

# GIFTED EDUCATION

## Executive Summary

1. Fostering gifted education is of pivotal importance to help nurture and enrich Hong Kong's pool of talent, thereby increasing our competitiveness. The Education Bureau (EDB), headed by the Secretary for Education, is responsible for the development and implementation of gifted education policy in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education (HKAGE) works together with EDB in the provision of gifted education. Established in 2008 as a private company limited by guarantee, HKAGE became a non-profit organisation subvented by EDB in 2017. In 2016, the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council approved the creation of a new commitment for the establishment of the Gifted Education Fund (GE Fund). GE Fund supports the operation of HKAGE and the provision of Off-school Advanced Learning Programmes (OSALPs) for gifted students in Hong Kong. The Permanent Secretary for Education Incorporated acts as the trustee of GE Fund. Since its establishment and up to 2023, the total funding approved for GE Fund amounted to \$2.2 billion. The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the work of EDB and HKAGE in gifted education.

### Identifying and developing talents of gifted students

2. *Membership applications were not enthusiastic.* HKAGE operates under a membership system. Gifted students aged from 10 to 18 studying in schools in Hong Kong can apply for membership to enjoy HKAGE's programmes and services. There are five channels for gifted students to become HKAGE members, i.e. School Nomination, Parent Nomination, Nurturing the Gifted Scheme, Web-based Learning Courses for Gifted/More Able Students and Principal's Nomination. Audit examined the membership applications received in the period from school year 2018/19 to school year 2022/23 (unless otherwise specified, all years (e.g. 2018/19) mentioned in this Audit Report refer to school years). Audit found that: (a) in the period, the overall percentage of schools without students nominated for HKAGE membership via School Nomination or Principal's Nomination was 51%, ranging from 48% to 53% each year. In the 5-year period, of the 1,103 schools, 347 (31%) did not nominate any students throughout the period; and (b) the majority of membership applications were received via School Nomination, ranging from 88% to 92% each

## Executive Summary

---

year. The percentage of applications received via the other channels was on the low side (paras. 2.2, 2.3 and 2.6).

3. ***Need to enhance Online Screening Programme.*** Audit examined the Online Screening Programme held in the period from 2018/19 to 2022/23. Audit found that: (a) only about half of the nominated students had completed the Online Screening Programme, ranging from 45% in 2019/20 to 62% in 2021/22. The overall percentage for the period was 56%; (b) according to HKAGE, some parents said that the online platform for the Online Screening Programme was unstable and as a result, the final assessment of the Programme could not be completed within the allowed time; and (c) up to 2022/23, the questions in the Online Screening Programme's final assessment had been used for more than six years. The possibility that the questions could have been leaked to the public rendering the assessment tool not reliable was discussed in a meeting of HKAGE's Senior Management Team in January 2023. However, up to January 2024, no action had been taken to revise the assessment questions. According to HKAGE, a development project on a new set of identification tools commenced in September 2023 and was scheduled for completion by December 2025. In Audit's view, HKAGE needs to review the existing assessment questions prior to the implementation of the new set of identification tools and closely monitor the progress of the development project on the new set of identification tools (paras. 2.9, 2.11 and 2.12).

4. ***Room for improvements in Student Profile Screening.*** Audit examined the records of Student Profile Screening conducted for the 3,315 student profiles in 2022/23. Audit found that: (a) while there were guidelines on marking the overall scores, the two Selection Committee members did not give any comments on the students based on the three assessment criteria. There was no documentation showing how the scores given by the members were arrived at; and (b) HKAGE's guidelines on Student Profile Screening had not always been complied with. There was no documentary evidence showing that re-examination had been conducted before the 579 marginal cases were accepted. Instead of rejecting the cases, all the 573 cases with aggregate score of 3 were accepted without documentation on the justifications of doing so. Moreover, 15 cases were accepted by the Senior Management Team despite Quality Control Team's recommendation to reject and there was no documentary evidence showing the justifications of doing so (para. 2.15).

