

NEWS

EDUCATION



ELCHK Yuen Long Lutheran College has spent about HK\$160,000 on infection-control measures such as UV light disinfection machines (below) and hand sanitiser. Photos: Felix Wong

SENIOR STUDENTS HEAD BACK TO SCHOOL AFTER 4 MONTHS

Classes suspended by virus outbreak to resume on half-day basis, but cross-border pupils must wait

Chan Ho-him
thomas.chan@scmp.com

About 150,000 senior secondary students across the city will return to school from today after a four-month class suspension due to the coronavirus pandemic, but up to 2,500 of the city's pupils who live across the border will continue to study online. Students from Form Three to Five will begin half-day classes under a phased resumption schedule, followed by lower forms next month. But education officials are still discussing arrangements with Shenzhen authorities for the daily commute of cross-border pupils, including mandatory virus tests and possible direct transport between checkpoints and schools. The return to classes might also be affected by plans of student concern groups from dozens of schools to stage sit-ins and class boycotts today to protest against proposed national security and anthem laws for Hong Kong. Secretary for Education Kevin Yeung Yun-hung yesterday warned against non-cooperative

movements at schools, which he said would jeopardise benefits students enjoyed, and called on pupils to avoid illegal activities. According to a non-governmental organisation providing cross-border social services, parents living on the mainland with children who attend schools in Hong Kong are growing increasingly concerned over when they can return to the classroom. Schools in Yuen Long, Tai Po and North districts are among those with the most number of

such pupils. Lin Chun-pong, vice-chairman of one of the city's biggest school heads associations, said some schools would resort to teaching them via live-streamed lessons or video make-up classes at weekends. Torres Lee Chi-hung, service coordinator at non-governmental group International Social Service Hong Kong Branch, said some parents of cross-border students worried that their children would fall behind when local students returned to school.

"Some parents have already felt that online classes lacked effectiveness," Lee said. "Now that local students can return to campus but [cross-border pupils] will be required to stay at home, parents feel a sense of unfairness, as well as having more [pressure] in nurturing their children." Jan Kwok, whose 14-year-old son Howard Huang crosses the border for school, said the boy felt disappointed he would not be joining his friends in the classroom. "Our school has not confirmed how [cross-border] pupils will have lessons ... it is rather frustrating for [us]," Kwok said. At the ELCHK Yuen Long Lutheran Secondary School, about 20 of 800 students live over the border, including about five at the senior secondary level. Principal Hairo Wan Ho-yin said that apart from giving online lessons, teachers would also provide make-up classes for them on Saturdays. "Of course we are concerned about their learning progress," Wan said. "We will be checking on them, and if we find they have been lagging behind, relevant adjustments will be made."



SOCIAL MEDIA

WeChat account shut to curb anti-US fake news

Cissy Zhou
cissy.zhou@scmp.com

Beijing has shut a popular social media account for spreading fake news and conspiracy theories, as it moves to curb misinformation and online hate speech in an attempt to tone down a war of words with the United States. Relations between China and the US have hit new lows in recent months, as the two clash over trade, the coronavirus, and Beijing's moves to impose new security regulations on Hong Kong. Nationalist groups and opportunistic businesses have been accused of latching onto the souring ties, using social media to spread lies and push anti-US messages. "The US has been processing dead bodies from Covid-19 diseases into hamburgers," was one of the last postings on Zhidao Xuegong – literally the Scholar Forum for Ultimate Truth – which had millions of followers on WeChat before it was shut on Sunday. The account garnered more than 1.7 million page views for 17 articles in April, said Xigua Data, a firm that tracks traffic on social media accounts. In an article this

month entitled "Nearly Dead: the Sinking of the US", the author "Mr Cloud" claimed Covid-19 may have killed 1 million people in the US and bodies "were very likely being processed into frozen meat, fake beef or pork, or processed into cooked meat as hamburgers and hot dogs". "Cannibalism has existed in the US before ... and only a few dozen years ago, Americans ate blacks, Indians and Chinese," the author continued. The article had at least 100,000 readers, with 753 giving money to support the account. The account was closed for fabricating facts, stoking xenophobia and misleading the public, WeChat said. It added that seven other accounts associated with Zhidao Xuegong had also been closed. Last Friday, the Cyberspace Administration of China started an eight-month campaign to remove "illegal and false information" from the internet, though it was not clear if closing Zhidao Xuegong was part of the push. The agency did not reply to requests for comment. The ban on Zhidao Xuegong, one of a group of commercially run "self media" accounts that are

trying to profit from a rise in nationalism, could also be a sign that Beijing does not want to go too far in fanning domestic hostility towards the US, or to deepen a blame game with Washington about origins of the coronavirus. Victor Gao, vice-president of the Centre for China and Globalisation, a Beijing think tank, said the anti-US sentiment was a natural response to the increasingly hostile attitudes from Washington "in all forms and shapes imaginable". "But from the government's perspective or from the regulators' perspective, it is important to try to clamp down on some expressions of extreme positions, even though they may fall into the category of freedom of expression of the internet, because a single voice ... may actually create a lot of repercussions," he said. Washington's attempt to blame China for the spread of coronavirus has angered Beijing and fuelled public mistrust of the US. China toned down some of its rhetoric after earlier accusations, including claims by a foreign ministry spokesman that the pandemic might have been brought to Wuhan by the US Army, caused diplomatic blowback.

