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A double standard in exams

THE results of this year's Advanced Level Use of English examinations have just been announced, with about 36 per cent of candidates obtaining Grade F.

Although this grade represents a fail, these candidates will be given the opportunity to sit for a supplementary examination which, if passed – according to an administrative circular from the Education Department in April – will be accepted by the local tertiary institutions as an equivalent to the level of performance required for admission to their courses, for which Grade E is a prerequisite.

Why are candidates who have failed to achieve the necessary grade being allowed a second chance to enter the territory's tertiary bodies? Here is an example of a positive discriminative mechanism at work.

To be eligible for the supplementary examination a candidate has to have been examined in Chinese for at least 50 per cent of the subjects taken in the Hong Kong Certificate of Examination (HKCEE).

So this supplementary examination serves as a means to encourage the use of Chinese as the learning medium.

This is in direct conflict with all that has been said by the Education Department personnel in the past few months during its promotion of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong secondary schools.

The department has continually emphasised that the learning of English would be reinforced and the use of the mother tongue would not adversely affect the standard of students' English language ability.

To allow only those who have used Chinese as their medium of learning to resit an examination is to admit they are sub-standard in their English language ability. If such is the case, why are they not simply given another syllabus and a different examination?

After all, this has been the practice in the case of the HKCEE. Otherwise, this special treatment might appear as an ignoble trade-off for administrative simplicity at the expense of equity.

Another eligibility criterion for entry to this supplementary examination is that candidates must have successfully enrolled in an intensive English programme solely organised by the Education Department in collaboration with the British Council.

This programme runs in two sessions, the four-week post-Form Six course and the six-week post-Form Seven course.

According to present arrangements by the Government, students who do not enrol for the post-Form Six course and attend it regularly will not be eligible for the post-Form Seven course and the supplementary English examination.

This note is disturbing in several ways. A monopoly with full enrolment guaranteed has been granted to the British Council. What is the rationale in making the attendance of such a course a prerequisite for eligibility to an examination?

To guarantee quality?

This would imply the British Council was the supreme authority in the teaching of the English language. Perhaps teachers of English usage in the territory will feel ashamed that the British Council is perceived to do a better job than them or they may feel relieved that somebody else is sharing their burden?

WHY is the Government so confident of the effectiveness of this programme? Is it a real educational possibility that a 10-week course can achieve for the majority of Form Seven students who seek help what teachers have not been able to do in almost two years?

Is it because the teaching materials used under the programme are more effective in improving language skills? If so, they should have been made available to all teachers of English usage beforehand. Or is this crash course going to be a means of drilling pupils to pass examinations – a method that has been discouraged if not condemned by all educationalists.

Such double-standards in education are not supported widely by public views. More comprehensive research and consultation ought to be conducted by the authorities.

Positive discrimination is still discrimination. Unless the above queries are addressed, this programme should be suspended until all students who have failed the examination are allowed a second attempt.