

## Executive Summary

In this knowledge-based society, practising lifelong learning is important. In a survey entitled ‘Indicators of Youth Values 2014’, which was conducted by The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, around ninety (89.4%) respondents believed lifelong learning to be necessary. Around seventy (68.1%) agreed that working and studying at the same time is challenging, revealing the fact that although young people affirm the importance of lifelong learning, in reality there are some obstacles to making continuous learning happen.

In 1998, former chief executive of the Hong Kong SAR government Mr. Tung Kin Wah proposed the idea of “continuous learning, lifelong learning” in his policy address. To encourage the public to participate in continuous learning, the government also established the Continuing Education Fund in 2002. However, as of May 31, 2016, there have been only 385,463 applicants between the ages of 18 and 39 years old who have been successfully reimbursed by subsidies from this fund. These applicants account for only 17% of this age group. Although the Continuing Education Fund has been established for many years, it has not yet been widely used. There is also doubt as to whether the fund can effectively encourage the public to participate in continuous learning.

According to a survey conducted by the HKU School of Professional and Continuing Education regarding the demand for continuing education in Hong Kong, the rate of participation in continuous education has increased from 18% in 2002 to 27.8% in 2009 but started declining to 25.4% in 2013. Especially among those aged 18 to 34, the rate dropped noticeably from 58.0% in 2009 to 39.1% in 2013. This reflects how young people’s motivation to participate in continuous learning has grown weaker. This will negatively impact manpower development as well as young people’s competitiveness. It is worthwhile to look into the reasons behind this decrease in young people’s interest in continuous learning.

This study aims to investigate the popularization of continuous learning in Hong Kong and young people’s views on continuous learning, including learning purpose, concerns, and obstacles, as well as to provide suggestions to encourage greater participation in continuous learning among young people.

## Key Findings

- 1. In general, respondents believed that continuous learning is necessary. However, only one-third (32.3%) of respondents stated that they had participated in continuous learning within the past five years. Additionally, 46.0% of respondents had not yet decided on their plans for continuous learning.**

The survey revealed that, in general, respondents agreed that continuous learning is necessary. When the perceived importance of continuous learning was measured on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest score, the average score of respondents was 7.03. The average score for those aged 18 to 29 years was 7.43, which is much higher than it is for those aged 30 to 39 years (whose average score was 6.65). This reflects the fact that younger respondents showed greater affirmation of the importance of continuous learning.

The study showed that, among 527 respondents aged 18 to 39 years, only around one-third (32.3%) revealed that they had participated in continuous learning within the past five years, a finding showing that young people are not very active in continuous learning. Younger respondents tend to participate in continuous learning more often. On the other hand, 46% of respondents had not yet decided on their plans for continuous learning.

- 2. Respondents believed that adding value and upgrading skills, personal interest and increased opportunities for promotions are the most crucial factors to consider when encouraging continuous learning.**

The survey showed that respondents generally believed that adding value and upgrading skills (37.0%), personal interest (34.7%) and increased opportunities for promotions (33.0%) are the most crucial factors to consider when encouraging continuous learning.

In the case interviews, respondents also revealed that assistance in their career development and personal interest are the driving forces for

participating in continuous learning. Some respondents pointed out that obtaining higher levels of education could facilitate their career promotion. Some expected that they could obtain professional qualifications as well as the chance to change the nature of their jobs after participating in professional courses. Some also revealed their belief that continuous learning should start from personal interest, while enriching their knowledge and upgrading their skills are important in the meanwhile.

**3. A majority of respondents did not understand the qualification framework well. Their confidence in those courses offered under the qualification framework was also found to be only fair.**

The survey showed that most of the respondents did not understand the qualification framework well. When their understanding of it was measured on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest score, the average score of respondents was 4.50. The lower their level of education, the less understanding the respondents had regarding the qualification framework. Among respondents with a lower secondary level of education, the average score was only 3.01, which is much lower than that of respondents who are degree holders (the average score among this group was 5.37). The survey also found that respondents have only a fair level of confidence in those courses listed under the qualification framework. When their confidence in these courses was measured on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest score, the average score of respondents was 5.61.

