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從學校走向工作研究  
The Transition from School to Work

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# **The Transition from School to Work**

## **Summary Report**

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The transition from school to work is a critical milestone in the life of young people and plays a crucial role in how their future careers develop. “From school to work” can be understood as a transition in which a young person having completed a certain educational level embarks on a work-life. According to some local scholars, this transition is a complicated process which not only involves a change of identity from a “learner” to a “worker”, but also a transition from “adolescence” to “adulthood” where one’s life planning is at stake.

In this study, we focus on three turning points in the lives of young people - as they completed “Form 3”, “Form 5” and “Bachelor’s Degree” qualifications respectively. Since the government implemented the 9-year compulsory education policy, “Form 3” has become the first turning point for young people in Hong Kong. Although the current system enables most Form 3 students to continue their studies through various means, there are still a small number of school leavers who need to move to the world of employment. Sources from the Education Bureau, as of October 2004, show that 325 Form 3 students left school for employment, while another 639 neither continued to study, nor started to work in the academic year 2003 / 04. How this group of “low-qualified” and “low-skilled” young people coped with the transition from being at school to going out to work has become a societal concern.

Every year, owing to the limited places in Form 6, many Form 5 graduates who do not score well in the HKCEE are unable to continue their studies. Sources from the Education Bureau, as of October 2004, showed that 6,404 students out of those who had completed Form 5 in the year 2003 / 04 started out to seek full-time jobs. Moreover, 2,607 Form 5 graduates had neither jobs nor school places when they left school. Consequently, this group of young people have very limited prospects in finding jobs especially in the current knowledge-based economy.

From the statistics compiled for those who completed their secondary education in 2004, 3,246 among the Form 3 and Form 5 school leavers were neither working nor studying at the beginning of the new academic year. While the number has been accruing year by year, the above figure does not represent the true picture.

According to statistics provided by the Census and Statistics Department, for the period of August to October 2004, 75,500 young people were neither engaged in productive activities nor were they in schools. Among these “non-engaged youth”, 32,200 were aged between 15 and 19 and 43,300 were aged between 20 and 24. While the figure is lower than that of the past few years, it still deserves our attention.

Each year, among the approximately 15,000 university graduates who receive subsidies from the University Grants Committee to complete their full-time first university degrees, the majority entered the job market to develop a career. As degree-holders, they are in a much better position when seeking employment than those who have only completed Form 3 or Form 5.

Are there any differences among young people with varied educational backgrounds in their path of transition? What are the expectations of young people regarding work? What are the difficulties or obstacles encountered in the transition from school to work? How can one ensure a smooth transition? These key questions need further investigation.

This Study aims at exploring the experiences and the needs of the three groups of young people aged between 15 and 24 who have completed Form 3, Form 5 and university education respectively, as they face the transition from school to work. Through an integrated research by means of a telephone survey, case studies and group discussions with targeted young people and interviews with experts and scholars, we hope to present the current situations with recommendations for the best way to proceed forward.

The telephone survey was conducted in a 14-day period from 28th February to 17th March, 2006. By random sampling, 768 eligible young people aged between 15 and 24 were successfully polled, yielding a response rate of 79.5%, with a standard error of  $\pm 1.8\%$ . Among them, 607 were students, 130 were employed and 31 were either unemployed or jobseekers. Because of the scarcity of samples, the result for this group, in which there are either unemployed or jobseekers will not be discussed in this chapter.

To have an in-depth understanding of the transition from school to work, we have successfully conducted case studies on 10 young people during March 2006. Among the 3 females and 7 males aged between 17 and 22 who have either completed Form 3, Form 5 or university education, half were employed and half were

seeking employment. All 10 interviewees had left school for periods ranging from one and a half year to two years.

Meanwhile, 5 focus group discussions were conducted. The 28 participants, comprising 21 males and 7 females aged between 16 and 24, had attained Form 3, Form 5 or a University degree level of education.

We also interviewed 11 experts and scholars during March 2006 for their views on the ways to facilitate the transition from school to work for young people. Those interviewed included academicians, human resources consultants, members of employers' associations, entrepreneurs, secondary school teachers, social workers and government officials.

## Discussion

- 1. 60% and 45% of youth interviewees who were either studying or working respectively, believed having a bachelor's degree was the minimum qualification required for getting an ideal job. Such a high expectation of education among the interviewees deserves attention.**

What is the minimum qualification for getting an ideal job? Our survey showed that 59.1% and 45.4% of youth interviewees, who were either studying or working respectively, believed having a "bachelor's degree" was the minimum qualification for getting an ideal job.

