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青年就業困難與出路研究  
A Study on Employment Difficulties and  
The Way Out for Young People

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# **A Study on Employment Difficulties and The Way Out for Young People**

## **Summary Report**

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The problem of youth employment has long been a social concern. The 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2007 global financial crisis hurt the Hong Kong economy, but the economy began to stabilize by the end of 2009, and the youth unemployment situation has improved. However, the youth unemployment rate still remains around 2 to 6 times higher than that of the overall labour force. Meanwhile, the number of economically inactive young people who are not pursuing any studies (non-engaged youth) has not decreased under the improved economic conditions. This shows that young people still face employment difficulties even in a good economic environment.

The HKSAR government has noticed that the youth employment problem is not simply caused by the socio-economic environment. To tackle problems of self-confidence, personal goals, job-search skills, work experience, specialized skills, professional qualifications, and the lack of suitable jobs, different government organizations, such as the Labour Department, Social Welfare Department, Education Bureau, Employees Retraining Board, and Vocational Training Council have introduced various measures to help young people join the work force and enhance their employability. Their effectiveness should be applauded.

However, in reality, young people still face obstacles in the job-search process and in the workplace. Young people have difficulty looking for and keeping jobs, particularly young people with weak qualifications. So why are young people still facing employment difficulties? What are the specific difficulties they face in the job search and in the workplace? How can the policies and measures be improved to help young people?

To further explore these concerns, this study tried to understand the job expectations of young people in general through a random-sampling telephone survey. Data were also gathered through case interviews with senior secondary school leavers, employers, experts, and government officials in order to understand the employment difficulties faced by people who leave senior secondary school and to explore possible employment policies and measures.

This study focuses on the situations of senior secondary school leavers with weak employment qualifications. In this study, "senior secondary school leavers" refers to people aged 15 to 29 in Hong Kong who leave school with educational attainment of Form 4 to Form 7 or equivalent who were not full-time students at the time of the interview. "Equivalent educational attainment" includes completion of a general "certificate" program, a general "diploma", or a "foundation diploma" program of level 2 or level 3 of the Hong Kong "Qualifications Framework".

The telephone survey was designed to understand the job expectations of young people in general and to assess their employment qualifications. The survey was conducted from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. between 2<sup>nd</sup> April and 30<sup>th</sup> April 2013 among young people in Hong Kong aged 15 to 29. By random sampling, 525 eligible young people were successfully polled, for a response rate of 53.6%, with a standard error of  $\pm 2.2\%$ .

The case interviews were aimed at understanding the employment history of senior secondary school leavers and the difficulties they face in the job market. The case interviews were conducted between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> April 2013. A total of 20 senior secondary school leavers aged 15 to 29 were individually interviewed through arrangements with the service units of The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups. The case interviewees included 13 males and 7 females. Thirteen were working full time, two were working part time, and five were unemployed. Their educational attainment ranged from completion of Form 3 plus certificate in dancing performance, to completion of Form 7 with HKALE plus having been admitted to a higher diploma program (without completion).

The aim of the employer interviews was to understand their requirements in employing young people, their evaluation of the performance of young employees, as well as the nature of work and the learning opportunities they can provide to young employees. The employer interviews were conducted between 16<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> April 2013. A total of four employers and human resources personnel (hereinafter referred to "employers") were successfully interviewed. The interviewees belonged to three large enterprises, one small enterprise, and one medium-sized enterprise. All of them have employed senior secondary school leavers.

The aim of the interviews with experts and government officials was to understand stakeholders' views on the employment difficulties of senior secondary school leavers, as well as their opinions on employment policies and measures.

The interviews were conducted between 8<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> April 2013. A total of four employment experts were successfully interviewed, while one government official provided written responses to the interview questions. The five interviewees were a scholar, human resources consultant, a member of the management team of a training organization, social worker, and a Labour Department official.

The following paragraphs summarize the major findings and the analysis of the telephone survey and the interviews. The findings are followed by a discussion and recommendations.

## Discussion

### **1. The number of senior secondary (or equivalent) school leavers aged 15 to 29 in Hong Kong exceeds 400,000, but young people usually learn little about employment when attending school. They do not understand their own personality and abilities and therefore lack employment goals, resulting in difficulty joining the job market and adaptation in the workplace.**

Though the post-secondary education participation rate of Hong Kong has already reached 66%<sup>1</sup>, many young people are still unable to enrol in post-secondary programs or are even unable to complete the senior secondary program and thus need to join the labour force. According to the 2011 Census, there are 418,290 school leavers aged 15 to 29 with educational attainment of senior secondary or equivalent (from Form 4 to below sub-degree).

