

LCQ6: Bringing in diversified talents

Following is a question by the Hon Mrs Regina Ip and a reply by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mrs Ingrid Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (June 4):

Question:

It is learnt that the Government, public organisations and some private enterprises have set biliteracy and trilingualism (i.e. the ability to write Chinese and English fluently along with an excellent command of spoken Cantonese, Putonghua and English) as the language proficiency requirement for recruitment. However, there are views pointing out that such requirement makes it impossible for talents with exceptional qualifications but uneven levels of biliteracy and trilingualism, or those who are proficient in specific languages and possess specific expertise to be recruited, and this may affect the talent diversity and competitiveness of Hong Kong in the long run. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has compiled statistics on the number of personnel in the Government and public organisations who are proficient in specific languages at present; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that, and whether it will compile the relevant statistics;

(2) given that Hong Kong is following closely the footsteps of our country in deepening international exchanges and co-operation, such as promoting economic and trade co-operation with Latin America and the Middle East region, etc, of the specific measures the Government has put in place to recruit talents proficient in the languages spoken in such regions and with local connections to undertake the aforesaid work; and

(3) whether the Government will take the lead in formulating more flexible language proficiency standards for recruitment to some government posts (especially those requiring specific expertise or international experience), so as to bring in diversified talents and enhance Hong Kong's competitiveness?

Reply:

President,

Consolidated reply to various parts of the question is as follows:

The Government attaches great importance to attracting talents from different backgrounds to join the civil service and building up a diversified pool of talents to enhance the quality and efficiency of the Government and public service. Appointment to the civil service is conducted on the principle of open and fair competition in order to select and recruit the most suitable and most meritorious talents. Departments will, having regard to the job requirements of different civil service grades, specify

appropriate entry requirements, including academic qualification, experience, language proficiency, etc, and will review these requirements from time to time to ensure that they are commensurate with the objective of achieving good performance. In selecting applicants, we fully assess their character, performance, ability and capability to ensure that only candidates who meet the required standards in all aspects would be appointed. It is of paramount importance for appointed officers to be able to meet the core competency requirements, including language requirements, of their grades. In particular, for degree level jobs, apart from discharging professional duties, officers are generally required to communicate with members of the public, stakeholders and other government departments, and to express complicated concepts and views. They may also be promoted to directorate level. In this connection, they must have good communication skills.

We will ensure that the language proficiency requirements set by departments and grades would not be higher than the requirements of the job. For posts requiring a university degree, there are two different levels of Chinese and English language proficiency requirements. Departments and grades may set their language proficiency requirements at one of the two levels according to their operational need. For posts requiring qualification below university level, departments or grades may set their own language proficiency requirements.

While the Government has a basic requirement on the Chinese and English proficiency level of the majority of civil servants, we will flexibly adjust the language proficiency requirements for individual post having regard to job nature and operational need, so that those who possess exceptional qualities or professional expertise but with uneven levels of biliteracy and trilingualism may also be appointed. For example, Government Counsels handle professional legal works, including criminal advocacy, civil litigation, legal advice, law drafting, public international law and legal policy matters. In order to attract a wider pool of talents, the Department of Justice may, without affecting the operation of the Department, recruit a small number of persons with unique experience or professional knowledge, but whose Chinese language proficiency do not meet the entry requirement to be Government Counsel. If there is a need for departments to adjust the language proficiency requirements for other jobs to meet their operational needs and to better trawl talents of different backgrounds, we are prepared to consider giving greater flexibility provided that the overall quality of public service is not affected.

In international business, finance or other fields, English is still the main working language. Although different countries have their own official languages, English is widely used in most settings. People who need to work with foreigners are generally willing and accustomed to communicate in English. For attracting enterprises and investment, promoting Hong Kong and other international engagements (examples on international engagements include attending international conferences and liaison work outside the conference venue, Hong Kong's young civil servants working in United Nations and its affiliated organisations as Chinese personnel), they can generally be carried out in English. Depending on actual need, say organising investment

promotion activities overseas, interpretation service will be arranged by the relevant departments and/or Hong Kong's Economic and Trade Offices (ETOs) overseas.

Government positions in overseas ETOs involve extended postings abroad, where officers must develop long-term and in-depth political, commercial and cultural ties with places where they work. As such, their roles call for higher proficiency in foreign languages. At the moment, we do not maintain statistics on the number of civil servants who are proficient in foreign languages. However, in respect of Administrative Officer (AO) grade which have the largest number of posts in overseas ETOs and the greatest opportunities to be responsible for external liaison and promotion work of Hong Kong, we will collect information on foreign languages proficiency of the applicants during recruitment. In addition, we also subsidise AO grade officers to learn foreign languages so as to build up a pool of officers with foreign languages ability for selection. For civil servants posted to ETOs or seconded outside Hong Kong, for example Executive Officers, Information Officers and Trade Officers, subsidies will be provided for them to learn foreign languages. Separately, where there is a need to use a foreign language for a specific period of time, departments may recruit persons who know the foreign language on civil service agreement or non-civil service contract terms. If there is a long-term need for the post holder of a particular post to know a foreign language, but applicants who know the relevant foreign language and proficient in both Chinese and English are rare, as mentioned in the earlier part of my reply on special arrangement, without affecting the operation of the departments, they may employ persons with unique foreign language ability but whose Chinese or English language proficiency do not meet the entry requirement.

The Government will also, having regard to the needs of the job at different times, fill vacancies in an appropriate way. For posts at promotion ranks, including directorate posts, if they require experience which may not be commonly found in the civil service, we will consider filling vacancies by open recruitment to widen the pool of candidates. Examples on open recruitment of directorate posts include Commissioner for Innovation and Technology, Director of Legal Aid, Director-General of Investment Promotion and Commissioner for Belt and Road, all of which are at the rank of Directorate Grade 6. Unlike recruitment of officers at entry ranks which require no or limited working experience, in the above cases, applicants' proficiency in Chinese and English is evident in their working experiences. For those who have rich experience and outstanding achievements in various industries, their communication skill in Chinese and English would not be inadequate to cope with their work. In this connection, the Government generally requires applicants to have good command in Chinese and English, instead of requiring them to possess specific public examination or civil service examination results, in order to attract talents who have the most suitable experience and capability.