

Youth Situation, Youth Policy and Youth Unemployment in Hong Kong

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Introduction

This report consists of 4 sections. Section 1 sets the scene of the report by describing the profile of young people in Hong Kong. Section 2 attempts to provide an analysis of youth policy in Hong Kong, with special reference to its background and related problems. Section 3 discusses the current economic situation of Hong Kong, the problem of youth unemployment, as well as the effectiveness of the YPTP as a response to the youth unemployment problem in Hong Kong. In the final section, two new trends in delineating youth unemployment will be highlighted, namely, school-to-work transition and the life course of adolescence.

Section I: Youth Situation in Hong Kong

The 21st Century is said to be the Era of Asia. Starting from Year 2000, the society and the economy of the Asia-Pacific Region have been changing rapidly and extensively. The development of the Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong is incredibly quick. Economically, with the **open policy**, brisk trade and globalization, the economic status of Asia-Pacific Region is rising. The speed of their economic growth has been remarkable. Although we are now overshadowed by the economic depression, the economic and social development of the Asia-Pacific Region will be increasingly prosperous and their influence over the world will be amplified.

Hong Kong is one of the influential cosmopolitans in Asia. Starting from 1970s, its economy has rapidly increased and has gained great achievements. The living standard of the people and the whole social structure has been dramatically changed. Nowadays, Hong Kong becomes a newly developed industrial and commercial city. The youth problems in Hong Kong, with the economic background as the push factor, appear to have new trends and characteristics. The reasons behind and the situations of youth problems are becoming more complicated. Thus, the education and counseling for youth have new development in terms of the emergence of new strategies and services.

In comparison with the developing and under-developed areas, Hong Kong is more advanced in the following aspects:

Firstly, the youth population is decreasing, especially in the age groups of the 15 to 19 years' old. This coincides with the trend of low birth rate in developed areas.

Secondly, being affected by the economic development and the education policy, the school age of the youth in Hong Kong is increasing.

Thirdly, with the education policy, the employment age of youth has been generally risen. As a result, the percentage of youth among the active working population is decreasing. On the other hand, the employment rate of female youth (especially after marriage or postnatal) is increasing.

Fourthly, as a symbol of a developed city, the average marriage age of youth in Hong Kong has been increased. Some youth even prefer being single. Apart from this, the consumption situation of youth becomes diversified, characterized by entertainment, relaxation and travelling.

Fifthly, being a special administrative region of China, the connection between youth in Hong Kong and Mainland China becomes close, in terms of both quality and quantity. Every year, a large number of Hong Kong students go to the Mainland China to visit, exchange and being trained/educated. On the whole, their knowledge of the Mainland and their sense of belongings have been increased.

In short, the youth development in Hong Kong has a close linkage with its economic and social development. The Social Welfare Department, the Labour Department, non-government organizations and social organizations, providing a lot of services, strengthening family development and communal support, have merits and demerits over the youth development. How to help young people grow and to prevent them from going astray, is a global problem. The situation of youth development in Hong Kong gives us a lot of insights.

In Hong Kong, there is no official definition for youth age. Social welfare organization would refer to those aged between 10 and 24 “youth”. In this study, unless it is specified, we refer “youth” to those who age in this range.

Followings are analysis on the current youth situation in Hong Kong. (Source: Youth in Hong Kong: A Statistical Profile 1997. Commission On Youth. Hong Kong Government. 1997)

Demographic characteristics

1. In Mid 2000, there were a total of 1,339,600 young people aged between 10 and 24 in Hong Kong, constituting 19.8% of the total population. The relative size of the youth population had shown a continuous trend of decrease since the 1980s.
2. In terms of nationality, most local young people were British with right of abode in Hong Kong only. On the other hand, the proportion of young local residents born outside Hong Kong and the Mainland China had shown signs of increase.
3. The percentage of the youth population, which never married, had also increased.