5. ***Some students did not proceed after passing Online Screening Programme.*** Students who have passed the Online Screening Programme need to

## Executive Summary

---

proceed to the Student Profile Screening before they could become HKAGE members. In the period from 2018/19 to 2022/23, 16,725 students passed the Online Screening Programme. However, 1,101 (7%) students did not proceed to the stage of Student Profile Screening (para. 2.18).

6. ***Lower success rates of membership applications from School Nomination.***

Audit examined the applications received via School Nomination and Parent Nomination in the period from 2018/19 to 2022/23. Audit found that: (a) the success rates of students nominated via School Nomination (i.e. ranging from 11% to 16% each year, averaging 13%) were lower than that of students nominated via Parent Nomination (i.e. ranging from 27% to 51% each year, averaging 33%); and (b) the passing rates in Online Screening Programme and Student Profile Screening of students from School Nomination were significantly lower than that of students from Parent Nomination (para. 2.20).

7. ***Target member-to-population ratio not achieved.*** HKAGE had set a target member-to-population ratio (i.e. number of members divided by the student population aged from 10 to 18). The target was set at 2% to 2.5% in the Three-year Business Plans from 2018/19-2020/21 to 2020/21-2022/23 and 2.5% in the Business Plans for 2021/22-2023/24 and 2022/23-2024/25. Audit examined the member-to-population ratios in the period from 2018/19 to 2022/23 and noted that the ratio was below the target each year, ranging from 1.6% to 1.9% (paras. 2.24 and 2.25).

8. ***Targets for completion rates not set for programmes for gifted students.***

According to the service agreement signed between the Government and HKAGE, programme completion rate is one of the performance indicators to measure the effectiveness of HKAGE's programmes. HKAGE is required to set out the annual performance targets on its performance indicators in each Business Plan. However, Audit found that starting from the 2021/22-2023/24 Business Plan, HKAGE had not set aimed completion rates for its programmes. There was no documentary evidence showing the justifications for not setting annual performance targets for completion rate (paras. 2.31 and 2.32).

9. ***Completion rates of some programmes for gifted students were low.*** Audit analysed the completion rates of the programmes organised by HKAGE in the period from 2020/21 to 2022/23. Audit found that the completion rates of some programmes

## Executive Summary

---

were low: (a) of the 1,246 face-to-face programmes held, the completion rates of 26 (2%) programmes were lower than 50%; and (b) of the 108 online programmes held, the completion rates of 62 (57%) programmes were lower than 50% (para. 2.33).

10. *Need to improve enrolment rates and completion rates of parent programmes.* Audit examined the enrolment rates of parent programmes held in 2021/22 and 2022/23 and noted that: (a) the average enrolment rate for parent programmes decreased significantly from 81% (ranging from 10% to 104%) in 2021/22 to 57% (ranging from 8% to 105%) in 2022/23; and (b) the enrolment rates of 12 (32%) of the 38 parent programmes held in 2021/22 and 13 (42%) of the 31 parent programmes held in 2022/23 were below 50%. Audit also examined the completion rates of parent programmes held in 2021/22 and 2022/23 and noted that the completion rates of 6 (16%) of the 38 parent programmes held in 2021/22 and 5 (16%) of the 31 parent programmes held in 2022/23 were below 50% (paras. 2.42 and 2.43).

11. *Need to shorten waiting time for consultation and assessment sessions.* Of the 162 hotline service requests received in 2021/22 and 2022/23 that had been responded by HKAGE as at 31 December 2023, 118 (73%) required the arrangements of consultation or assessment sessions. Audit analysed the waiting time for the consultation or assessment sessions (i.e. duration between the date of service requests and the date of consultation or assessment sessions). Audit found that the waiting time for consultation and assessment sessions was relatively long, ranging from 0 to 362 days (averaging 85 days). For 17 (14%) of the 118 consultation and assessment sessions, the waiting time was over 180 days (para. 2.47).

## Governance and administrative issues of The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

12. *Need to strengthen measures for safeguarding national security.* According to the School Administration Guide issued by EDB to aided schools, all levels of school personnel should perform their respective functions and work in collaboration to facilitate the effective formulation and implementation of measures for safeguarding national security in schools. EDB has issued guidelines to the public sector schools offering full curriculum on procurement procedures to safeguard national security. According to the guidelines, schools should include specific clauses

## Executive Summary

---

into the quotation/tender documents to allow disqualification of a supplier and to terminate the contract in the interest of national security. Although HKAGE is not covered by the guidelines issued by EDB, its responsibilities to safeguard national security are as important as those of the public sector schools. Audit noted that up to January 2024, HKAGE had not formulated or implemented specific measures for safeguarding national security (paras. 3.2 to 3.4).