Since the mainstream education system still emphasises pursuing further studies, the employment preparation for students after they leave school is obviously inadequate. Some students do not have the opportunity to access the working world while attending school. They know little about different industries and occupations. They lack employment goals, and their conceptions of what they want to do are rather vague. At the same time, they do not understand that sometimes their own personality and abilities do not meet the requirements of the jobs they are applying for. These problems cause difficulties in the job search and workplace adaptation.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Steering committee for the review of the post-secondary education sector, 2008. *Report of the phase-two review of the post-secondary education sector.*

The case interviews show that many young people have not thought seriously about employment while attending school. Some thought that certain industries were interesting when they learned about them on television programs. Some have not held short-term or part-time jobs before, and they have no targets when they search for jobs. They only look for income, without understanding or caring about the nature of the job. These situations make it difficult for them to get a job.

Some young interviewees do not quite understand their own personality, strengths, limitations, and abilities, nor do they understand the nature of different jobs or the competencies required by the job they are seeking, resulting in a failure to find a suitable job. For instance, an interviewee said she was not suitable for manual labour because of her health, but she kept on looking for salesperson jobs, which require employees to move goods and stand for a long time. Another interviewee said he did not want to look for jobs that require him to communicate with other people, but he kept on looking for customer service officer and receptionist positions. In these cases, their abilities cannot fulfil the requirements of the job.

The examples above show that these young people face difficulties in meeting the requirements for different jobs, even though they have been successfully employed. Thus, it would be easy for them to feel resigned and look for another job without any goal. In such cases, they would fall into the cycle of "job search -> short-term job -> job search -> short-term job" or even start to avoid searching for jobs because of frustration.

**2. Young people usually think that their choice of job types is limited, but there is a gap between their preferred industry and the career-development opportunities in different industries. Therefore, the problem of job mismatch makes it so that young people have limited job choices.**

Young people think that the job market is not lacking in vacancies, but the types of jobs available for them are quite limited. Results from the telephone poll showed that young respondents think that there are not many posts that they are eligible to apply for. A total of 60.0% of respondents thought the number of posts is "average". They also thought that the opportunity of finding a post that can meet their salary

expectations is not very likely. More than half (52.9%) said the opportunity is “average”.

In the case interviews, senior secondary school leavers said that job choices were very limited for those with low educational attainment and limited work experience. Because of poor grades on public examinations, they were not eligible to apply for jobs that require secondary school certificates or diplomas. They could only choose jobs in the service industry, such as retail and catering, junior clerical posts, or technical posts. Since the image of certain jobs is not attractive, some young people are biased against those jobs, thus further narrowing their choices. For instance, an interviewee said he resisted the blue-collar catering jobs and will never consider those jobs in all circumstances.

However, there is a gap between their industry preferences and the career-development opportunities in different industries. The phenomenon of limited choice of job type may be a mismatch problem.

The results of the telephone poll revealed the situation described above. Figures showed that disciplined services (11.1%) ranked as the most desired industry for young respondents, followed by medical services (9.9%) and educational services (8.0%). As for the most desired occupation, professional occupations (31.3%) ranked first, followed by managers and administrators (23.7%). Young people were less favourable towards other industries and occupations that do not have strong professional images, such as service and sales posts, technical posts, the trade and wholesale industry, logistics, and the transportation industry.

However, these industries have many development opportunities. According to the figures of the first quarter of 2013, 8.3% of all employed persons were employed in the transportation and storage industry, another 8.3% were employed in the construction industry, and 13.5% were employed in the import/export trade and wholesale industry. In the same quarter, 16.9% were employed as service and sales workers, 13.7% were employed as clerical support workers, and 7.1% were employed as craft and related workers. This shows that there are many development opportunities in these industries and occupations.

**3. School leavers usually lack work experience, and they have difficulty entering the job market. They can only make a breakthrough through part-time or short-term jobs.**

The biggest obstacle faced by young people in entering the job market is the lack of work experience. This limits their opportunity to find a full-time or long-term job.

The telephone survey showed that 43.4% of the respondents considered “lack of work experience” to be the biggest obstacle in finding a job. Unless they have worked part-time or short-term jobs or taken part in internship programmes while at school, young school leavers usually lack work experience. However, work experience is often a recruitment requirement, so it is difficult for them to enter the job market.

Likewise, many young interviewees said that the employers did not have confidence in school leavers since they do not have any work experience, making it difficult for them to find a full-time job after leaving school. An interviewee who was actively seeking a job said that she had inquired after more than 50 posts after graduating from secondary school but received no responses. She did not even have a chance to attend an interview. Some young people turn to looking for part-time or short-term jobs in order to accumulate work experience with the hope of getting access to the job market.

