

## Executive Summary

In recent years, there has been growing concern over the emotional and mental well-being of Hong Kong's younger generation. While much attention has been given to the teenage group, the challenges faced by young adults transitioning from school to the workforce often go unnoticed. These individuals encounter various pressures and obstacles related to work, relationships, environmental changes, and adapting to new experiences. Consequently, they encounter significant challenges, which can have a detrimental impact on their mental health.

An overseas academic introduced the concept of "Emerging Adulthood"<sup>1</sup> to describe the transitional phase experienced by young adults aged 18-29. This stage brings about distinct forms of stress, highlighting the need for more support and resources to address the unique challenges faced by this age group.

Hong Kong has long been recognised as a highly competitive city where long working hours and high levels of stress are the norm. This can negatively impact the mental health of the working population which, especially for young adults entering the workforce, can be particularly pronounced. However, mental health issues are often considered taboo in the workplace. There is also a reluctance to seek help or acknowledge personal mental illness making it difficult for individuals to seek help or to know where to turn for assistance. Research indicates that a significant proportion of Hong Kong's young adults aged 18 to 30 exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress<sup>2</sup>. This emphasises the importance of equipping this age group in being able to cope with stress; thereby reducing the risk of mental illness.

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<sup>1</sup> Working youth (between the ages of 18 to 29) are in the stage of emerging adulthood, a period of profound change and transition. During this transitional period, they tend to view themselves as being neither adolescents nor adults but somewhere in between.

<sup>2</sup> Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service (24 April, 2022). Press Release on the increasing incidence of Mental Health Crisis during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from [https://www.bokss.org.hk/content/press/276/refresh\\_press\\_release\\_final\\_.pdf](https://www.bokss.org.hk/content/press/276/refresh_press_release_final_.pdf)

Various sectors in Hong Kong have responded to the mental health needs of young adults. The Government, for instance, has launched the “Shall We Talk” public education initiative to raise awareness of mental health. In the non-profit sector, the 24/7 online counselling platform OpenUp was launched to provide emotional support to youth aged 11 to 35 years old. Other non-governmental organisations also offer individual psychological counselling services as an affordable alternative to private services for financially-constrained young adults.

When examining global initiatives, it becomes evident that numerous governments and charitable organisations around the globe have implemented comprehensive community-based mental health support systems for young adults. In Hong Kong, according to a Government report<sup>3</sup>, upon reaching the age of 18, young adults will be referred directly from Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services to Adult Psychiatric Services, without an intermediary transitional service in place.

The primary objective of this research is to: explore the well-being of Hong Kong youth navigating the transitional stage from school to the workplace, their perspectives on seeking mental health services, and to leverage service-experience insights from other places. Importantly, the research aims to provide practical recommendations that respond to the distinct needs of Hong Kong’s working young adults.

## **Main Discussion**

- 1. Young people transitioning from school to the workplace experience significant stress due to identity shifts and workplace challenges.** Left unaddressed the stress can have long-term effects on both the overall well-being of individuals and society as a whole.
  
- 2. Our research shows that the adaptation period from school to the workplace typically lasts 2 to 6 months.** During this time, young

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<sup>3</sup> Panel on Health Services, Legislative Council (17 November, 2023). New Measures on Mental Health and Progress Report of the Advisory Committee on Mental Health. Retrieved from <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr2023/chinese/panels/hs/papers/hs20231117cb4-977-4-c.pdf>

individuals may suffer from anxiety, unease, insomnia and eating disorders. Over 30% of surveyed young adults reported various pressures during this transition period. The provision of targeted support at this time can facilitate a smoother transition.

- 3. Coping with stress in the workplace is essential, and young adults point to “financial matters”, “personal development and future prospects”, and “work” as the main stress factors. Over 50% of respondents prefer to seek stress relief from friends.** Engaging in exercise, getting adequate rest, spending time in nature, or socialising with friends are seen as effective stress-reducing strategies.
- 4. Half of the young adults surveyed believe that there is limited acceptance of individuals with mental illnesses in the workplace.** Many young adults are reluctant to discuss their emotional problems with colleagues or superiors, as it is thought that it might hinder their career development .
- 5. The willingness of individuals to seek mental health services is influenced by various factors. These include concerns about discrimination, being labelled, denial of their emotional/mental health issues, and lack of awareness about available services.** Online access, high privacy standards, affordability, accessibility, awareness and recognition, and de-stigmatising efforts are believed to encourage young people with mental health needs to seek services.
- 6. Collaboration between government, businesses, and employees to promote workplace-friendly measures related to mental health not only helps to alleviate work-related stress but also enhances job performance.** Social awareness and consideration of mental health issues has a broad beneficial impact on overall societal productivity.

