

Legislative Council Panel on Public Service
Meeting on 18 March 2002
Language Proficiency Requirements for Entry to the Civil Service

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on Government's initiatives to raise the language proficiency requirements for entry to the Civil Service.

Background

2. It is Government's policy to maintain a Civil Service that is biliterate (English and Chinese) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua and English). In pursuing this policy, language proficiency requirements (usually English and Chinese) have been included as one of the entry requirements for civil service posts since 1995. At present, the entry requirements for civil service posts are determined by Heads of Department/Grade (HoD/HoG) in the light of the job requirements and are generally set with reference to academic/professional qualifications, e.g. Form 3, Form 5, diploma, degree, membership of professional institutes. For civil service posts which require candidates to have academic qualifications at 5 passes at the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) or above, the minimum English and Chinese language proficiency requirements are generally set at Grade E in Chinese Language and English Language (Syllabus B) of the HKCEE.

3. Apart from stipulating language proficiency of candidates in the HKCEE, HoD/HoG may conduct separate language examinations with a view to further assessing the language proficiency of candidates for meeting their operational requirement. Since 1984, job applicants for five civil service graduate grades, namely, Administrative Officer, Executive Officer, Trade Officer, Labour Officer and Management Services Officer are required to sit for a Common Recruitment Examination (CRE). The CRE now comprises two parts, Part I has three one-hour multiple choice papers i.e. Use of Chinese, Use of English and Aptitude Test while Part II is a problem solving task paper. Apart from the CRE, some other degree grades conduct separate language examinations in their recruitment exercises.

The Initiatives

4. There has been concern about the declining standard in English in the community. The trend if continued will adversely affect Hong Kong's competitiveness as an international business center. As the largest employer in the territory, the Government will take the lead to ensure the language proficiency of the Civil Service through raising the language standards for entry to the Civil Service. This will induce the community to attach greater importance on enhancing language proficiency. In developing a fully biliterate and trilingual Civil Service, Government should ensure that its new recruits reach specified language standards before entry.

5. Against this background, we shall introduce two initiatives to raise the language proficiency requirements for our new recruits –

- (a) applicants to civil service posts at graduate/professional level should be required to pass the two language papers (Use of English and Use of Chinese) in the CRE Part I; and
- (b) applicants to civil service posts at non-graduate level should attain at least Grade E in English Language (Syllabus B) and Chinese Language at the HKCEE.

6. Under the first initiative, getting a pass in the two language papers of the CRE Part I will become a new entry requirement for all degree and professional grades. The CRE will serve as a threshold test to assess the language proficiency of candidates for appointment to civil service posts at graduate level. This will help address the current gap in language proficiency of these grades which are expected at the graduate level for operational needs but generally set at the HKCEE level only in terms of entry requirements. Apart from raising the language proficiency standards of new recruits, extension of the CRE to all degree grades will also bring forth two more benefits –

- (a) economise the resources for conducting language examinations for different grades and save candidates' efforts in attending similar language examinations when applying for different civil service posts. The Civil Service Bureau now organizes the CRE for 5 degree grades annually for some 16,000 candidates in each exercise. In addition, it assisted 36 degree grades to conduct separate recruitment examinations for some 74,000 candidates in 2000/01 and 2001/02. With this new initiative, the number of language examinations for individual degree grades will be greatly reduced; and
- (b) language examinations will be detached from the recruitment process. With effect from a prospective date, we would require candidates to get a pass in the language papers of CRE Part I before applying for civil service vacancies in response to recruitment advertisements. By doing so, the recruitment exercise may be fast-tracked by 6-8 weeks through saving the time for conducting a separate language examination.

7. The second initiative is applicable to all grades with entry requirements now set at below degree level. Again, with effect from a prospective date, applicants should acquire a pass in Chinese Language and English Language (Syllabus B) at the HKCEE before applying for these posts. Having regard to the progressive lift in general education standard in Hong Kong over the years and the rising public expectation on the quality of the Civil Service, we consider it appropriate to upgrade the language proficiency requirements of these grades. We believe that this measure will send a strong message to the community of Government's determination to upgrade the language proficiency of the Civil Service continuously and to help groom a life-long learning culture in the community.

Implementation

8. We have consulted HoD/HoG on these two initiatives. Their feedback are very positive and all of them agree that there is a need to raise the language proficiency standards of new recruits with a view to providing better services to the community. A few grades have indicated some concern as these requirements may limit the pool of candidates given the requirements of specialized training or professional background or the nature of the duties involved. These grades include Government Counsel, Veterinary Officer, Marine Officer, Shipping Safety Officer, Leading Sewerman, Mortuary Attendants etc.

9. Noting the feedback and in order to ensure the provision of the service would not be adversely affected due to inadequate supply of candidates to fill the positions, we would build in a mechanism whereby exemption to these language requirements may be granted on application from the HoD/HoG.

Detailed Mechanism

10. In future, the language examinations in the CRE Part I will be delinked from recruitment exercises. Applications for the CRE and civil service posts will be handled by CSB and relevant HoD/HoG respectively. Candidates are expected to acquire a pass in the CRE before applying for relevant civil service posts at graduate/professional level. To provide sufficient opportunities for prospective candidates to take part in the CRE, we propose to hold two examinations annually, in June and November respectively. Similar to the present arrangement, the CRE Part I is a threshold test on language proficiency level of candidates for civil service appointment purpose. Candidates will be notified whether they have passed the examination. The results are valid for three years and candidates who have passed the CRE do not need to re-sit for the examination during the validity period. At present, some 10,000 candidates are holding valid results in the CRE and they form a ready pool of civil service applicants.

11. We must emphasize that the CRE is a language examination for civil service appointment purpose and we do not envisage it to form a general academic qualification nor to be relevant for job applications outside the Civil Service.

12. We will firm up the detailed arrangements with a view to implementing the new requirements with effect from late 2002 or early 2003. We shall launch a publicity drive in early April to ensure that prospective job applicants to civil service posts are aware of the new requirements.