In a knowledge-based economy, those who obtained high education and skills were the assets of developed society. Therefore, having a bachelor's degree became the basic element for enhancing one's competitiveness.

Although the number of places for all first year bachelors programmes subsidized by the University Grants Committee has increased from 8.0% in the 1980's to the current 18.0%, it is still inadequate to meet with the increasing demand for higher education. To increase participation in higher education and to enhance the quality of tertiary education, the 2001 Policy Address emphasized its aim was to enable 60.0% of eligible students to take part in tertiary education in ten years. The

current situation has already exceeded this previous benchmark. To a certain extent, this policy might have met the demand of those young aspirants for higher education. Hence the results of this study show that the majority of young people wish to obtain a “bachelor’s degree” for riding the trend of economic development and enhancing personal growth. In the long run, we still need to tackle a shortage of university places.

**2. According to the case studies, those who were being employed with “Form 3” qualification were not prepared for the transition from school to the work force. Because of their limited educational level, they had relatively low expectations from their jobs.**

The Form 3 school leavers who took part in case studies and group discussions left school as they had found themselves unable to cope academically after completing Form 3. In order not to waste time and effort they decided not to advance to Form 4. They claimed that they had not made any move to seek employment until several months after leaving school, seeking solace from the Internet and watching television instead. This highlights that these young people lacked a sense of direction, as well as the psychological capacity to face the employment market. They tended to value instant pleasure and did not seem to possess a proper attitude towards work as they hopped in and out of the job market. On the other hand, having been aware of their own limited qualifications and skills, these young people expected little by way of employment and usually found jobs through street advertisements and personal referrals.

Our telephone survey shows that those who have completed Form 3 are predominantly engaged in the manufacturing industry (26.7%), the handicraft and related industry (26.7%), and being in permanent or short-term jobs (26.7%). Also, 26.7% of them had a monthly income that ranged between \$4,001 and \$5,000.

In addition, 46.7% of the Form 3 school leavers who are now working believed that “Form 5” education was the minimum requirement for getting an ideal job. 33.3% of them hoped to attain a “technical” level of expertise and 69.3% were confident of finding an ideal job. As to whether they had plans for career development, 60.0% of them had no idea, with 55.6% having a mindset of “not thinking ahead and just playing it by ear”.

When asked to assess their own awareness of the job market, their interviewing skills, and their ability to prepare application letters and resumes, the interviewees gave the average score of 5.12, 5.06 and 4.64 respectively, with a failed score for the latter item.

The combined results of the case studies and telephone survey showed that the Form 3 school leavers were generally low academic achievers without basic work skills and proper work attitudes. It is thus imperative to help this marginalized group of young people overcome their plight and to make a decent living.

**3. The working interviewees with a Form 5 qualification had certain expectations from their jobs; hence they seemed to feel powerless in realizing their goals. With the human resources market tilting towards the highly educated, this group is bound to face difficulties in the labour market.**

Our survey showed that interviewees with a Form 5 educational qualification who were working had certain expectation from their jobs; hence they seemed to feel powerless in realizing their goals. Career-goals were aspired, more in the “Form 5” group. 29.2% wanted to become “managerial” staff and 35.4% believed that in order to obtain an ideal job, one must have at least a “bachelor’s degree”. Half of them (52.3%) had little confidence in their ability to get an ideal job. 76.9% of them had not prepared themselves for career development as they moved into the employment world. Among them, 48.0% said they had “no idea as to how to get prepared”.

When asked to assess their own awareness of the job market, their interviewing skills, and ability in preparing application letters and resumes, on a scale from 1 to 10, the interviewees gave the average score of 5.08, 4.87 and 4.82 respectively, with the last two items failing to meet the passing score.

On an average, it took the interviewees nine weeks after leaving school to land their first job; they had expected a starting salary of \$6,763 while the actual figure was \$5,806. Many of them (35.4%) had no intention to settle down in their first job.

These Form 5 graduates were predominately in the wholesale and retail industry (18.5%), clerical staff (43.1%) or were contract staff (46.2%). An equal percentage of them (16.9%) had a monthly salary ranging \$6,001 to \$7,000, and \$7,001 to

\$8,000 respectively. According to the estimation of the Report on Manpower Projection to 2007 (HKSAR, 2003), the number of clerical-level employees who have either obtained a Form 7, associated degree or bachelor's degree education has increased by 2.8%, 3.1% and 3.6% respectively, while the number of clerical jobs requiring only Form 5 qualification has decreased by 9.0%. Therefore, those who left school after completing Form 5 will face a shrinking number of jobs available to them.