Family Background and Dynamics

1. Studies have found that most young people considered their family life to be a happy one.
2. In terms of parental control, most young people did not in general feel that their parents were too harsh on them. On the other hand, more young people preferred to talk to their mother than to their father.

Physical Health

1. The life of expectancy at birth in Hong Kong had continued to rise over the last 25 years. On the other hand, the mortality rates among the youth age groups had continued to drop.
2. The age-specific fertility rates of the youth population had also gone down significantly.
3. The mean weight and height of the local young people had also increased over the last 30 years.
4. While the basic diet of the local young people was reported to be good, the problem of obesity had begun to emerge for all youth age groups.
5. The number of road traffic casualties for the youth population (10-24) had decreased significantly over the past 25 years.
6. Despite the fact that the number of smokers had shown signs of decrease over the last decade, the rates of young daily smokers had shown signs of increase within certain age-specific groups. On the other hand, studies have found that most young people were for the idea of implementing legislative control prohibiting the sale of cigarettes and liquor to young people below 18 even among smokers and drinkers.
7. Studies have found that most local young people were satisfied with their physical appearance. Moreover, most of them felt that to be good looking was more important than to be a good person.

Mental Health

1. By employing different scoring methods, studies have found that a significant portion of the local youth population could be classified as psychologically at risk. Moreover, when faced with stressful life events, only about half of the young people would seek help from other. For those who would, parents, friends, and classmates remained to be the more popular choices.
2. Although there was no exact estimation, the number of young drug abusers in Hong Kong should be quite small. However, it is expected to be increasing. Peer influence and curiosity remained to be the main reasons for young people taking drugs.
3. The suicide rates of the youth population had shown a significant increase in the past decade.

Education

1. The percentage of the youth population studying full-time in school or educational institution had continued to rise over the last 15 years. Furthermore, more and more young people were receiving tertiary or higher education.

Non-attendance and School Dropouts

1. Contrary to what some might think, the number of suspected school dropouts had been on the decline both at Primary and Junior Secondary level over the past decade. Most school dropouts had experienced problems at school before dropping out.

Economic Characteristics

1. Because of increasing educational opportunities in both secondary and tertiary levels, the labour force participation rate had in general decreased among the youth age groups. Since 1999, the number of young people joining the labour force is increasing, particularly the “Form Five School leavers” – (around age 16).
2. Overall speaking, more working youth were working in the area of wholesale, retail, and import/export trades, restaurants & hotels. In terms of sex difference, there were more working youth males in the construction industry, and more working youth females in the community, social, and personal services.
3. When choosing a job, most young people would consider the salary/benefits, their interests, and the career prospects offered. Besides, studies have also found that more young people would like to go into the commercial/sales sector.
4. In terms of spending and saving, studies have found that apart from the basic, necessary expenditures, most young people spent their money in entertainment and hobbies, as well as clothes.

Youth Culture and Development

1. Contrary to what some might think, studies have found that most young people in Hong Kong did not place high significance on their material life. Rather, they treasured kinship and bonds and friendship most.
2. In the area of media exposure, studies have found that about half of the local young people had the habit of reading newspapers every day, the more popular contents being social and entertainment news. For TV, more young people preferred drama series and news programmes. As for the radio, more young people preferred pop music programmes, and D. J. talk shows.
3. Shopping, family chats, ball games, household work and sleeping were found to be the more popular leisure time activities among young people.
4. In the area of new technology, studies have found that more than 90% of the local young people would use the computer before mainly for playing games, watching VCDs, and doing work/homework.

Civic, Social, And Political Attitudes And Participation

1. A significant number of the youth population participated in youth organizations,

uniformed groups, and voluntary service.

