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Education must meet innovation needs

By Naubahar Sharif

The year 2012 marked a new era in education in Hong Kong. That year a new secondary matriculation exam — the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) — replaced the previous ‘Form 5’ and ‘Form 7’ exams. The idea had been discussed at least as far back as 2004, when the Education Bureau issued a consultation paper proposing a new scheme known as the “3-3-4”: three years of junior school, three years of high school, and four years of university. The introduction of this new scheme marked a major expansion of the tertiary education sector in Hong Kong, not to mention a change in the content and structure of tertiary education offered locally. Today we continue to assess the effects of the “3-3-4” change in the secondary and tertiary education sectors.



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Why, however, was the “3-3-4” educational structure proposed in the first place? One often forgotten reason is substantive. Prior to the change, a strong consensus had emerged in Hong Kong that students were much more comfortable appropriating existing knowledge than creating new knowledge. Rote learning — mere memorization — it was claimed, was privileged over lateral thinking in students’ educational lives. Finally, experts and other observers acknowledged that the learning experience for secondary school students had been marked by both an over-emphasis on exams and too little emphasis on acquiring intangible learning assets, such as the ability to apply knowledge, the ability to solve problems using a wide array of knowledge domains, and the ability to apply knowledge spontaneously to novel situations.

One main reason for the shift to cultivating intangible learning assets was the recognition that Hong Kong needed to become a knowledge-based economy in which creativity, knowledge-based research and innovative development would play prominent roles. Lest it be forgotten, these changes were proposed against the backdrop of more than six years of extreme tumult in Hong Kong, beginning with the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, continuing through the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, and culminating with the SARS health epidemic in 2003. Against such a landscape, restarting the engine for economic growth rested on the new knowledge economy — not just, narrowly, financial services — an outcome that was not only desirable, but necessary. The drivers of the educational reforms were not accidental — they were shaped by Hong Kong’s nascent experiences as a special administrative region (SAR) of China, and they were pushed by strong societal pressures and economic needs.

To reduce the focus on exams as the most important markers of success, a single school-exit examination — the HKDSE — replaced the two that had previously determined students’ fates.

Still, we must not forget that deemphasizing the exam culture reflects the true spirit of the “3-3-4” reforms: They were intended to encourage creativity, critical and exploratory thinking, innovation and adaptation to change, self-confidence, team spirit, and social skills.

These features indicated the values that the new curriculum was meant to bring to the fore of the educational experience in Hong Kong.

How can we promote these values and integrate them into our educational system? First, to reduce the cumulative effect of making students sit for HKDSE exams in a large number of subjects, they should be allowed to take exams in certain subjects (those in which they are strong, and have confidence) earlier in their secondary school careers. This would avoid clogging the exam calendar with multiple exams for multiple subjects to be taken all at once. Second, the HKDSE's school-based assessment section must be reformed to ensure that students are fairly and regularly assessed during the period in which they take their HKDSE subjects. Moreover, the school-based assessment component of HKDSE subjects should be broadened to include more elective subjects and deepened to increase the school-based share of the assessment (reducing the exam-based share). Finally, teachers implementing the HKDSE must be appropriately trained to instill the values of creativity and critical and exploratory thinking in the students they teach.

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