

**低學歷、低技能、低收入青少年的困境與出路**

The Challenges and Difficulties Faced by Young People in Hong Kong with  
Low Educational Attainments, Low Levels of Skill and Low Incomes

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## **Summary Report**

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According to the Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong experienced a downward trend in the unemployment rate when figures went down to 4.2% in the first quarter of 2007 – with the number of unemployed dropping down from 309,100 in mid 2003 to 152,500 in early 2007. While many of the former unemployed have been re-absorbed by the labour market, the unemployment rates for those aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 remain relatively high at 16.2% and 5.7%, 3.9 times and 1.35 times higher than the overall unemployment rate respectively.

As the world's economy continues to globalize and be knowledge-based, the labour market has an ever-increasing thirst for experienced candidates who are highly educated and well trained. Since the economic rebound, Hong Kong's job market has been as competitive as ever, resulting in a yawning gap between the rich and the poor. For those young people who are neither well educated nor adequately trained, not only do they not benefit from an improved economy, but they also find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of low income, on-the-job poverty and even intergenerational poverty.

To enhance young peoples' vocational skills and job opportunities, governmental departments such as the Education Bureau, Labour Department and Social Welfare Department have since the 1990's offered a number of youth vocational training schemes. Over the years, these initiatives have been commended to be successful in helping young people acquire various working skills. Nevertheless, there remain a certain number of low-skilled and less educated young people who are left behind in the job market or have been in and out of the training programmes. This study aims to find out the barriers experienced by those young people in the labour market as well as the reasons behind their poverty and suggest ways to get them out of their present predicaments.

In this study, "Low Educational Attainments" refers to those who have a minimum educational attainment of Form 3 or below, as well as those who have completed Form 5 but scored zero in the HKCEE. "Low Levels of Skill" refers to

those who have no recognized professional or vocational qualifications, and those who were engaged in non-skilled occupations such as fast-food servers, those working as couriers, delivery or packing workers. "Low Income" means those whose monthly incomes were below half of the median salary, which according to a consolidated household survey conducted in the fourth quarter of 2006, referred to those who earned less than \$5,000 a month – since the average median salary for Hong Kong citizens during that period was \$10,000. On the other hand, "Young People" means a target group of those aged between 15 and 24. Taking into account relevant statistics, we have a conservative estimate that there are at least 30,000 such young people in Hong Kong who can be described as less educated, low skilled and poorly paid.

In order to understand and analyze the situations of those who are not well educated, less skilled and poorly paid ( or the "three low" ) and to make recommendations to the relevant authorities, we gathered data through case studies with young people and interviews with experts. We have also conducted random telephone surveys to get a glimpse of how those 15 year olds or even those older see the difficulties facing this particular group of young people.

The case studies were conducted during the period 20th April to 16th May, 2007. We successfully interviewed 20 young people comprising 9 females and 11 males aged between 16 and 24. Among them, 11 were employed while 9 were looking for jobs or unemployed.

In our interviews conducted during April to May 2007, nine experts including academics, legislators and representatives from employers associations, social workers and government officials shared their views on how to help young people who are trapped in the vicious cycle of insufficient educational levels, poor skills and low incomes.

In order to get an idea of how other citizens perceived the problem, we conducted random telephone surveys between 6:00 and 10:15 p.m. from the 14th to the 18th of May, 2007. 547 Hong Kong citizens aged 15 or above were selected by random sampling and were successfully polled by interviewers over the phone. The response rate was 63.0%, with a standard error within  $\pm 2.1\%$ .

## Discussion

### **1. Beware of the predicaments of the “three low” young people and the possible vicious cycle that results.**

According to the Education Bureau’s statistics for the three academic years during 2002/03 to 2004/05, a majority of Form 3 students continued their studies (with percentages 97.9%, 98.4% and 98.1% respectively). Only a small number of students decided to be engaged in full-time employment, part-time employment or were neither working nor studying (2.1%, 1.6% and 1.9% respectively). To make a rough estimate, every year, about 1,000 Form 3 school leavers do not make it to Form 4.

According to figures for the past three academic years (03/04, 04/05, 05/06), there were respectively 1,035, 989 and 1,100 junior secondary school leavers. Although about 60% of them later resumed studies in the same academic year with the help of trans-professionals, the remaining 40% would most likely enter the employment market.

