

LCQ16: Restoration works for and security of tertiary institutions' campuses

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (October 28):

Question:

It has been reported that during last year's disturbances arising from the opposition to the proposed legislative amendments (the disturbances), the campus facilities of a number of tertiary institutions were extensively vandalised with a lot of properties stolen. As a result, such institutions have to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to carry out restoration works and step up campus security. Although the disturbances have subsided, incidents of facilities being vandalised, unauthorised posting of slogans and persons with different political views clashing with each other still happen from time to time in the campuses of a number of institutions. It has been reported that on the 26th of last month, some outsiders entered the campus of the University of Hong Kong, tearing up publicity materials and clashing with the students of the university. However, the university did not report the incident to the Police, and some security staff were subsequently disciplined for alleged mishandling of the incident. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the respective additional expenses on (i) restoration works and (ii) security, incurred by the various public-funded tertiary institutions in relation to the disturbances;

(2) whether it knows, since the removal of the cordons around the campus of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University following the violent clashes at the campus at the end of November last year, the respective numbers of incidents of facilities being vandalised and persons with different political views clashing with each other in the campuses of various tertiary institutions, and the respective resultant numbers of teaching staff, students, security staff and other persons who sustained injuries;

(3) in respect of the incidents mentioned in (2), of the number of those incidents which were handled by police officers who arrived at the scene and, among such cases, the respective numbers of those in which (i) someone had reported to the Police (please specify who did so) and (ii) the Police had taken the initiative to intervene; whether it will issue to the various tertiary institutions security guidelines, including one on the circumstances under which they should report to the Police to seek assistance instead of relying solely on security staff to handle the situation; and

(4) whether the Government will learn a lesson from the disturbances and

consider empowering the Education Bureau to monitor and regulate tertiary institutions, as well as to provide these institutions with more support, so as to ensure that such institutions can effectively manage and protect their campus facilities?

Reply:

President,

During the social incidents last year, the campuses of a number of post-secondary institutions were damaged, defaced and interfered with, with some incidents of confrontation, which seriously affected the institutions' order and operations. The Education Bureau (EDB) regrets it and condemns all illegal or violent acts.

After last year's damage to the campuses, the post-secondary institutions promptly commenced restoration works to minimise the disruption to teaching and research activities. On the whole, the campuses of the institutions are currently generally calm. Teaching and research activities have returned to normal, except for the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic.

My reply to the questions raised by the Hon Tony Tse is as follows:

(1) All post-secondary institutions have deployed their existing resources to carry out repair or maintenance work on campus facilities and enhance security measures, having regard to actual needs. The EDB does not maintain any information on the relevant expenditure.

(2) and (3) The post-secondary institutions are responsible for the day-to-day management of their respective campuses. The EDB does not maintain any data on the vandalisation of facilities or confrontations between individuals with different political views on their campuses. According to their information, there were four incidents of the vandalisation of facilities or confrontations between individuals with different political views on their campuses during the period from December 2019 to September 2020. Three of these cases were reported to the Police by the institutions afterwards. There were no injuries in these incidents.

It has all along been the post-secondary institutions' practice to establish dedicated security units, having regard to campus management needs. Appropriate personnel are engaged for security duties to ensure campus safety. The institutions have also put in place internal mechanisms, rules and procedures to deal with ad-hoc incidents on campus. In the event of ad-hoc incidents, security personnel will be deployed to maintain order on campus as and when necessary and ensure the safety of all those at the scene. Consideration will also be given to seeking the assistance of the law enforcement agencies, taking into account the actual circumstances and needs. Generally speaking, the institution will seek the assistance of the Police when its security staff are unable to control the situation, or the safety/property of all those at the scene are endangered.

The laws of Hong Kong are applicable to all places in the territory and

nowhere is above the law. The campuses of the post-secondary institutions should not be used for any illegal activities and offenders on campus will not be absolved from criminal liability. It is the statutory duty of the Police to take actions if anyone contravenes the laws of Hong Kong. Section 50(3) of the Police Force Ordinance further stipulates that if any police officer has reason to believe that any person to be arrested has entered into or is in any place, the person residing in or in charge of such place shall allow the police officer free ingress thereto and afford all reasonable facilities for search therein. The institutions should, as required by the law, co-operate with the Police in carrying out their duties and all those at the scene must also comply with the instructions given by the Police in discharging their duties.

(4) The post-secondary institutions are responsible for properly managing and protecting the safety of their campuses, and preventing illegal activities on campus to ensure that their operations comply with the law.

In the light of the experience of last year's social incidents, the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities and the Vocational Training Council (VTC) have enhanced their on-campus security arrangements, taking into account their actual needs, and they have hired additional security staff. Some institutions have also implemented access control measures, such as requiring staff members, students and invited visitors to present their identity documents or to register before entering the campus. Individual institutions have even engaged professional security consultants to review the existing on-campus security facilities, manpower and arrangements, seeking professional recommendations on enhancing the overall on-campus security measures in the long run.

In addition, while respecting academic freedom and institutional autonomy, the Government has all along required the institutions to maintain good governance, and provided appropriate assistance to meet actual needs, thereby ensuring that the institutions effectively operate in accordance with their missions and roles, and serving the best interests of students as well as society. Over the past few years, the UGC-funded universities and the VTC have implemented various measures to enhance their governance, such as drawing up an institutional risk register and a code of governance, or reviewing them. Moreover, the UGC-funded universities are required to make an annual report to the UGC on their latest developments and performance indicators. Regarding the handling of ad-hoc incidents, all UGC-funded universities have put in place a contingency mechanism, normally consisting of an emergency response team led by the university management (e.g. the President or Vice-President responsible for administrative duties) to co-ordinate the contingency measures and cooperation among different units.

On the premise of looking after the interests of students and society as well as the development of higher education in Hong Kong, the EDB will continue to maintain close communication with the post-secondary institutions.