13. ***Targets were not set for some performance indicators.*** According to EDB, HKAGE should set targets for the performance indicators listed in the service agreement and include the targets in the Three-year Business Plan. Audit reviewed HKAGE's Three-year Business Plan for 2023/24-2025/26. Audit found that in the Business Plan, of the 19 performance indicators listed in the service agreement: (a) for 15 (79%) indicators, there was no mentioning of the performance indicators in the Business Plan and no targets had been set; (b) for 1 (5%) indicator, a quantified target was set. However, the timeframe for achieving the target was not mentioned; and (c) for the remaining 3 (16%) indicators, quantified targets with timeframe for achieving them were set (paras. 3.8 and 3.9).

14. ***Delays in distributing meeting notice and documents to Board members.*** Audit reviewed HKAGE's 9 Board meetings held in the period from 2020/21 to 2022/23 and found that of the 9 Board meetings: (a) the requirement on serving meeting notice at least 10 business days before the date of the meeting was not complied with in 8 (89%) meetings, with delays ranging from 1 to 3 days (averaging 1.5 days); and (b) the requirement on serving meeting documents at least 5 business days before the date of the meeting was not complied with in 3 (33%) meetings, each with a delay of 1 day (para. 3.15).

15. ***Need to improve measures relating to Sexual Conviction Record Check (SCRC).*** HKAGE's Corporate Governance Manual stipulated that all new employees are required to undergo SCRC. The contracts signed between HKAGE and the service providers required that all prospective employees deployed to provide services for HKAGE are required to undergo SCRC and not to have conviction record against sexual offences. Audit examined SCRC records of 36 new employees in the period from 2019/20 to 2022/23. Audit found that of the 36 employees: (a) for 8 (22%) employees, the dates of SCRC results were long before the employment dates, exceeding 180 days (ranging from 204 to 360 days, averaging 238 days). There was no record showing that HKAGE had accessed the updated results before the employees started their employment; and (b) for 8 (22%) other employees, SCRC

## Executive Summary

---

results were obtained after they had started their employment. For 3 (8%) employees, the results were obtained 49 to 55 days (averaging 51 days) after they had started their employment. Moreover, Audit examined the records of 20 programmes completed in 2021/22. Audit found that, for all the 20 (100%) programmes, HKAGE did not seek confirmations from the service providers on whether they had complied with the requirements on SCRC (paras. 3.20 to 3.22).

16. ***Need to ensure employees comply with requirements on declaration of interest.*** According to HKAGE's guidelines, new employees of HKAGE are required to submit declaration of interest at the time of reporting duties. Audit examined the records on declaration of interest submitted by 36 new employees in the period from 2019/20 to 2022/23. Audit found that for 9 (25%) new employees, the declarations of interests were submitted after the dates of reporting duty. The delays ranged from 1 to 85 days (averaging 19 days). For 2 (6%) new employees, the declarations of interests were submitted over 30 days after they reported duties (para. 3.24).

### Education Bureau's support measures for gifted education

17. ***Need to enhance attendance rates of some Professional Development Programmes (PDPs).*** Audit reviewed the records of the 883 PDPs on gifted education (comprising 364 programmes for all schools and 519 programmes for targeted schools) organised by EDB in the 5-year period from 2018/19 to 2022/23. Audit found that: (a) the enrolment rates of individual programmes ranged from 5% to 290%, averaging 96%. Of the 364 programmes for all schools, 189 (52%) were oversubscribed; and (b) the completion rates of programmes for all schools (ranging from 49% to 100%, averaging 78%) were relatively lower than those for targeted schools (ranging from 89% to 100%, averaging 99.9%). Moreover, the completion rates of programmes for all schools were on a decreasing trend, from 84% in 2018/19 to 69% in 2022/23 (para. 4.4).

