday appealed to all property owners in Hong Kong again to offer assistance to tenants by providing rent relief and/or management fees waiver, stopping enforcement actions (for example, termination of lease, re-entry action or taking legal actions) if tenants cannot pay rent timely or fulfil other obligations under the lease.

"The economy of Hong Kong will only recover speedily when the epidemic stabilises. As such, the community as a whole should continue to fight the virus together, maintain social distancing and reduce the frequency of going out. We encourage citizens to co-operate with the Centre for Health Protection, assist in the tracing of close contacts, and participate proactively in the Universal Community Testing Programme, so as to identify the asymptomatic infection cases and cut the community transmission chain as early as possible, and safeguard the health of members of the public and their family members (in particular the elderly)," the spokesman said.

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## EDB clarification

In response to allegations made by the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (PTU) today (August 19) that the professional consultancy service for senior secondary Liberal Studies "textbooks" was unprofessional and subject to political censorship, the Education Bureau (EDB) expressed deep regret over the allegations which were untrue.

A spokesman for the EDB explained that the provision of one-off professional consultancy service was triggered by the social incidents last year. In view of the escalating social incidents, the public has been very concerned about the hate speech on the Internet and suspected bullying cases as well as the biased teaching materials, including the learning materials of senior secondary Liberal Studies (LS). The public is worried that the improper contents of the teaching materials would mislead students who are mentally and psychologically immature, and even spread hatred and prejudice. People even doubted whether the EDB had abandoned monitoring the quality of the "textbooks". Both the EDB and publishers have received a considerable number of complaints.

Therefore, the EDB has introduced the special arrangement to provide professional consultancy service to the publishers of LS "textbooks" so as to improve the quality of these "textbooks" and to ensure that the "textbooks" are in line with the curriculum aims, objectives and learning focuses. The professional consultancy service was provided by a professional team, comprising subject inspectors, university academics and education professionals.

The spokesman said, "Since the implementation of the New Senior Secondary Academic Structure, LS has been a core subject for more than 10 years. The textbooks currently available on the market have never been reviewed by the EDB. They are entirely written according to the authors' own interpretation of the curriculum. The degree of rigour of content and expression is different from that of the formal textbooks."

"The publishers voluntarily participated in the professional consultancy

service and refined the textbooks, with a view to sieving out the inaccurate parts from the rest. This is for ensuring that the information is correct, based on facts, keeping abreast of the times, as well as clear and easy to understand, while avoiding the possibility of exaggeration, inaccuracy or misleading students' understanding. These would help students construct knowledge and develop positive values. Their efforts and professionalism deserve recognition."

The spokesman said the feedback and justifications were made after interactions and discussions between the team and the publishers. The revisions, ranging from "textbook" content, the use of words and sentences, pictures, cartoons to the arrangement of layout, had been made entirely by the publishers themselves. The indiscreet allegation by the PTU that the professional consultancy service is akin to political censorship is totally unfounded, based on twisted facts, and for deliberately smearing the service.

He stressed that the revised content must be compared in juxtaposition with the curriculum aims and objectives, and the content should be read thoroughly to understand the intention of the revisions made by the publishers. The revisions should not be taken out of the context for conjuring up pointless criticisms and triggering one-sided and politicised controversies. The PTU's claims that the professional consultancy service was unprofessional and was "a political censorship even more stringent than the formal review of textbooks" are totally unfounded. The EDB strongly condemns the PTU's attempts to judge the bureau's service through a politically-coloured lens and politicise the professional work of education again.

In addition, there were news reports which quoted people in the education sector as urging the authorities to review LS "textbooks" again as their contents may have breached the National Security Law. The spokesman stressed that publishers have the responsibility to review textbook contents regularly and to revise and improve textbook contents continuously as and when necessary.

He said, "Whether the National Security Law exists or not, textbooks should not have any contents which are against the law. With the implementation of the National Security Law, textbook contents should be reviewed in order to cover relevant materials of the subject and enable students to understand the law correctly. Meanwhile, the EDB has earlier issued preliminary guidelines to schools on the implementation of the National Security Law. We will also develop relevant teaching resources and teacher training courses to support schools and teachers."

The spokesman reiterated that the implementation of the LS subject has long been a matter of concern among different sectors of society and has even given rise to controversies of a political nature. As the department responsible for education affairs in Hong Kong, the EDB, upon discovering the problems with the implementation of the LS subject, has the obligation to act in the interest of students' well being by giving professional advice and taking follow-up actions to rectify mistakes and bring the LS subject back to the education profession.

The EDB will continue to maintain close contact with various stakeholders and work with them towards our goals in education, persevere in our mission, and provide students with quality learning materials so as to nurture them to be knowledgeable and responsible citizens and nationals.

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## **Hong Kong Customs seizes about \$17 million of suspected cannabis buds (with photos)**

Hong Kong Customs yesterday (August 18) seized about 60 kilograms of suspected cannabis buds with an estimated market value of about \$17 million at Hong Kong International Airport.