According to the 2006 HKCEE results released by the Examinations and Assessment Authority, among the 68,884 first-time full-time candidates, 6,636 were zero scorers (9.6%), slightly more than the 6,565 (9.5%) in 2005. These figures and proportions fared slightly better than before the educational reforms (in 1999, 8,291 first-time full-time candidates scored zero, comprising 12.4%). However, there is no room for complacency.

With reference to the above data, each year there are altogether 7,000 plus poorly educated young people – about 1,000 junior secondary school leavers and 6,000 zero HKCEE scorers who move on from their school life and enter the competitive job market.

According to the Census and Statistics Department, there were 50,600 “non-engaged youth” aged between 15 and 24 during the period December 2006 to February 2007 – who were neither working nor studying. Among them, 10,600 had received Form 3 education or below. During the same period, about 91,000 young employees aged between 15 and 24 received a monthly income below \$5,000, with 19,600 having Form 3 education or less.

To give a conservative estimate in light of the above statistics, there are more than 30,000 “three low” young people aged between 15 and 24. They are likely to languish along the brink of poverty under the accelerating wheel of a knowledge-based economy. How is it possible to help those resources-stripped young people get out of the plight they are in, away from the vicious poverty cycle and minimize the associated social costs? This is a hot-button issue.

**2. There is no agreed definition of “three low” young people; most people tend to relate to them as those who have an educational attainment of below Form 3, without specific skills and with monthly incomes below \$5,000.**

There is no social consensus on what constitutes “three low”. Nevertheless, from the data we gathered through case studies, interviews and telephone surveys, more people tend to relate to them as those with an educational attainment of Form 3 and below, with a lack of specific skills and a monthly income of less than \$5,000.

In the case studies conducted, most of the 20 correspondents aged between 16 and 24 regarded “education below Form 3”, “a lack of specific skills” and “a monthly income below \$4,000” to signify “three low”.

Among the experts interviewed, most of them regarded Form 3 school leavers or the zero scorers in HKCEE as a poorly educated group; being “low skilled” meant having no specific skills and being in the “low income” bracket meant earning 40% or 50% less than the median income (if the median income is \$10,000, it will mean either \$4,000 or \$5,000). Some academics referred to a “horizontal” relationship among the three factors – because those who are less educated often engage in low-skilled occupations and are in turn, poorly paid.

Among the 547 Hong Kong citizens aged 15 or above surveyed, most took “low education” to mean Form 3 or below (37.4%), “low skills” to mean without specific skills (29.0%) and “low income” to mean earning less than \$5,000 a month (30.0%).

The study shows that society is aware of the problem facing the “three low” young people, though there are different interpretations as to who are included.

**3. Case studies show that the characteristics of the “three low” young people are intertwined with their parental backgrounds, personal learning abilities and self- image.**

(a) Most parents were not well educated and had a low income:

The 20 case studies show that parents of the “three low” young people are mostly not well educated and low-skilled employees living in low-income households. It reveals that the plights of the “three low” young people resemble that of their parents and there is little hope of upward improvement.

According to case studies, the situations of the “three low” correspondents are intertwined with the destitution suffered by their own families. In some cases, the children had no choice but to leave school as their parents could not pay their school fees. It would not only affect their personal development but also lead to a vicious poverty cycle without timely assistance. It deserves attention.

(b) Most did poorly at school and could not study further:

Most correspondents failed to continue studying due to poor academic results. Even for those who had completed Form 5, their zero score in the HKCEE remained a hurdle to their further education. Many correspondents scored poorly at schools because they lagged behind in their academics or because they lacked the interest to study. On the other hand, for those who came from better-off families, they often had more options to further their education. For young people whose families were cash-stripped, their choices were limited.

(c) Low confidence and self-image:

Many correspondents lacked confidence and a positive self-image. According to the 20 case studies, low educational qualifications, lack of skills and introverted personalities led to a low self-esteem among these young people. The repeated setbacks in job-hunting made things worse.

On the other hand, most “three low” young people were looked down upon in society as having no working skills. Stigmatization was also rife, where those who were not good looking, too fat or too short were regarded as inefficient by their prospective employers.