However, the actual duties and working hours of these part-time or short-term jobs may not differ much from full-time or long-term jobs, except that employers can avoid providing holidays and benefits. For instance, an interviewee had worked part time before, and she worked six to eight hours a day, four days a week. Another interviewee had the same working hours as other full-time staff, except he was required to take a one-week leave after every three weeks of work.

**4. Young people have not paid enough attention to the attitudes and ethics required by the workplace. If the employers fail to give an adaptation period to new employees or if the employees fail to overcome the problems encountered in the new job, the jobs are not likely to last long.**

When entering the job market, many young people do not understand or have not paid enough attention to the work attitudes and ethics required by the workplace, resulting in adaptation problems. If the employers are not aware that employees need an adaptation period or if the employees have no patience to overcome these problems, the jobs are not likely to last long.

The employers and experts repeatedly expressed concern about the work attitudes of young employees. An employer wanted to hire job-seekers with little work knowledge but was unwilling to hire those with attitude or ethical problems. An expert who had interviewed many employers also reflected that many young employees resigned or were dismissed because they failed to adapt to the work-attitude requirements of the workplace. In contrast, few young interviewees mentioned the importance of work attitudes. In general, they only focused on whether their educational attainment and work experience met the entry requirements.

Summarizing the comments of the employers and experts, the key requirements of work attitudes and ethics in the workplace include:

- (1) having a good attitude and sense of responsibility so that the employers are confident to pass on the jobs;
- (2) having serious work attitudes, definitely not casual;
- (3) being a team player, being co-operative, and being able to assist other colleagues; willingness to take care of non-designated duties;
- (4) having the concept of “the customer is always right” and that the workplace is not a place to debate right or wrong;
- (5) having a sense of time – not being late for work and not leaving early;
- (6) understanding human relations and conflicts at work.



**5. If the employer is able to provide visible and clear promotion prospects, or if there are development opportunities in the industry, the young employees will work longer and be more stable employees.**

Young employees generally hope to have development and promotion opportunities in the workplace. Therefore, if the employers are able to provide adequate promotion prospects, or if there are visible development opportunities in related industries, young employees will be more willing to stay in the enterprise or in the industry. Sometimes the employers or the industry may need to give a clear message to young employees about the development opportunities and ladder so that they will be willing to work longer.

Interviews with the case participants indicated that, if there is no promotion ladder for the post or if the young employees think promotion prospects are slim, they will be discouraged, and they will be less motivated for work. In contrast, if there are visible promotion opportunities for young people, they will have more positive attitudes and be more willing to stay in the post.

Some of the interviewed employers thought that employees need to set up a clear career-development goal and be motivated to obtain promotion opportunities. An interest in promotions is also welcomed by employers because employees would be attracted to stay in the enterprise and be more stable workers. Of course, employers need to actually provide promotion opportunities in order to attract employees.

In the interviews, the experts pointed out that young people today are rather impatient and do not understand that they need some time to familiarize themselves with the work before they can play a meaningful role. Therefore, employers have to explain to the young employees the prospects of the job beforehand if they want the employees to stay in the job.

**6. Young people with a low sense of on-the-job learning face career development problems.**

The youth telephone survey results showed that, ranked in order of the percentage of respondents rating it “very important”, “interest of work” (39.4%)

ranked first out of 10 common job expectations. Second and third were “job satisfaction” (33.7%) and “meaningful work” (32.0%). Relatively speaking, opportunities to learn and to try different jobs were considered less important. Expectations of “learning and training opportunities” (28.6%) ranked sixth, while the “opportunities to try different types of jobs” (10.7%) ranked last.

This demonstrated that young people have certain expectations for jobs. However, they pay less attention to the opportunity for trying different jobs, learning, and training relative to interest and satisfaction, with which they can obtain immediate benefits. The benefits of the former expectations may take a longer time to realize, but they are more useful and longer lasting.

Data from the case interviews also indicated that the sense of on-the-job learning was rather low among individual young people. Some did not understand that they need to learn through observation and trial and error; instead, they expected employers to provide designated people to teach them working knowledge. This inaccurate perception prevents effective learning. Some other interviewees learnt through observation and trial and error, thereby making progress. These young people felt confident about their future career development. Some employers thought that when employees are recruited into an industry, they should invest time learning knowledge in that specific industry. They should also make use of the training and learning opportunities provided by the enterprise and observe whether there will be any room for future development.

Long-term career development relies on the positive attitude to strive for more on-the-job learning opportunities. Therefore, young people who lack the attitude of self-learning or who have a weak sense of on-the-job learning are likely to face obstacles in career development.

**7. The work values of young people have gradually shifted to work-life balance. In addition, some young people have no urgent financial needs. The traditional workplace environment has therefore become less attractive to them.**

There has been a gradual change in the work values of young people. For one, they emphasize the balance between work and life. At the same time, their families

have no urgent financial needs. The traditional workplace environment has therefore become less attractive to them.

