



EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

Purpose

Once hailed as the crown jewel of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum, Liberal Studies has been put in the limelight due to significant controversies in recent years. On the one hand, advocates applaud pioneering efforts to incorporate thinking skills, social awareness, and other '21st century competencies' in a rigid secondary school curriculum. On the other hand, dubious critics have raised questions about many aspects of its make-up.

At its 10-year juncture, this report examines whether Liberal Studies has achieved its aims and objectives as per the curriculum reform. This review is timely because there have been important secular changes in the past decade, with side effects of the information explosion in the digital age. This report further seeks to sharpen its core aims and offer practical measures to drive better learning outcomes. These measures cover five aspects: curriculum, assessment, teaching materials, teaching process, and articulation.

In preparation for this report, the research team has conducted a total of 25 expert interviews, and hosted roundtables with representatives from schools, the Government, and highly regarded education professionals. In addition, OHKF has commissioned Lingnan University's Public Governance Programme to carry out a territory-wide survey, which yielded responses from 484 Liberal Studies teachers and 71 principals.

Policy Directions

Teachers and students find Liberal Studies' **curriculum** overly broad, with teachers required to deliver 12 themes in only 168 teaching hours. Hong Kong's secondary schools do not have a unified articulation subject leading into NSS Liberal Studies; 68% of teachers surveyed perceive the arrangement as insufficient to lay a solid knowledge foundation and to prepare students for a challenging issue-enquiry approach. Moreover, Liberal Studies is biased towards humanities at the expense of science. This creates a curriculum imbalance, which has impacted Hong Kong's academic performances in science since the NSS' launch.

This report therefore recommends reconfiguring the curriculum by trimming the breadth of topics and deepening the analysis and discussion content, with key concepts clearly defined in the *Liberal Studies Curriculum and Assessment Guide*. In addition, to attain the aim of 'Arts for Science, Science for Arts', both humanities- and science-focused study options should be offered for students to strike a better balance in the overall NSS curriculum. Schools and institutions should facilitate experiential learning, enabling students to gain hands-on experience.

The **assessment** of Liberal Studies is inherently challenging, as it is difficult to quantify higher-order thinking skills and objectively map the results on a quantitative grading scale. Summative assessments tend to direct students' focus towards examination techniques, drills, and language ability, as opposed to the thinking process itself. As a result, examination frameworks have become a hindrance to thinking skills rather than a boost, undermining the pedagogical purpose.

This report recommends redesigning the assessment approach to maximise fairness and flexibility through a pass or fail system, while offering alternative modes of assessment. Relevant curriculum development and assessment committees should collaborate closely to align learning and assessment objectives.

Liberal Studies' **teaching materials** have raised concerns over their availability and quality. Our findings indicate that 87% of teachers surveyed rely on textbooks as a basis for teaching, and an astounding 39% of them use social media as one of their main teaching materials. However, textbooks were not vetted by authorities until recently, and online media has dominated how people receive information, severely affecting the accuracy and objectivity of content circulated in class. This report proposes outlining a set of transparent and practical vetting guidelines on teaching materials, which should ideally extend beyond textbooks to cover supplements such as workbooks and listening materials. Furthermore, the Education Bureau should compile and promote a publicly accessible directory of recommended e-learning resources, and review listings on a regular basis.

This report further investigates Liberal Studies' **teaching process**, which was cited to be another challenge for 56% of teachers surveyed who are required to teach multiple subjects concurrently. This is happening against a backdrop of declining enrolment in specialised university programmes. To uphold teaching quality, the Government should clearly define required competencies and offer support via Continuous Professional Development.

Finally, this report reviews the status of Liberal Studies as a mandatory **articulation** subject. Result-focused articulation, when applied to Liberal Studies, is at odds with an 'assessment for learning' ethos; it also hinders higher-order thinking skills and self-directed learning. It is therefore recommended to exclude Liberal Studies from the JUPAS scoring system – while students are still required to study the subject, a pass would be sufficient for university admission. This will ultimately allow students to reorient themselves and get the most out of the learning process.

Through 13 comprehensive policy recommendations listed below, this report seeks to refocus the role of Liberal Studies in fostering broad-based knowledge drawn from multiple disciplines, cultivating higher-order thinking skills, and appreciating and respecting differences. In line with this effort, the Government may rebrand Liberal Studies as 'Integrated Studies' to underscore its intended learning outcomes. Notwithstanding, Liberal Studies is one of a kind when it comes to achieving its stated learning goals, and remains crucial in nurturing our next generation of leaders vital to Hong Kong's continued prosperity in the 21st century.

Key Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Reconfigure the curriculum to facilitate in-depth learning and to cultivate critical thinking skills

- 1.1. Trim the curriculum to intensify analyses, evaluations, and discussions
- 1.2. Outline key learning concepts in the Curriculum and Assessment Guide
- 1.3. Offer humanities- and science-focused study options for students
- 1.4. Partner with organisations to develop module-specific experiential learning

RECOMMENDATION 2

Revamp the grading system, rejuvenate the assessment mechanism, and enhance the overall governance

- 2.1. Replace the seven-point grading scale with a pass or fail system
- 2.2. Incorporate alternative modes of assessment, such as concept mapping, word matching, and multiple choice
- 2.3. Strengthen the recruitment and feedback mechanisms of HKEAA subject and moderation committees, to better align assessment and curriculum development and to enhance transparency and accountability

RECOMMENDATION 3

Ensure fair and unbiased teaching materials to improve learning outcome

- 3.1. Publish clear and transparent vetting guidelines, covering teaching materials attached to textbooks (e.g. training exercises and supplementary tools)
- 3.2. Compile a publicly accessible online directory of recommended e-learning materials and supplements

RECOMMENDATION 4

Furnish comprehensive and timely training in order to enhance teaching and learning quality

- 4.1. Publish a teaching manual outlining prerequisite knowledge and skills such as critical thinking theories
- 4.2. Reinforce Continuous Professional Development through learning communities and on-site school support

RECOMMENDATION 5

Adjust Liberal Studies' weight in further articulation, allowing students to refocus on learning rather than assessment

- 5.1. Maintain Liberal Studies as a mandatory HKDSE examination subject
- 5.2. Remove Liberal Studies from the JUPAS scoring system, such that only a pass is required for further articulation