18. ***Need to encourage schools to participate in Gifted Education School Network.*** Audit reviewed the number of primary schools and secondary schools participating in the Gifted Education School Network in the period from 2019/20 to 2023/24. Audit found that among some 1,200 schools, the number of schools participating in the Network ranged from 29 (3%) to 87 (7%) each year (averaging 56 (5%)). The cumulative number of schools that have participated in the Network in the period was 151 (13%) (para. 4.9).

## Executive Summary

---

19. ***Approved funding applications for OSALPs were predominantly from post-secondary institutions.*** Audit examined the funding applications for OSALPs received by EDB in the period from 2019/20 to 2022/23. Audit found that the percentages of funding applications from organisations other than post-secondary institutions were low: (a) of the 143 applications received, 69 (48%) were from post-secondary institutions, 37 (26%) were from non-governmental organisations and 19 (13%) were from technology enterprises. None were received from professional bodies; and (b) of the 42 approved applications, 34 (81%) were received from post-secondary institutions. The percentages of approved applications received from eligible organisations other than post-secondary institutions were low, ranging from 0% in 2019/20 to 27% in 2022/23 (averaging 16%). Furthermore, Audit examined the list of potential programme providers adopted for OSALPs application invitation exercises in the period from 2019/20 to 2022/23. Audit found that each year, the number of professional bodies, technology enterprises and non-governmental organisations being invited were few, ranging from 0 to 11 (paras. 4.25 and 4.26).

20. ***Delays in submission of financial statements and reports.*** Audit examined the records for submission of financial statements and reports by OSALP providers in the period from September 2019 to January 2024. Audit found that: (a) 18 (58%) of the 31 Final Financial Reports and 12 (39%) of the 31 Final Reports were submitted late. The delays ranged from 2 to 134 days (averaging 34 days) and from 2 to 134 days (averaging 34 days) respectively; and (b) 10 (16%) of the 62 Interim Financial Reports and 8 (13%) of the 60 Progress Reports were submitted late. The delays ranged from 1 to 43 days (averaging 12 days) and from 1 to 41 days (averaging 12 days) respectively (para. 4.31).

21. ***Need to improve lesson observations.*** Audit examined the 92 lesson observations carried out by EDB on the 31 OSALPs completed in the period from September 2019 to September 2023. Audit found that the frequency, mode of result documentation and follow-up actions taken for the lesson observations varied: (a) the number of lesson observations conducted on each of the OSALPs varied and ranged from 1 to 7, averaging 3; (b) for 61 (66%) lesson observations, only photos showing students attending lessons were kept as the records of lesson observations (i.e. no written records were available showing comments made by the officers conducting the lesson observations); for 1 (1%) lesson observation, a press release issued by the programme provider was used as the record (i.e. no written records were available showing comments made by the officers conducting the lesson observations); and for 1 (1%) lesson observation, the result was not available; and (c) for 74 (80%) lesson observations, there was no record showing that comments and/or views arising from

## Executive Summary

---

the observations had been communicated to the programme providers; and for all the 92 lesson observations, there was no record showing that EDB had taken actions to ensure that the comments and/or views arising from the lesson observations had been followed up by the programme providers (para. 4.32).

22. *Need to ensure programme providers' compliance with requirements on SCRC.* Since 2022/23, EDB has required programme providers to submit a confirmation relating to SCRC prior to the first session of the programmes. Audit examined the records of the 11 OSALPs approved in 2022/23. Audit found that for 10 (91%) of 11 programmes, instead of submitting a confirmation prior to the first session of the programmes, the programme providers submitted the confirmations 17 to 144 days (averaging 65 days) after the first session (paras. 4.41 and 4.42).