The "Form 5" group shared their view in the group discussion that in the current competitive job market, most job applicants were equipped with lots of qualification certificates or high levels education; thus young people like them with limited education and work experience did not appeal to employers who had numerous choices. This situation makes it hard for them to find a job.

Generally speaking, these "Form 5" graduates had expectations about their careers but they lacked a sense of preparation to achieve their goals. They gave themselves failed scores (less than 5) on job-seeking skills such as interviewing and writing application letters. In our knowledge-based economy and amid a highly competitive human resource market, it is likely that this group of moderately educated young people may find that they face difficulties in the job market.

**4. Those who have obtained a university degree level of education were better prepared to enter the job market as compared with the two other groups. They had a higher competitive edge in today's knowledge-based economy.**

Our study shows that employees with varying levels of qualifications are in different situations at work. Many degree holders were engaged as auxiliary-professionals (45.8%) and contract employees (70.8%). An equal percentage of them (31.8%) had a monthly salary ranging \$9,001 to \$10,000 and \$10,001 to \$15,000 respectively.

70.8% of the interviewees believed that a "bachelor's degree" was the minimum requirement for finding an ideal job. 62.5% aspired to attain a "managerial" level job, 54.2% wanted to work for multinational companies and most of them (83.3%) believed they could find an ideal job.

They were also more than prepared to kick-start their work-life - 62.5% had prepared for career development and of them, 53.3% said they would “keep abreast with the latest information in the job market”.

When asked to rate their own awareness of the job market, their interviewing skills, and ability in preparing application letters and resumes, this group gave the average score of 6.12, 5.98 and 6.23 respectively – all surpassed the median score.

The degree-holders in our case studies and discussion groups believed that a university education gave them an advantage in finding jobs. Despite lacking a clear prospect, they more or less had a brief outlook of their career development. Therefore, they tended to consider personal interests and suitability as criteria for finding jobs.

Those degree-holders were better informed in the current job market and better equipped in job seeking skills. With higher qualification and better preparation in entering job market, they were in an advantageous position in the present knowledge-based economy.

**5. According to our survey, the three challenges facing those who left school and started work were “interpersonal relationships”, “demands from boss” and “work requirements”. Further, a lack of direction was the greatest problem facing those in our case studies and group discussions as they started their career. It is thus advisable to take this into account when considering the content of career training.**

As young people finished schooling and entered the work-life, the first three challenges facing them were “interpersonal relationships” (48.5%), “demands from boss” (31.5%) and “work requirements” (21.5%).

Those who had a “Form 3” qualification felt that the greatest challenge for them was “interpersonal relationships” (60.0%), followed by “demands from boss” (46.7%) and “work requirements” (33.3%). On the other hand, those who took part in our case studies and group discussions had difficulty in filling a job application, as well as adapting to long hours of work.

*"I don't know how to find a job or how to attend interviews or write application letters."*

*"I feel young people who had little education and skills like us work long hours – 10 hours daily on average. We work all day long with low pay and little time to relax."*

Participants with a "Form 5" qualification had most difficulties in "interpersonal relationships" (47.7%), followed by "demands from boss" (32.3%) and "work requirements" (20.2%); the problem that bothered them the most was "not knowing their interests in career development" and "lacking direction in seeking jobs". Some of them had difficulties adapting to the fast pace of work-life, the excessive hours and coping with interpersonal relationships.

*"I was blind as I wandered around the job market. I didn't know what I was interested in and which job suited me."*

*"I was totally lost as I went to work the first day. There was so little time and so much work...I worked long hours every day and needed to work overtime until 10 or 11 o'clock."*

The participants who had a "bachelor's degree" found it most difficult in "mastering the knowledge and skills required of the job" (41.7%), followed by "interpersonal relationships" (37.5%) and "adapting to disciplines such as punctuality" (29.2%). They also believed that they had difficulties in recognizing the direction of their career development. Besides, some felt pressurized by their job requirements, irregular work hours and interpersonal relationships.

*"I was still exploring which direction I should head in when looking for my first job."*

*"Maybe I was unsure about which direction I should head in. I wanted to try everything and switched once the job was unsuitable. I had no idea where I should head."*

*“I was unhappy in the first few days of work. My colleagues seemed not that nice. There were so many things I didn’t know but the boss expected me to know them all... The colleagues were not nice and I had no idea how to deal with them.”*

The combined results of our study showed that regardless which group one belonged, “Form 3”, “Form 5” or “degree-holder”, young people who left school and entered work faced difficulties in varying aspects and degrees. Most of them had problems in handling “interpersonal relationships”, “work requirements”, “work disciplines” and identifying a direction for career development. These areas of concern may provide a reference when considering related career training programmes.