(d) Limited social exposure and personal contacts:

The study took a quick look on the correspondents' weekly routines to look at their social life. It showed that most of the correspondents had limited social exposure and often stayed at home watching T.V. or playing Internet games for leisure. They seldom went out with friends and never took part in community activities which made them confined to a narrow social network.

On the other hand, their meagre or zero incomes meant they had to be very frugal. There was virtually no money left for saving after paying for family expenses and it did impinge upon their social life.

(e) Relevant skills and vocational training programmes enhance job opportunities:

Most of the correspondents had taken part in skills and vocational training programmes. Most of them had attended the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme. Others had participated in programmes like the Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme and "Action S4". These schemes were proven to be effective in helping young people equip themselves before entering the job market.

(f) Six-month-wait for the first job:

The first job is a milestone for young people who have little education, skills and experience. The study found that there was a long wait for individuals before they could get their first job, ranging from a month to four years. Most of them had waited for half a year before being successfully employed.

The "quickest" job seeker got employed through the arrangement of the Vocational Training Council and was spared from going through the strenuous job-hunting process. It has taken a less fortunate job seeker four years to get his / her first job with the help of employment services.

Overall, most of the correspondents found themselves unemployed or waiting to be employed for more than half a year. The longest wait was four years while the shortest was as little as a month.

**4. The study found that most “three low” young people had the following barriers in employment (1) job-hunting; (2) choosing a career; (3) staying on the job; and (4) self-enhancement.**

According to results from the case studies, interviews with experts and telephone surveys, “three low” young people had the following barriers in employment:

- (a) Barriers in job-hunting: Low qualifications, lack of experience and communication skills and a low self-esteem affected the chances of “three low” young job seekers:

According to results of the 20 case studies, many “three low” young people experienced difficulties in finding jobs because of low qualifications and a lack of work experience. In a job market tilting towards high qualifications and professional skills, those “three low” young job seekers are particularly marginalized.

The “interview” is a critical part of job seeking in a competitive labour market. The poor qualifications and experience added to young people’s disadvantages and they also lacked communication skills and self-esteem, which were considered very important by their prospective employers.

The case studies showed that these young people not only were poor in expressing themselves, but also shy. It was an upward battle for them to try and impress interviewers as they tended to be nervous and gave only simple responses during interviews.

On the other hand, some correspondents mentioned the importance of having good looks to get jobs. According to a correspondent, being overweight made people think they were inefficient and incompetent and further reduced the chances of employment.

*“I waited for nearly a year before finding my first job, and it was difficult for me. I’ve had only Form 3 education with no experience at all. Some positions required Form five qualifications, two years experience and English and Putonghua skills. I can speak some Putonghua but not*

*English. Some positions only asked for Form 3 qualifications but also needed work experience. ”*

*(Male/22/job-seeker)*

*“I’ve been turned down many times. I was very nervous every time they asked for an interview. I gave only a short answer to each question. I dared not speak too much to avoid mistakes and I had no idea how to respond. Most of the time I said either “yes” or “no”.”*

*(Male/22/job-seeker)*

*“Maybe my ex-boss thought I was inefficient and fell short of his requirements. Another reason for getting the axe was probably my looks. My ex-boss often linked my appearance with poor efficiency and incompetence. They just looked down on fat people. My appearance gets in the way of my getting jobs.”*

*(Male/23/employed)*

- (b) Barriers in choosing a career: Apart from personal limitations, the shortage of available positions in the market posed a barrier to their choice of a career:

In light of the re-structured economy and advancement of information technology, many positions that require low skills or low qualifications have been either replaced or moved northwards to make way for a more professional workforce. These young people were marginalized in the labour market not only because of their limited qualifications and experience, but also a lack of available opportunities.

In the case studies, some correspondents said they had no bargaining power in the job market. As long as they fitted the job requirements, they would try any kind of jobs.

According to the experts interviewed, the service industry is among the biggest sectors in need of manpower nowadays. The “three low” young people have little choices in the current job market. For most of them, there exists an unexciting choice between the service industry and other positions with limited prospects.