In the interviews, one participant said that he will only work half-time or part-time in order to spare time for developing his hobbies. There were also interviewees who lacked motivation and confidence for work. These cases did not have an urgent family financial need, and their families were even responsible for their daily expenses.

Results from the youth telephone survey echoed these observations. Nearly 10 per cent (9.6%) of respondents desired self-employment, reflecting that being a “freelancer” is attractive to the new generation to a certain extent.

Experts said there is a difference in work values between youth and the previous generations. Since families today are generally better off than the previous generations, young people have no urgent need to earn a living. Therefore some young people expect that the workplace can provide an environment of work-life balance or even room to develop hobbies. The traditional workplace environment has therefore gradually become less attractive.

## **Recommendations**

**Based on the above findings and discussion, we make the following recommendations to improve the employment difficulties of young people:**

- 1. Create short-term posts for young people with employment difficulties in order to help them enter the job market.**

**The HKSAR government has previously created jobs during poor economic conditions. The government helped young people with employment difficulties enter the job market by creating low-threshold posts so that they were able to enhance their employability and understand their abilities and vocation. This measure was very useful in preparing them for further career development in different industries.**

**This study finds that young people with weak employment qualifications still face difficulties when entering the job market, even in an improving economic environment. The Labour Department is currently providing on-the-job training through the Youth Employment and Training Programme (YETP). Employers of the programme need to offer training posts with wages not lower than the minimum wage level, while the government provides an on-the-job training subsidy of \$3,000 per month to the employers. Therefore, the posts from this programme are basically market-oriented, and participants need to meet the employers' requirements in order to get hired.**

**In addition to YETP, we recommend the government create low-threshold jobs with a short-term contract period of 6–12 months in government departments and NGOs in order to help young people with employment difficulties gain work experience. This measure can help them enter the job market and provide them with wider varieties of employment opportunities and choices.**

## **2. Renew and promote traditional industries pro-actively in order to attract young people.**

**The changing work values of young people have made traditional industries less attractive to them, meaning fewer job choices are available to them. This problem can be improved by renewing and promoting traditional industries.**

**Industry associations and employers may carry out renewal measures in order to attract young people to join them, such as providing working environments and facilities that are more adapted to the lifestyle of young people; arranging work time so that young employees have opportunities for continuing education; and providing visible career ladders and prospects in relevant industries. For instance, some employers in the construction industry have tried to improve the site environment**

**by providing rest and bathing facilities and uniforms. This is a good model for other traditional industries.**

**In addition, industry associations and employers may collaborate with training institutes to design new job types by selecting valuable elements from traditional jobs. For instance, the Employees Retraining Board is going to launch a high-end property management and security services programme, which will transform the job of security guard into a new type of job. This move aims at meeting market needs and providing more choices for young people.**

**3. Provide schools with more resources for career-planning services so as to help young people understand themselves and plan ahead for their career-development goals.**

**Career-planning education helps young people understand their personality and abilities at an early stage so that they can plan ahead for their life and career-development goals and bring their plans into practice step by step. The Education Bureau has set off to a good start by providing support for secondary school teachers to carry out career-planning education at schools. Some social service agencies have also provided secondary schools with various kinds of career-planning lectures and workshops.**

**To help young people search for their own pathways sooner and reduce their employment difficulties, we encourage schools to use more teaching hours to carry out career-planning education. In addition, the government can use a forward-looking perspective to enhance youth employment support by providing additional resources for career-planning services for all through training institutes.**

**It is worth it to encourage young people to increase their exposure to work. For one, they will be able to accumulate work experience. In addition, they will learn about different types of**

**jobs and be able to broaden their choices in the job market. In this respect, training institutes can continue their collaboration with employers and provide more opportunities for workplace attachment.**

**4. Continue improving youth employment services and widely publicize the service information to secondary school teachers, students, and parents.**

**Although the YETP is useful for those with associate degrees and secondary school leavers, many young school leavers still do not know about this programme or have misunderstandings about the programme. For instance, many students and parents confuse workplace attachment and on-the-job training in the programme. They often think that wages for on-the-job training are pressed down by employers. Some of them have no idea that the programme provides case-management service. Instead, they think that it only helps young people look for jobs.**

**The Labour Department can publicize information on youth employment services more widely to secondary school students and parents. For example, advertisements introducing the service can be put on buses or television during job-searching seasons. In addition, the government can provide career-counselling teachers with more information about employment services so that students in need may benefit.**

**In addition, the various types of youth employment programmes—including YETP—should be reviewed and improved periodically so as to provide young people with wider varieties of attachment and training opportunities.**