2. In the area of environmental concern, studies have found that more young people had participated in environmental activities than other age groups.
3. Most young people felt that social discrimination did exist in Hong Kong, the more serious being sex and racial discrimination.
4. Studies have also found that a significant portion of the young people did take note of news about foreign countries, especially regarding political and social scenes.
5. In the area of corruption, studies have found that most young people would not give bribes even if doing so could solve a problem. On the other hand, not many young people would report cases of bribery to the authorities.
6. More young people felt that the most important civic rights were freedom and democracy, and the most important civic responsibilities were voting and obeying the law.
7. While most young people trusted the Government, they nevertheless felt that the transparency of the Government was not high enough and voices of youth were not being heard. In terms of performance, studies have found that more young people were satisfied with what the Government had done on education, and were most dissatisfied with the Government's performance on housing and economic development.
8. In terms of national identity, studies have found that young people in Hong Kong were less proud to be Chinese than those in Guangzhou or Beijing.
9. While most young people were confident about the future of Hong Kong, they were less optimistic about the future of the political environment and the living standards of their families.

Section II: Youth Policy in Hong Kong: A Unique Case

Hong Kong has youth services, Hong Kong has hundreds of youth work organizations, Hong Kong has thousands of professional social workers working with young people; but it seems that Hong Kong has never had an overall comprehensive youth policy. Since the first development of children and youth centre service in the 1950's, there has been a lack of a focal point and direction for the evolvement of a policy on social welfare services for youth. At present, social services rendered to young people in Hong Kong are carried out by a number of governmental departments and non-governmental organizations, each with its own philosophy, objectives and priorities. Despite the fact that Hong Kong Government has occasionally, since the late 60's, published policy papers or programme plans on the development of youth, none of these have been regarded as social welfare policy for youth by the youth work profession. Nor has it been the intention of the government to treat these as centralized governmental policies for youth. After almost thirty years

of service provision, it is quite clear that there is still an absence of a centralized governmental policy for young people in Hong Kong.

Policy for youth, youth services and youth are three sets of interrelated domains. National and societal expectation and demands on youth form the basis upon which the government perceives the needs and problems of its younger generation. In turn, this becomes a platform on which the objectives and contents of certain “youth policies” are formulated. Once these “policies” are formulated, youth service programmes will then be implemented with courses of actions to accomplish the objectives laid down in the “policies”. In Hong Kong, the interplay among these three domains is significant, yet ambiguous. It is ambiguous because of the many confusing “factors” that surround them. It is significant because an explanation on the relationship and interplay among them is indeed the key to unveil the nature of the entire issue in the local context, and that answers the question of why Hong Kong fails to formulate its own youth policy even after its returning to China in 1997 and has become a Special Administrative Region of China for almost five years.

“Young people are pillar of our future society”. The meaning of this old saying needs no further explanation. Irrespective of whether a government agrees with this saying or not, young people today will grow up and many will take charge of our future society. Therefore, the kind of values with which they are now imparted will profoundly affect the attitude they hold as well as their future. Needless to say, this bears a significant relationship with the development of youth policies in any countries.

Researchers have identified from a number of countries, two categories of “youth Policy” with their uniqueness and differences rooted on the political ideology and social and economic structure of the countries. The first group (e.g. Australia, Sweden, and Netherlands) focuses entirely on the development and welfare of the youth; and all policies for youth fall in line with the development of young people. Great respect is placed on the autonomy, discretion, self-determination privacy and space of the individual. The second group (e.g. Singapore, Peoples’ Republic of China, South Korea) emphasizes on national building and youth development. It maintains that the welfare and development of youth should be considered in the context of the interest of the country as a whole. Policies for youth are the means to achieve the political and social objectives fostering patriotism, curbing social unrest and preserving political stability. Following this categorization and taking into account the political and historical background of Hong Kong, the question immediately arises is which category does Hong Kong belong to? The answer is simple and unique: Hong Kong falls in between, and what Hong Kong has is a **social welfare policy for youth** instead of a national youth policy.