## **6. Parents play a critical role in an adolescent’s smooth transition from school to work.**

68.4% of “Form 3” students and 59.3% of the “Form 5” students who responded in our telephone survey said that they would consult their parents should they have questions in their work-life. Similarly, 26.7% of the “Form 3” school leavers and 41.5% of “Form 5” school leavers had parental advice in their job-seeking process. It shows that parents have certain influence on young people and in the work they choose.

Our case studies and group discussions reveal that parental support helps build up confidence and encourages young people to talk to their parents about their career plans.

On the other hand, as a scholar pointed out, young people and their parents may have different views about careers. Facing a choice between their children continuing studies or starting work, parents usually focus on the former option and ignore their children’s personal desire to join the work force.

According to an interview with a secondary teacher, schools might have pressure from parents when implementing career training. This happens because most parents focus on their children’s studies and when they find schools emphasizing too much on career training, they get the impression that their children are doing badly at school. Therefore, when their children consult them in matters concerning their careers it is arguable whether parents can have a balanced view or

merely give advice out of their academic concern that will have a direct influence over young peoples' choices. In other words, parental advice hinders smooth transition as much as it helps the process. Thus it is a matter worth exploring as to how we can increase parental awareness and knowledge on matters pertaining to career development so that they can play a proper role in advising their children.

**7. Less than 20% of secondary student respondents in our telephone survey had “Career Life Planning” implemented in their schools; while a scholar believed that schools should expand the planning which helps young people realize their life goals and career plans. According to the results of our case studies, group discussions and interviews with experts and scholars, most secondary schools tended to emphasize on academic studies when providing career advice to students. Therefore, there was room for further development regarding career guidance services at secondary schools.**

To understand the situations of career guidance services and related schemes currently provided at schools, we sought opinions from our survey correspondents on seven types of services including “interviewing skills”, “application-letter writing skills”, “introduction on individual professions”, “career life planning”, “organizing visits on various professions and work organizations”, “exploring students’ strengths and weaknesses” and “exploring students’ own career preferences”.

Of the 382 secondary students surveyed, over a range of 20% to 70% had the seven items of services respectively provided in their schools: “career life planning” (17.3%), “organizing visits to various professions and work organizations” (34.8%), “interviewing skills” (36.4%), “application-letter writing skills” (40.8%), “introduction to individual professions” (46.9%), “exploring students’ own career preferences” (51.3%) and “exploring students’ strengths and weaknesses” (70.2%) – among which the attention on “career life planning” was relatively little. According to a scholar, schools should play more attention to “career life planning” as its comprehensive nature helps young people recognize their life goals and plan ahead for their future.

On the other hand, the “Form 5” group in our case studies and group discussions had schools focusing on students’ academic studies with little advice on their future work-life. As students, these interviewees felt that “work” was something far away

from them. Those who had received career advice at schools, found the information and work- life sharing fairly useful.

*“It might not be useful for students to listen to career advice at school too soon. For secondary students, “work” is such a remote concept and many of them just don’t bother.”*

*“My school did not give us any advice on finding jobs; instead, it emphasized on which university we should choose, or which subject we should take.”*

*“When my school arranged talks on what a Form 5 graduate could do, it told us the alternative routes by which we could further our studies but not how we could find a job.”*

In our experts / scholars interviews, a secondary teacher said that career guidance services currently provided by schools emphasized on academic studies at the expense of information related to work. It appears that “work” remains a remote concept for schools, teachers and students alike and career education is far from being recognized in schools.

*“Most schools focus on advising students on academic choices...they pay attention only on how students could further their studies...Career education remains at the level of information release that the school keeps passing on to us. My point is career education has yet to take root in schools.”*

The results show that there is room for developing career education in schools. Schools play an indispensable role in enabling students to make a smooth transition from school to work.

**8. There is an upward trend of students choosing to work in Mainland China. It shows that more young people in Hong Kong have realized that the Mainland provides an opportunity for their career development.**

Our telephone survey showed that of the 768 correspondents aged between 15 and 24, 33.2% expressed interest to work in the Mainland. When we conducted a

similar survey in 2003, 15.1% of the 669 correspondents aged between 15 and 24 had indicated the same preference. The increased figure illustrates that more young people are considering the Mainland as a possible place for developing a career. Therefore, we may need to deal with an increasing demand for information for career opportunities for young people in the Mainland.