### Audit recommendations

23. **Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has recommended that:**

- (a) **the Executive Director, The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education, in collaboration with the Secretary for Education, should:**

*Identifying and developing talents of gifted students*

- (i) **step up efforts in identifying gifted students, including taking actions to address the issue of the lack of enthusiasm of some schools in nominating gifted students, and taking further measures to promote channels for identification of gifted students other than School Nomination (para. 2.27(a)); and**
- (ii) **encourage schools to facilitate their nominated students to prepare for the screening process and provide appropriate support to the schools to facilitate their identification of gifted students for nominations for HKAGE membership (para. 2.27(b) and (c));**



## Executive Summary

---

- (b) **the Executive Director, The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education should:**

*Identifying and developing talents of gifted students*

- (i) **encourage schools to facilitate students to complete the Online Screening Programme and provide appropriate assistance to schools, parents and students (para. 2.28(a));**
- (ii) **monitor the technical issues of the final assessment of the Online Screening Programme and rectify the technical issues identified (para. 2.28(c));**
- (iii) **review the existing assessment questions in the Online Screening Programme’s final assessment prior to the implementation of the new set of identification tools and closely monitor the progress of the development project on the new set of identification tools (para. 2.28(d));**
- (iv) **require the Selection Committee members to give comments and justifications based on the three assessment criteria to support the scores given by them in the Student Profile Screening (para. 2.28(e));**
- (v) **ensure that HKAGE’s guidelines on Student Profile Screening are complied with, and any deviations from the guidelines should be well justified and documented (para. 2.28(f));**
- (vi) **ensure that due consideration is given to the recommendations of the Quality Control Team and document the justifications for accepting the students who have been recommended for rejection by the Team in the Student Profile Screening (para. 2.28(g));**
- (vii) **take a prudent approach when making adjustments to the assessments of student profiles in the Student Profile Screening and ensure consistency in the standard of screening for identifying suitable students with untapped talents for nurturing (para. 2.28(h));**

## Executive Summary

---

- (viii) ascertain the reasons for not proceeding to the stage of Student Profile Screening by students who have passed the Online Screening Programme and in light of the reasons, take appropriate actions to follow up with these cases (para. 2.28(j));
- (ix) step up efforts to achieve the target member-to-population ratio (para. 2.28(m));
- (x) set targets on the overall completion rates for HKAGE's programmes for gifted students and monitor their completion rates (para. 2.39(a) and (b));
- (xi) monitor and improve the enrolment rates and completion rates of parent programmes (para. 2.52(a));
- (xii) explore measures to shorten the waiting time for consultation and assessment sessions (para. 2.52(d));

### *Governance and administrative issues of HKAGE*

- (xiii) strengthen HKAGE's guidelines and regulations relating to the safeguarding of national security, including measures pertinent to school administration and procurement procedures (para. 3.6);
- (xiv) set targets for the performance indicators listed in the service agreement (para. 3.11);
- (xv) ensure that meeting notice and documents are served to HKAGE's Board members within the required timeframe (para. 3.17);
- (xvi) for SCRC on new employees that were conducted long before they reported duty, obtain the updated SCRC results prior to their employment date and document the results accordingly (para. 3.28(a));

## Executive Summary

---

- (xvii) ensure that SCRC is conducted before the new employees start their employment and seek confirmations from the service providers on whether they have complied with SCRC requirements stipulated in the service contracts (para. 3.28(b) and (c)); and
  - (xviii) ensure that the interest declaration requirements stipulated in HKAGE's guidelines are complied with by new employees (para. 3.28(d)); and
- (c) the Secretary for Education should:

### *EDB's support measures for gifted education*

- (i) consider conducting adequate re-runs for PDPs that have been oversubscribed to meet the demand for them and encourage teachers who have enrolled in PDPs to complete the programmes as far as possible (para. 4.6(a) and (b));
- (ii) encourage schools to participate in the Gifted Education School Network (para. 4.12(a));
- (iii) step up efforts in encouraging eligible organisations to apply for OSALPs (para. 4.44(a));
- (iv) review the list of potential programme providers with a view to identifying more potential programme providers for OSALPs application invitations (para. 4.44(b));
- (v) ensure that financial statements and reports are submitted by programme providers of OSALPs in a timely manner (para. 4.44(c));
- (vi) improve the lesson observations for OSALPs (para. 4.44(d)); and

## **Executive Summary**

---

- (vii) ensure that programme providers submit the required confirmation relating to SCRC before the first session of OSALPs (para. 4.44(f)).

### **Response from the Government and The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education**

24. The Secretary for Education and the Executive Director, The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education agree with the audit recommendations.