*“First I got registered in the Labour Department but heard nothing. My limited qualifications and experience reduced my options to a very few choices in the job market. I couldn’t pick and choose and tried every*

*position I could fill. But despite all this I am still empty-handed.”*

*(Female/21/job seeker)*

*“There are difficulties for all types of young job seekers. For the unemployed school leavers, the available positions were mostly in the service industry, delivery, warehouse, courier, ordinary sales, catering or hairstyling etc... They have a very limited choice of mostly low-paid jobs with little prospects.”*

*(Dr. Hon. Fernando Cheung Chiu Hung /  
Legislator, HKSAR Government)*

- (c) Barriers in staying on the job: Low work competency, poor interpersonal skills, and low motivation were all against these young people maintaining the jobs:

According to results from the 20 case studies, those “three low” young people had problems staying on the job they had tried so hard to get, either because their contracts expired or they got fired. Some of them got the axe for having lagged behind the bosses’ requirements; on top of the insufficient work-related abilities, some had personal problems such as poor interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills and little motivation which made it difficult for them to develop their careers.

On the other hand, the lack of motivation was probably a result of the monotonous nature of the job or low remuneration. The futile career prospects that the young people could foresee also put them off from being enthusiastic about their jobs.

*“My boss came to me saying, ‘This place doesn’t suit you’, when I hadn’t put the files back in place on the fourth day. I was so unhappy that I cried with tears running down my cheek. He said there was no use crying coz I was unsuitable for the job. He also said another new employee was much better than I was in dealing with people and things and could tidy loose ends quickly. He said, ‘She is the same age as you, why can’t you be like her? I would definitely choose her than you.’”*

*(Female/20/employed)*

*“My managers thought I was not motivated enough as I couldn’t use the copying machine. They just couldn’t understand why. Sometimes I*

*didn't know where to start when putting the files in order, and they would wonder why.*

*At the beginning they just taught me to copy one sheet after another without telling me how to copy as a bundle. As I was doing one after the other it was slow. I needed to photocopy every page and fax it off, and also pick up the phone. Sometimes I just didn't know how to cope or was not motivated enough. When I saw the receptionist at the desk I would just ignore the calls."*

*(Female/20/employed)*

*"In just one day the hairstylist wanted me to learn how to wash hair holding a client's head. I was not strong enough to do this. Then they seemed to tease me. I found it boring just to wash somebody's hair. I didn't want to do it and quit after a month."*

*(Male/19/employed)*

- (d) Barriers in self-enhancement: Low qualifications, low income and long working hours affected young people's decisions for continued education:

Good personal qualifications are a vital investment in today's highly competitive job market. Self-enhancement is crucial to those aspiring to move upwards in their careers. The "three low" correspondents in the case studies, faced three barriers in this regard: (1) inadequate education especially weak language foundations got in the way of further studies; (2) limited savings due to low incomes made them short of funds for further education; (3) long hours and unstable jobs affected their determination to embark on continued education.

According to the experts interviewed, continued education needs time, money and basic qualifications, of which the "three low" young people were lacking in.

*"There are two main difficulties for me: first is money. I need to save to continue my education; another is basic qualification. I can't save much from my low-paid job. I live a simple life apart from the necessary expenses. I don't know when I can have enough money to go back to school. My English is poor and I am worried I can't catch up."*

*(Female/20/employed)*

*“They have no time to study to make up for their low qualifications and therefore are trapped in a vicious cycle. They are the people I serve. As far as I am concerned, they have the motivation to study but are put off by the long work hours and expensive tuition fees. They may choose to do some short courses like hairstyling; but still they cost \$10,000 to \$20,000. They can only keep on working and saving up to pay the fees.”*

*(Dr. Wong Hung / Assistant Professor, CUHK)*

- (e) Creating jobs for “three low” young people as a priority: “Job opportunities support” works better than handing out welfare:

The experts interviewed were of the view that the biggest barrier facing the “three low” young people is “getting the job”.

According to the 20 case studies, many of the “three low” young people got their jobs through “job opportunities support”. Some praised the service as their stepping stone to entering the job market thereby allowing them to gradually pick up the job requirements and improve their employment skills and attitudes. They had positive comments on “job opportunities support”. Some correspondents wanted to have the service period extended so as to allow them more time to settle in the job.