## **Recommendations**

**Based upon the findings and discussion above, this study proposes the following recommendations to enhance the mental health of working youth in Hong Kong and facilitate a smooth transition from**

**campus to the workplace.**

- 1. Extend counselling services from tertiary institutions to working youth in need, provide follow-up services and emotional health assessments.**

As young adults embark on their post-education careers, they encounter not only a shift in identity but also various workplace pressures and challenges. This transition can be even more daunting for those who already grapple with mental health issues. However, the free counselling services that are typically available are often limited to enrolled students only. This leaves many young individuals struggling to access continued psychological support after graduation. They may be referred to public services with long waiting lists or to expensive private services. Continual support from universities can assist young individuals to successfully adapt.

According to the shared experiences of interviewed young individuals, the adaptation period from campus to the workplace can take between 2 to 6 months. During this time, cases of anxiety, unease, insomnia, eating disorders, and worsened mood-swings have been reported. This highlights the critical need for a six-month emotional counselling service tailored to the needs of recent graduates, with pricing adjusted to match varying budgets.

Many tertiary institutions currently track and support the employment situations of their graduates. Continued support from universities can prove invaluable in helping young individuals navigate the challenges of the transition from campus to the workplace, ultimately fostering their successful adaptation. It is recommended to incorporate assessments of emotional well-being in this follow-up process, while also providing graduates with information on easy-to-access mental health resources. This proactive approach would enable the early identification of those in need of mental health support, empowering them to seek appropriate services in a timely manner.

- 2. The Government could launch a pilot programme named “Youth Mental Health Service Vouchers”, allowing young people aged 18 to**

### **29 to access private psychological counselling services using the provided vouchers.**

Introduced in 2023, Taiwan's "Youth Mental Health Support Program" provides three free counselling sessions for individuals aged 15-30. It is recommended that the Government introduce a pilot programme called "Youth Mental Health Service Vouchers" to allow all young adults in the initial stage of adulthood (18-29) to seek private psychological counselling services. This approach reduces stigma, improves access to mental health information, and facilitates prevention and early identification of mental health issues ensuring timely and appropriate psychological support for young people.

Additionally, the survey results indicate that important factors for encouraging young individuals to seek services include online video services (40.1%), the ability to maintain personal anonymity (38.4%), and affordability (31.8%). The provision of the programme should consider these features, including online services and simplification of the personal data collection process during registration.

### **3. Encourage companies to establish Wellness Days to demonstrate their concern for employee well-being.**

A healthy workplace environment can enhance employee morale and productivity, including supporting mental health. The changing social landscape with increased awareness of holistic well-being among employees post-pandemic, there is now a growing emphasis on fulfilling social responsibilities and addressing the mental and physical health of employees. Many companies have implemented health-friendly workplace measures to enhance employee well-being and resilience.

Drawing inspiration from current practices of some companies that have designated mental-health days, it is recommended to provide various activities to promote physical and mental health, such as meditation, mindfulness exercises, yoga, mental-health workshops, and family-friendly programmes. Companies can establish "Wellness Days" based on their organisational nature or employee preferences. This would demonstrate their commitment to employee well-being while increasing

employees' awareness about their own mental and physical health.

**4. Foster a culture of inclusiveness, actively promote mental health in the workplace, and create channels to listen to young employees and promote social progress and development.**

The survey results indicate that half (50.4%) of the interviewed young people believe that workplaces lack acceptance of employees with emotional disorders, and over half (52.6%) stated that they would not disclose their mental health issues to others. This reflects the stigma surrounding mental health problems in the workplace, as young employees find it challenging to openly discuss their personal mental health concerns.

Promoting emotional well-being in the workplace is crucial for employees. The government can increase the promotion of the "Mental Health Workplace Charter" and provide incentives to encourage companies to sign the charter and drive the implementation of related workplace-friendly measures.

Companies can break the silence surrounding mental health issues and promote employee communication, by establishing a "Wellness Committee". Decision makers in companies can encourage participation, by listening to their employees and adopting workplace-friendly measures that better meet the needs of the younger generation.

Through joint effort from the Government and companies, a culture of inclusiveness and mental health friendliness can be created. This would not only help to alleviate work-related stress for employees but also promote a healthier workplace culture, enhance job satisfaction and productivity, and contribute to social progress and development.