The following accounts for the reasons why both the colonial government before 1997 and the current SAR government fail to development a comprehensive centralized Youth Policy:

1. Whether it was the colonial period or present ruling of the HKSAR, the Government does not have a clear and convincing “Youth Development Prospective”. The first priority of the policy makers is to prevent youth from committing crimes and to help the juvenile delinquents, and thus developing

- youth becomes secondary.
2. At present, the Hong Kong Government believes that services provided for youth, including education, welfare, medical services and employment are sufficient. Moreover, it is believed that services provided by different departments would be more flexible and more responsive to different needs of the youth. Therefore, a centralized department for youth policy is unnecessary.
 3. The Hong Kong Government also worries about the burden of resources. If centralizing youth policy, other community groups and functional groups would also ask for an independent policy for themselves, fighting for more welfare. Probably, there would be “Elderly Policy”, “Women Policy”, “Family Policy”, “Rehabilitation Policy”, “Labour Policy”, etc. If it were, the Government would need a lot of resources to support them and the Government could not afford to do so.
 4. The role and the ruling concepts of the Government. Main findings of related research studies revealed that the formulation of any policies or plans for youth development in Hong Kong in the past three decades basically followed an **incremental approach**, within the Government’s positive **non-interventionist paradigm**. The Government has never played a distinct and active role in the process of developing youth in Hong Kong.
 5. At present, youth services are largely provided by subvented non governmental organizations and voluntary institutions. As these organizations and institutions are using government grants, they somehow have to adhere to government policies. The NGOs in Hong Kong seldom act as an active advocate, forcing the Government to formulate youth policies.
 6. Comparing with other important agenda, concerning political and economic issues and livelihood, “youth development” could never be the priority under the Government agenda.

Although Hong Kong does not have a centralized youth policy, the development of youth welfare services in Hong Kong is superb. In the past 30 years, Hong Kong has enforced numerous youth welfare services. Mostly are organized, provided and evaluated by professional social workers. These services could be categorized into therapeutic, remedial and developmental aspects. At present, Hong Kong has 122 youth centres, 64 integrated youth work teams, 25 outreaching teams, 467 school social workers, several tens uniform groups and other numerous youth service organizations¹. Every year, they organize different kinds of activity to enhance the physical and mental health of the youth, to train youth leaders, to prevent them from committing crimes and to counsel the youth in need. Starting from 1970s, the Hong Kong Government has issued a number of “**White Paper on Social Welfare Policy**” and “**Programme Plan on Youth Development**”. Although these are scattered and disseminated social welfare policies for youth for different periods, their implementation did speed up the development of youth services directly. Therefore, we can say that “The Youth Policy” in Hong Kong is distinctive. It has the function of youth welfare policies in a country and its development coincides with the historical, political and economical development of Hong Kong.

Certainly, we are not satisfied with the present situation. We need to accept that

¹ Information provided by the Hong Kong Council of Social Services, Children and Youth Division, October, 2001.

the need of youth and their problems are becoming more complicated, disparate and changeable. A “youth welfare policy” is far from being sufficient. Moreover, the model of disconnected youth services in different organizations also needs to be reviewed. Therefore, we foresee that the Government will evaluate the existing youth services and policies in the near future, and a new set of **Youth Policy** will come into sight. This new set of **Youth Policy** will base on:

- (1) The Government will re-position the status of youth in Hong Kong, re-defining the relationship between our society and young people, providing more opportunities and hopes for young people;
- (2) The Government will invest on youth in order to gain the competition edge for the whole community;
- (3) The Government will identify the insufficiencies of the existing model of disconnected youth services in different organizations and set up a mechanism to centralize youth issues to meet the rapid growth of the society;
- (4) “Youth Policy” will become an important political agenda and it is believed that setting up a set of Centralized Youth Policy with a clear and long-term goal will be accepted and supported by the general public at present.