The central government's rigid control of media has stifled politically sensitive reporting on topics such as the pandemic, though misinformation has been allowed to spread online. This has led to a situation where serious news reports, including an interview with Wuhan doctor Ai Fen by *Portrait Magazine*, have been censored but fake stories have proliferated online. Tencent, which owns WeChat, said it had closed 2,500 accounts for "misleading content" and shut 20,000 others for fake news since the coronavirus outbreak began. Zhidao Xuegong stood out for appealing to super nationalism and xenophobia by publishing articles such as "Why learning English makes you stupid".

22,500

Number of accounts that Tencent, owner of WeChat, says it has closed in recent months for "misleading content" or fake news

TRANSPORT

Uber gears up for move as it reveals conditions of deal

Ride-hailing giant says it will relocate HQ from Singapore as long as service can operate legally

Cannix Yau
cannix.yau@scmp.com

Uber has put an offer on the table for the Hong Kong government amid investor fears over Beijing's proposed national security law – it will relocate its regional headquarters to the city if the ride-hailing firm is allowed to operate here legally. Revealing the deal yesterday, Uber Hong Kong general manager Estyn Chung promised the move would create jobs and help create an innovation and engineering hub in the city ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic. "Uber is ready to move its regional headquarters to Hong Kong... but regulatory certainty is key – it is time for the government to regulate ride-sharing so we can bring jobs and investment to Hong Kong," he said. However, Chung said the government needed to provide a regulatory framework that would make the move possible. "It's simply not possible for any business to make significant investments without regulatory certainty," he said. "We're asking the government and community leaders to sit with us and hear our vision and investment plan for Hong Kong, so together we can find a pathway to regulate ride-sharing."

Despite operating here for six years, the firm's services have been deemed illegal. It has also faced strong resistance from operators of the city's 18,163 licensed taxis. In 2019, a year after merging its Southeast Asia operations with regional rival Grab, Uber opened its Singapore office to oversee operations in nine regional markets, including Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. At the time, the office had about 165 employees. Uber has been calling for a partnership with the Hong Kong government to address the city's mobility future. However, the government has so far stood firm in cracking down on the service.



The US-based firm laid its cards on the table as it plans to relocate its Asia-Pacific headquarters out of Singapore in the next 12 months, with the pandemic hammering its business. But the offer comes at a time when Beijing's proposed national security law has stoked fears of uncertainty about Hong Kong in the international business community, with many feeling the move could hamper the city's business environment and jeopardise its role as a financial hub. However, Chung said the firm was confident of Hong Kong's economic future as Uber's business in the city posted a strong rebound, achieving 70 per cent of its pre-Covid-19 figures. "We're watching the situation closely. It's a bit early to speculate what may happen ... But we're optimistic about the future of Uber in Hong Kong."

“We’re watching the situation closely. It’s a bit early to speculate what may happen”

ESTYN CHUNG, UBER HONG KONG

with proposed increases in penalties for drivers caught providing illegal rides. Chung said the company would formally approach the government with its proposal in the next few days. Chan Man-keung, chairman of the Association of Taxi Industry Development, said if the government really wanted to open up the ride-hailing market, it needed to resolve the long-standing issue of taxi licences – priced at more than HK\$5 million each. "The government needs to be fair to taxi owners. They all invested a substantial sum to get their licence," Chan said. "If it doesn't compensate for our losses, we'll definitely oppose any Uber deal."

DIPLOMACY

African countries fearing block from G20 deal opt for China debt relief talks

Jevans Nyabiage
jevans.nyabiage@scmp.com

Some African countries are opting to negotiate debt relief individually with China and other rich nations amid concerns that poorer countries will be blocked from financial markets by the G20 deal to help them get through the economic shock of the coronavirus pandemic. The deal, to suspend debt payments until the end of the year for the world's poorest nations, was agreed in April, but private lenders – who hold US\$154.9 billion of the total long-term debts of sub-Saharan countries, estimated at US\$493.6 billion – have rejected its blanket approach to debt relief. The G20 finance ministers invited private creditors, working through the Institute of International Finance, to participate in the initiative on comparable terms, but the lenders have insisted they would negotiate with African countries on a case-by-case basis – a stand also favoured by Beijing. The G20 has no power to force them to take part in the deal. The response from eligible countries has also been lukewarm because of a clause that blocks countries requesting relief from "contracting new non-concessional debt during the suspension period, other than agreements under this initiative". Kenya has rejected the proposal, and several low-income countries have also been reluctant to take up the offer. Kenyan treasury cabinet secretary Ukur Yotani has said his country would negotiate at a bilateral level with China, France, Germany, Sweden and Japan to secure a moratorium on debt service payments for around a year,

citing fears that the G20 offer may lead to a downgrade of Kenya's credit rating and limit its access to loans at favourable terms from international finance markets. Only 22 of the 77 nations eligible for debt relief have requested it, according to the International Monetary Fund. Mali is among the countries to receive debt relief from the G20 and the Paris Club, a group of major creditor countries. Virag Forizs, emerging markets economist at London-based Capital Economics, said the modest uptake of the G20 offer "could be indicative" of the fears expressed by low-income nations about their future credit ratings and access to international private finance. "Kenya's example suggests that this was the reason for opting out of the G20 debt service suspension deal," she said. As countries shun the G20 deal, and private creditors decide to play hardball, analysts say China's role will be an important one to watch. "China's agreement to participate in the G20 deal suggests that Beijing is on board with bilateral debt relief to lower-income economies," Forizs said. However, "were China to renege on the deal or play hardball with debtors, that could be damaging from a reputational point of view". Last week, while addressing the World Health Assembly, President Xi Jinping said Beijing would work with other G20 members to implement the debt service suspension initiative for the poorest countries. "China is also ready to work with the international community to bolster support for the hardest-hit countries under the greatest strain of debt service so that they could tide over the current difficulties," he said.