

Go Liberal? Go with the text



by Samantha Chung and Lina Leung

While the Education Bureau (EDB) does not encourage the use of Liberal Studies textbooks, some secondary schools have proceeded with plans to use textbooks as teaching materials and textbook publishers are tapping on to this demand.

The EDB has made it clear that they do not recommend any textbooks for Liberal Studies under the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum, which marks the change in academic structure of secondary schools from “5+2+3” to “3+3+4”, in which students will no longer enter form seven but to enter university, turning

the current three-year undergraduate degree to four.

Yet opinions from teachers and students towards whether to use textbooks in the teaching of the subject remain divided.

Head of Liberal Studies panel of Po Leung Kuk Vicwood K.T. Chong Sixth Form College, Wallace Hui Chung-sing, supports the adoption of textbooks.

“Textbooks are more convenient for students to store and use. After all, it is easier to lose a piece of paper than a whole book. These small details are to be considered,” he said.

Mr Hui added that textbooks have a standardised format, which clearly

provides instructing directions with summaries, case studies and concepts. “They (textbooks) are very systematic, which is important in running lesson plans. Also, it is easier for students to keep up during class,” he explained.

“It is feasible for us to organise our own teaching notes, but the workload is not necessary. Teachers will have to work extra hours and this will add burden onto them,” said Mr Hui.

While some prefer to use textbooks for teaching guidelines, other schools choose to develop their own sets of teaching materials for the subject.

Chairman of the Hong Kong Liberal Studies Teachers’ Association,

Cheung Yui-fai, said some teachers fear that Liberal Studies textbooks may limit the approach and focus.

Mr Cheung, also the Panel Head of Po Leung Kuk Lee Shing Pik College, said that once you buy a textbook, you are getting the whole package, but self-made materials are more flexible and easier to adjust to meet the teachers' needs.

“Textbooks are more convenient for students to store and use. After all, it is easier to lose a piece of paper than a whole book.”

He said that the school has been working on their own teaching materials for the new Liberal Studies subject instead of using textbooks. As the school has been offering the subject Integrated Humanities in junior forms and Liberal Studies in the Advanced Level Examination, existing teaching materials can be used as a basis for the new subject.

“I understand that it would be difficult for some schools to develop their own teaching materials, especially for those who have not offered subjects like Liberal Studies before. Teachers may not have enough experience or confidence,” said Mr Cheung.

He added that although publishers have told the school they would publish Liberal Studies textbooks for NSS, sample copies are not expected to be available until March.

“If we decide to use textbooks, we have to confirm the booklist by March. We do not want to decide to use textbooks without seeing the samples. That is not good for students.”



Olivia Yam Pui-woo, a form three student at Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section) is one of the many who will be taking Liberal Studies as one of the compulsory subjects starting from the coming September. She agrees that Liberal Studies textbooks are necessary.

Miss Yam said books were the main guidance while reference materials count as “only the supplementary information to know more about an issue only”.

On the other hand, Vivian Li Wai-tung, also a form three student, prefers not to have textbooks.

“For me, textbooks are boring. And they’re all about some normative things. Reference books or notes are different,” said Miss Li. “They’re just for reference. You can choose whether or not to agree with them.”

“I think the room for thoughts in textbooks is narrow. I believe room for individual thinking is important for students studying Liberal Studies,” she said.

Lee Tsz-ngong, programme director in Liberal Studies of Baptist University said that the issue is not whether textbooks should exist. His concern is how the textbooks are written, what are being included and how teachers would use them.

“If we stick to the point of textbooks being the provider of basic background and basic facts, I don’t see any big problem with using textbooks,” he said.

He added that textbooks for Liberal Studies are expected to appear as it becomes a compulsory subject in NSS. “Publishers are trying to get into the market because they see the potential,” said Dr Lee.



LINA LEUNG



SAMANTHA CHUNG



CECILIA CHAN

1. Some publishers, including Longman Hong Kong Education, said they will be publishing Liberal Studies textbooks for the NSS curriculum.
2. Cheung Yui-fai, Chairman of the Hong Kong Liberal Studies Teachers' Association, said self made teaching materials can adjust to teachers' needs.
3. Liberal Studies textbooks may not be able to keep up with contemporary issues, even if there were a yearly revision.

Longman Hong Kong Education said they had invited front-line teachers and professors from the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) as well as professionals such as doctors to collaborate in writing the textbooks.

Catherine Chung Lai-ping, author of a Longman Liberal Studies book for the Human Relationship module, said it is difficult to find people to help in writing a Liberal Studies textbook, as it is not a defined discipline. "It is like anyone can write (the textbooks) as well as anybody else can," she said.

Oxford University Press told *Varsity* that the company has no plans to publish textbooks for Liberal Studies.

Ben Mak Ka-lung, sales and marketing director of Oxford University Press, said that the company doubted the market size for Liberal

Studies textbooks since the EDB has a clear policy saying that teachers and students should not rely on textbooks for the subject.

"The (NSS) curriculum is new to all: the EDB, teachers, students and publishers. Nobody can tell you the best way of designing textbooks. Everyone has to draw on their own experience," he said. He explained that changes have to be done on textbooks for all six compulsory subjects with the launch of the new curriculum.

He said that as Liberal Studies requires a lot of school-based materials and a lot of updated topics, traditional textbooks would not be able to satisfy the requirement.

John Tan Kang, former chief curriculum development officer for Liberal Studies from the EDB echoed with Mr Ma about the limitations with textbooks. "They (textbooks) are not updated frequently. Even if there were a yearly revision, it would not be enough for keeping up with contemporary issues," he said.

"There is also limitation of links (to other sources), textbooks

may not allow multiple perspectives which is highly emphasised in the new curriculum," he added. "Textbooks are outdated compared to online materials like our platform, which is more flexible."

He said the EDB has been developing a web-based resource platform for teachers to access to teaching resources in the subject.

The platform includes a teachers' area, in which news clippings, Liberal Studies-related literature and other updates of teaching materials are provided.

Teachers may not be very clear about the structure of the Liberal Studies subject, said Ho Ming-seng, chairperson of the Hong Kong Cooperative Learning Association, an organisation which encourages cooperation among teachers in designing their own teaching activities.

"All in all, teaching materials should be in line with the curriculum guide, so teachers know what objectives they should have reached after they have taught certain parts," Mr Ho said. ▣