**4. Respondents believed that working and learning at the same time is difficult. Around half revealed that they are only willing to spend less than 10 hours per month on continuous learning.**

The survey showed that most of the respondents believe that expensive tuition fees (19.5%), scheduling work and learning (18.0%) and having no urgency to study (12.5%) are the major challenges to participate in continuous learning.

In the case interviews, respondents believed that working and learning at

the same time is difficult. When the reported difficulty of this was measured on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest score, the average score of respondents was 6.78. This showed that striking a balance between work and study is challenging. Moreover, 35.9% of respondents revealed that they are only willing to spend 6 to 10 hours on continuous learning per month (less than two hours per week). Of the respondents, 14.1% spend only 0 to 5 hours on continuous learning per month. These findings showed that it is difficult for young people to find enough time for continuous learning.

**5. Respondents believed that their current employers provide insufficient support for employees to participate in continuous learning.**

This study showed that respondents generally thought that current employers do not provide enough support for employees' continuous learning. When belief about whether current employers provided enough support for employees' continuous learning was measured on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest score, the average score of respondents was 4.52. In some case interviews, some young people pointed out that their employers often provide them flexible time off on days when they have courses but seldom subsidize their tuition fees. Moreover, some revealed that if there is a shortage of labour, their employers seldom allow them to leave early on days when they have courses; this is especially the case in service sectors. Young people expect employers to work more on human resource allocation and on subsidizing tuition fees in order to encourage employees' continuous learning.

**6. Over sixty of the respondents have never before applied for subsidies from the Continuing Education Fund. Around half revealed that the exclusion in the subsidized list of the particular courses they were taking was the main reason they had not applied for subsidies from the Fund.**

This study showed that of the 168 respondents who have participated in

continuous learning in the past five years, over sixty (61.0%) have not applied for subsidies from the Continuing Education Fund. In terms of the reasons behind this, 48.5% of respondents revealed that the exclusion of the courses they were taking from the subsidized list was the main reason for not applying to the fund. Other reasons given include respondents having no need to apply (13.6%) and applying being troublesome (12.6%).

In general, over sixty of the respondents did not know that there is a four-year limit for using the Continuing Education Fund (62.6%), showing the need to strengthen promotion about the fund among the public. On the other hand, a majority of respondents suggested that the subsidized amount be in the range of \$20,001 to \$25,000 (23.0%). Some also suggested the amount be in the range of \$15,001 and \$20,000 (15.2%). The conclusion of these findings is that there is much room for improvement regarding the subsidized amount offered by the fund.

## Main Discussion

This study concluded the following discussion after integrating the data from the phone survey, case interviews and expert and scholar interviews.

- 1. The participation rate of young people in continuous learning is declining. Although young people affirm the importance of continuous learning, in reality their engagement with it is still weak due to different factors.**

To keep up with knowledge-based development and the labour demand, continuous learning has become an essential element of society. However, according to the survey conducted by the HKU School of Professional and Continuing Education regarding the demand for continuing education in Hong Kong, the rate of participation in continuous education has dropped dramatically from 58.0% in 2009 to 39.1% in 2013 among people aged 18 to 34 years. This decline reflects how young people's motivations to participate in continuous learning have grown weaker.

This study shows that although young people affirm the importance of continuous learning, their participation in it is still weak due to many

concerns. To help young people overcome these obstacles, society must encourage them to actively participate in continuous learning and to achieve life-long learning.

**2. Young people have many concerns when it comes to continuous learning, including a lack of money, difficulty scheduling work and study time and family factors.**

When young people consider continuous learning, there are often obstacles and challenges that prevent them from participating in it. Money, work and family are the major concerns that prevent them from taking part in continuous learning. Younger adults do not have stable incomes. The expensive tuition fees are an increased economic burden for those who participate in continuous learning. Moreover, those who have children also need to make their families their first priority.

