

South China Morning Post

Encouraged by attitude towards new diploma

26 July, 2010

It is good news for Hong Kong students that the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) is welcomed and increasingly recognised by universities overseas, including Britain, as they will have more options for their higher education when they complete their schooling ("Top British universities set diploma entry terms", July 17).

This is also important for Hong Kong as an international city, given the diversity of experiences and skills students studying overseas will bring back to the city.

Given public anxieties about the reforms, it is important readers have a full and balanced picture of the requirements and their rationale.

British universities are taking considerable care in how they assess the HKDSE for admissions.

Some of them have now made decisions about their requirements based on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) tariff benchmarking of the HKDSE, which enables them to compare it directly with GCE A-levels, and other information available.

The requirements vary, depending on institutions' own policies and the competitiveness of the university.

They range from three Level 5s at the University of Oxford to two Level 5s and a Level 4 for some programmes at the University of Manchester, and four Level 3s and Applied Learning Gained with Distinction at Sheffield Hallam University. These should be useful pathfinders for others to follow or refine.

Your article focused only on requirements for Level 5s.

Two universities - Oxford and Warwick - have initially specified that they require elective rather than core subjects (except mathematics if studied at the extended level). But this is unlikely to be the norm and may in time be reviewed as the core curriculum, which also includes Chinese, English and Liberal Studies, becomes better understood.

Universities have been impressed with the new senior secondary curriculum.

They see the mix of core and elective elements, as well as the other learning experiences, as an enlightened model in its mix of academic rigour and focus on developing the whole person.

They are hopeful that students will be better equipped for the independent learning and thinking that universities value.

Chinese is, of course, regarded as relevant, even if some may not include it among the three HKDSE subjects that they require for admissions.

It is the norm for universities to specify subject requirements for particular disciplines to ensure students are ready to study that discipline at the university level, with the most competitive universities requiring high levels of academic performance.

The decisions so far appear very fair, given that universities are following UCAS' expert recommendations on the comparison with UK A-levels.

They are only requiring two to three subjects for consideration, are being sparing in asking for the Level 5* (none so far have mentioned 5**), and are ready to consider the Level 3 and Applied Learning.

Katherine Forestier, director of education, British Council Hong Kong