Our statistics further reveal that the more educated the students, the more interested they were in seeking job opportunities in the Mainland: “Form 3 students” (21.1%), “Form 5 students” (31.7%) and “degree-holder students” (46.6%).

Similar results were also revealed in the working interviewees. 20.0% in the “Form 3” working group, 23.1% in the “Form 5” working group and 29.2% in the “degree-holder” working group respectively said that they would consider seeking job opportunities in the Mainland.

The results show that university students or degree-holders tend to have more interest in working in the Mainland. In light of the Mainland’s liberalized job market and its policy to lure talent, those who are highly educated and qualified will have a competitive edge in the Mainland.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Current measures meet the needs**

**This study shows that young people have high expectation about education in our knowledge-based economy. Their transition from school to work-life may not be a one-off event, for they may further their studies some time after they leave school as they continue to study and work. Therefore, continued education opportunities and related facilitating measures are very important in helping young people enhance their qualifications as they alternate between study and work. We advise the government to keep up with the current measures in building up appropriate qualification assurance mechanisms that could facilitate students to further their studies.**

## **2. Deal with inadequate university places**

**There is a great demand for university places. At present, first year university places at tertiary institutions currently subsidized by the University Grants Committee only benefits 18% of those aged between 17 and 20. New measures such as associated degree programmes and vocational training are providing more local opportunities for continued education. The participation rate of young people aged between 17 and 20 receiving local tertiary education has increased from 30% in the academic year 2000 / 01 to the current 60%. This allows for a greater number of young people to be better educated prior to moving on to the workforce. Thus, because of the developmental needs of our society and the strong demand for higher education, we should pay heed to the current lack of adequate university places.**

## **3. Keep up with the current assisting measures**

**Although Form 3 school leavers are a minority, their low qualifications and skills hinder their participation in the job market; Form 5 graduates are in no better position. Under the current manpower projection of the Hong Kong SAR Government, in future, the number of young job seekers having “Form 5” or “Form 3” education or below will exceed that of the jobs available to them. These young people will have fewer choices when it comes to the work available to them. From our case studies and group discussions, young people were positive about the Labour Department’s Youth Pre-employment Training Programme and the Youth Work Experience Training Scheme. They found that these two schemes helped them to be better prepared for entering work-life as well as equipping them with valuable work experience. Therefore, we recommend that the government continues implementing the related schemes and not halt its efforts.**

#### **4. Enhance support for career advice**

**The results show that young people, in general, lack a sense of direction in their career development, which is related with the way they understand their life goals and career plans. With respect to preparing students to enter the employment market, secondary schools generally focus on teaching the skills of undertaking interviews and letter-writing and providing information about individual professions. There is little mention of concrete career planning. Therefore, we recommend that the “Career Life Planning” concept should be added to the new “Career Oriented Curriculum” in secondary schools; and there should be collaboration between schools and civic organizations in helping students get a grasp of Career Life Planning.**

#### **5. Strengthen parental education services**

**It appears that many young people rely on parental advice in their decisions of career development. Hence, according to our teacher interviewee, parents focus too much on their children’s academic achievements. We therefore advise that appropriate assistance such as training courses be given to parents so that they can better understand their children’ abilities and personal talents and have a more balanced view for their career plans.**

#### **6. Foster cooperation between schools and enterprises**

**Our interviews show that without affecting daily operations, the business sector is willing to fulfill its corporate responsibilities and collaborate with schools in advising students about positive work attitudes and imparting information about various professions. Therefore, we suggest that commercial enterprises and schools work more closely together so as to keep students informed of work-related information and help them realize their personal interests at an early stage.**

## **7. Keep young people informed**

**Our study shows that 33.2% of those aged between 15 and 24 are considering work in the Mainland, two times than that of the 15.1% found in our 2003 survey. Although “going north” provides a new opportunity for young job seekers in Hong Kong, it is the well-qualified professionals that are in demand. In our opinions, the proposed new “Career Oriented Curriculum” currently under public consultation should include teaching students the different political, social, economic, cultural and legal systems in the Mainland and also the psychological preparation required of young job seekers. On the other hand, the government should cooperate with the business sector and civic organizations in regularly hosting job exhibitions for the Mainland so that interested young aspirants can keep up-to-date with the latest career news. Moreover, schools, civic organizations and the business sector may work together to run more exchange programmes and field trips so that Hong Kong students can get a better understanding of various business entities and corporations in the Mainland.**