Customs officers inspected an air cargo consignment arriving in Hong Kong from the United States at Hong Kong International Airport yesterday and found the batch of suspected cannabis buds concealed inside four metal boxes.

After follow-up investigation, Customs officers arrested a 22-year-old man suspected to be in connection with the case in Fo Tan on the same day. About 1 gram of suspected cannabis buds and a set of suspected drug-smoking apparatus were found respectively in the consignee address involved in the case and in the man's possession. Customs officers then escorted the arrested man to a residential premises in Sheung Shui for a search and further seized about 0.5g of suspected herbal cannabis and a set of suspected drug-smoking apparatus.

The arrested man has been charged with one count of trafficking in a dangerous drug, two counts of possession of a dangerous drug and two counts of possession of apparatus fit and intended for the smoking of a dangerous drug. He will appear at Shatin Magistrates' Courts tomorrow (August 20).

Customs will continue to step up enforcement actions against drug trafficking activities through air cargo, postal parcel and express courier channels, as well as maintain close contact with Hongkong Post and the logistics industries, with a view to intercepting the inflow of drugs to Hong Kong.

Under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance, trafficking in a dangerous drug is a serious offence. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$5 million and life imprisonment.

Customs also reminds that cannabis and tetrahydro-cannabinol (THC) are classified as dangerous drugs under the Ordinance. Importation of products (including food and drinks) containing cannabis or THC into Hong Kong is

prohibited unless the relevant provisions in the Ordinance are complied with. In order to avoid breaching the law inadvertently, special attention should be paid to the packaging labels of food and drinks.

Members of the public may report any suspected drug trafficking activities to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account ([crimereport@customs.gov.hk](mailto:crimereport@customs.gov.hk)).



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## [AFCD provides free COVID-19 testing services for Hong Kong mobile fishermen and their deckhands](#)

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) today (August 19) announced that as all Hong Kong mobile fishermen and their deckhands on board vessels operating in Mainland waters are required to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test result issued by one of the medical-testing institutions recognised by Hong Kong within 72 hours prior to entry to the Mainland, the AFCD has started to provide free testing services to the above-mentioned people today.

A spokesman for the AFCD said, "All Hong Kong mobile fishermen and the deckhands hired on board their fishing vessels or fisheries ancillary vessels operating in Mainland waters are eligible for the services."

Distribution and collection of the sample bottles for deep throat saliva tests for the first round of tests will be conducted at three locations, namely Aberdeen Wholesale Fish Market, Cheung Sha Wan Wholesale Fish Market, and Castle Peak Wholesale Fish Market under the Fish Marketing Organization. Bottles were distributed from 2pm to 5pm today, and will be distributed from 8am to 1pm on August 20 and 21, and collected between 8am and 1pm from August 20 to 22.



The spokesman reminded fishermen and deckhands who will take the tests to collect bottles and application forms in person. Hong Kong mobile fishermen should bring along their Hong Kong Identity Cards, Mainland Travel Permits for Hong Kong and Macao Residents and the fishing permit / ancillary vessel permit (either a copy or electronic file is acceptable). Mainland deckhands should bring along their Identity Cards and Deckhand Permits issued by the Mainland authorities and the vessel owner's confirmation letter (if the vessel owners have not come along). Application forms and confirmation letters can be downloaded from the following website:  
[www.afcd.gov.hk/english/whatsnew/what\\_fis/what\\_fis.html](http://www.afcd.gov.hk/english/whatsnew/what_fis/what_fis.html).

Sample bottles should be returned together with completed forms and can be done by others.

The spokesman added that arrangement of further COVID-19 testing services after the above-mentioned dates will continue and details will be announced later.

To safeguard personal health and minimise health risks, the spokesman urged fishermen to maintain environmental hygiene at all times and remind their staff to pay attention to personal hygiene to reduce the risk of contracting the disease. Fishing vessels should be equipped with thermometers. The body temperatures of everyone on board should be taken and recorded every day. All necessary protective measures should be taken during their sojourn on the Mainland or in Hong Kong to safeguard personal hygiene and avoid unnecessary social contacts. In case of fever or any other respiratory symptoms, medical advice should be sought as soon as possible. For relevant information, please visit the COVID-19 Thematic Website:  
[www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/index.html](http://www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/index.html).

For enquiries, please call 2150 7095 or 2150 7099.

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## [Appeal for information on missing man in Tseung Kwan O \(with photo\)](#)

Police today (August 19) appealed to the public for information on a man who went missing in Tseung Kwan O.

Heung Man-ki, aged 26, went missing after he left a shopping centre on Pui Shing Lane at noon on August 10. His family made a report to Police on August 12.

He is about 1.5 metres tall and of thin build. He has a long face with yellow complexion and short black hair. He was last seen wearing a grey T-shirt with stripes, grey shorts and blue slippers.



Anyone who knows the whereabouts of the missing man or may have seen him is urged to contact the Regional Missing Person Unit of Kowloon East on 3661 0316 or email to [rmpu-ke-2@police.gov.hk](mailto:rmpu-ke-2@police.gov.hk), or contact any police station.