Many “three low” young people understand their limitations and disadvantages in the highly competitive job market. They have little expectations from their jobs. Their hope is simple: to be employed, self-reliant and make a living on their own. From this aspect, to keep the beleaguered “three low” young people motivated in this critical period, there must be timely vocational training and continued educational opportunities for them.

According to results from the telephone surveys, among the 547 Hong Kong citizens aged 15 or above, 92.5% supported “substituting jobs for welfare payments to help the needy to make a living”; on the contrary, only 31.8% supported “increasing the amount of unemployment benefit payments”. It showed that most citizens preferred “job opportunities support” than “social welfare payments”.

Currently, vocational training programmes targeting young people include the Labour Department’s Youth Pre-employment Training Programme and Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme, which respectively provide young people with

pre-employment or on-the-job training. According to the Labour Department, most participants have successfully found employment in the job market after taking part in these programmes.

On the other hand, the Labour Department has begun “Action S4” following the Youth Work and Experience and Training Scheme, providing young people with on-the-job training for six to nine months. This “supportive” programme aims at helping young people equip themselves to make their way into the job market.

The above measures show that, although there is a lower starting point for the “three low” young people, if effective support is provided for further education and training, there is hope that we can get them out of their present predicament and reshape their career prospects.

- (f) “Social Enterprise” - the right way to go. It should be started effectively and public education implemented as soon as possible:

According to results of the telephone surveys, 71.5% of the 547 correspondents had never heard of the term “Social Enterprise”, compared with 28.5% who had. Nevertheless, after the interviewer explained that it was a government-initiated social enterprise in collaboration with the business sector and society for promoting job opportunities for the disadvantaged groups and alleviating social problems, 88.7% gave their endorsement. It showed that while the public was agreeable to the notion of social enterprise, their understanding of it remained shallow. Hence the government needs to speed up publicity about the enterprise and promote it simultaneously while implementing the programme.

In general, the public mostly agrees with the concept of “workfare” — “substituting jobs for welfare payments” — to empower the needy to make a living. Even the young people in our case studies said that what they wanted was job opportunities so that they would not need to rely on their families or on society. The plight of the “three low” young people, therefore, will be greatly improved if the government persists in the direction of helping the needy to help themselves and provide timely vocational training and counselling for those who are making career decisions and transitions.

## **Recommendations**

- (1) To extend the training period for those in dire need.**

**Currently, the main vocational training programmes targeting young people are the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme and the Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme, which have proven effective and should continue. As for programmes like “Action S4” which aims at helping the neediest, the government should consider putting in more resources and extending both the training periods and the list of participating institutions, so that “job opportunities support” can work to its fullest.**

- (2) To lead “three low” young people gradually out of their plight by providing educational subsidies.**

**Many “three low” young people miss out on continued education because of money problems – which is pivotal to helping them improve their abilities and life goals. Although there are ways to apply for educational funds, the high entrance costs and academic pre-requisites put many off. We suggest the government broaden the scope of the subsidies, so that those who are resolved to further their studies can start from the basics and make their way gradually up the learning ladder and sustain their motivation.**

- (3) To implement “social enterprises” and enforce public education.**

**According to experts, even social enterprises will not resolve unemployment; rather they play a role in sustaining social development. We believe implementing “social enterprises” is the right direction to go on in to provide more job opportunities for young people. But the government needs to keep communicating with the public and telling them what the policies really are.**

- (4) To strengthen counselling for junior students to enhance their self-esteem and career decision-makings.**

**Counselling plays an important role in understanding an individual's different abilities and enhancing young people's confidence thereby helping them plan ahead for their life goals and career choices. We suggest secondary schools introduce this service to junior students so as to better equip them to face the job market in the future.**

- (5) To consider extending the nine-year free education scheme and provide career consultations for junior secondary school students.**

**Strong human capital is crucial to a society's long-term development. Hence most of the regions nowadays have realized the importance of enhancing educational levels and extending compulsory education for young people. In order to improve the quality of human resources, the government should consider extending the nine-year free education policy and provide career consultations for junior secondary school students, so that younger students get to know more about vocational training and can brace themselves for future curriculum reforms.**