A recent survey conducted by the United Bank of Switzerland ranked the number of working hours of Hong Kong citizens, averaging 52 hours per week, to be the highest in the world. Although young people intend to continue learning, they are often bound by work. Technology is developing quickly these days, and educational institutions could make use of technology to provide courses with flexible schedules. Online e-learning is an important area for development and could make learning more convenient for those who need to work, allowing them to arrange their study time in a flexible way.

**3. The reputations and quality of educational institutions these days varies. People also have doubts about the quality of those courses included under the qualification framework, a fact that may negatively affect young people's intentions to continue learning.**

In recent years, different educational institutions and non-governmental organizations organize a wide variety of courses to meet market demand. However, due to the lack of regular supervision and evaluation of these courses, the teaching quality and tuition fees vary among these educational institutions, a fact that may decrease young people's intentions to continue

learning.

There should be close monitoring and supervision of courses to ensure that teaching quality meets the proper standards. Moreover, educational institutions should regularly analyse the employment conditions of those who have completed professional courses in order to further improve the contents of their courses. Doing this would help these institutions gain the public's confidence that taking those courses is worthwhile.

- 4. There is much room for improvement in the operation of the Continuing Education Fund, including in its promotional work, the subsidized amount offered and in the range of subsidized course sectors available; improvement in these areas will encourage young people to continue learning.**

The Continuing Education Fund provides a certain amount of economic support and helps lessen the economic burden of education on some young people, encouraging them to continue learning. Although young people affirm the importance of continuous learning, they have not yet learned how to fully utilize the subsidies offered by the fund. Encouraging the public to continue learning may not be effectively serving the functions of the fund. Some young people do not even know the time limit for using the Continuing Education Fund. This reflects the fact that there is a lack of promotional information available about this fund. Moreover, the range of subsidized course sectors is limited and needs to be widened. Also, the subsidized amount offered needs to be adjusted accordingly in order to help those young people who need economic assistance for continuous learning.

- 5. The public's understanding of the qualification framework is not sufficient these days. Some members of the public do not even have a fundamental knowledge of it. There is a need to strengthen promotional work about the qualification framework and to increase its global recognition.**

Although the qualification framework has been established for over ten years, it has not been well known among the public. In general, respondents showed insufficient understanding of the qualification framework. Even

though they had heard its name before, they did not know its underlying contents and purposes. The popularization of the qualification framework is not enough, and there is a need to strengthen the work of promoting it. Moreover, global recognition of the qualification framework also needs to be gained in order to increase public confidence in those courses under it. Some young people may continue learning in order to obtain certain qualification levels. Therefore, increasing promotional work for and obtaining global recognition of the qualification framework could effectively encourage more young people to participate in continuous learning.

## Recommendations

This study proposes the following recommendations for the government, employers and educational institutions:

### 1. Government

**This research concluded that both young people and scholars believe that there is a need to optimize the operation of the Continuing Education Fund, including the subsidized amount offered, the range of subsidized course sectors available and the promotional work:**

**a. Increasing the subsidized amount**

**Suggest to the government that the subsidy for continuous learning provided by the Continuing Education Fund be doubled to \$20,000 in order to show the government's determination to encourage continuous learning. This could also help lessen the economic burden for some young people in need.**

**b. Widening the range of subsidized course sectors**

**Suggest to the government that the range of subsidized course sectors be widened. This could encourage the public to actively apply for subsidies from the Continuing Education Fund.**

**c. Strengthening the promotional work**

**Suggest to the government that promotional work be strengthened in order to encourage the public to continue learning as well as to**



**achieve lifelong learning.**

## **2. Employers**

**Employers should have an open-minded vision and support employees' participation in continuous learning, which helps them enrich their knowledge and increases their productivity. Moreover, a tax reduction scheme could be launched to encourage employers to support employees' continuous learning.**

## **3. Educational institutions**

- a. Open courses with more flexible timetables, including daytime and evening sections, so as make continuous learning more convenient for young people with non-daytime working hours or shift work.**
- b. Open online courses for young people with unstable working hours. Moreover, close supervisions and evaluations are required in order to gain the public's confidence and recognition.**