Section III: Employment Opportunities and Labour Market

1. Hong Kong economy experienced frustration in the past years. In 2000, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) recorded the highest growth rate since 1987, with a marked rise of 10.5 per cent in real terms. Strong and broad-based upturns were registered on both the external and domestic fronts. The General labour market conditions were improved last year. Both unemployment and underemployment rates showed a slight drop and a mild rise in labour earnings. Starting from early 2001, the situation has a downturn. Economic slump is all over the world. After the “911 incident”, we expect that the economy of Hong Kong in 2001 and 2002 will drop drastically. Exports, overseas trade, tourism and exported services will be poorer than those in the previous year. Depression will last. Trade, in whatever format, will be at a loss.
2. Employment in Major Occupations:
As a result of the economic restructuring, the proportion of production workers in the employed population has been decreasing whereas a large proportion of the employed population has taken up skill-intensive or non-manual jobs. In 2000, managers and administrators, professionals and associate professionals accounted for 29.5 per cent of the total number of employed persons. Clerks, service workers and shop sales workers altogether took up 32.2 per cent; while craft and related workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers only accounted for 18.8 per cent.
3. Generally speaking, Hong Kong’s economy is undergoing structural changes. Occupation becomes professional, technological and intellectual. On the other hand, exports decrease, property market goes down, and all trades face their own problem. Cutting salary and terminating employment will become a common trend. The propensity of people to consume decreases. Depression continues. Thus, unemployment rate is expected to be around 6% in 2002. Research findings

identify four high-risk groups: elderly (aged 65 or more); middle-aged women (aged 40 or more); new immigrants and youth aged between 15 to 19².

Youth Unemployment and the Youth Pre-employment Training Programme

In 2000, the problem of youth unemployment becomes serious, especially for those aged 15 to 19. The high unemployment rate has been focus of public concern. When writing this report, the employment market in Hong Kong has a phenomenon of supply exceeding demand, and the qualifications of job-finders are incongruous to the job requirements. Employers are looking for well-educated and skilled personnel. Young school leavers, without skills, professional qualification and working experience, their career future is rather pessimistic.

“Unemployed youth”, in this section, refers to those youngsters aged from 15 to 19. Generally speaking, the majority of youth aged 15 to 19 should be in school. That is, they should be students (Form 3 to Form 7) and should not be in the employment market. Unfortunately, every year, many youngsters in Hong Kong, for various reasons, could not continue their education and have to find a job. These reasons include, lessen classes in secondary schools (from Form 4 to Form 5 and from Form 5 to Form 6), poor academic results and the financial need of the family. In the employment market, the number of these youngsters is over ten thousand. These young people are mostly performing poorly in the existing education system and their academic results make them unable to continue to study. On the other hand, their interpersonal skill is also poor, and they do not have any motivation or interest to develop a technical skill. At the same time, the nine-years’ compulsory education could not provide them with any training for securing an appropriate job. Currently, secondary schools in Hong Kong seldom provide student with a systematic and effective career advisory service. In sum, when these youngsters enter the labour market, their nightmare begins.

How serious is the youth unemployment in Hong Kong? In the “Quarterly Report on General Household Survey” for January to March in 2000 issued by the Census and Statistics Department, the youth unemployment rate was 25.5%. It is 4.6 times of the total unemployment rate, which is 5.5%. In other words, among 100 youngsters aged 15 to 19, about 25 are unemployed. These unemployed youth face the problem of long period of unemployment, without the chance and motivation of continuing education, nothing to be occupied and being scolded by the family. Thus, these youngsters feel “lacking of self-confidence”, “having a poor self-image”, “having a sense of uselessness”, “becoming pessimistic”, “affecting the familial relationship”, “having a doomed future and being puzzled”, “just waiting for luck”, “wanting to commit suicide sometimes”... Many research findings reflect that the blow of long period of unemployment to a youth will be as hard as that to an adult. For the young people, unemployment will have a very negative effect regarding their perception towards life, career path, family, society, government and their own future.

There are many reasons that account for youth unemployment. Some are social whilst others are personal. The economic downturn in 1997 speeded up the entire

² Policy Watch, *Centre for Social Policy Studies*, Vo.2, Department of Applied Social Sciences, Hong Kong Polytechnic University. September, 1999.

structural economic change in Hong Kong. Jobs become technical and professional. This hits the unskilled labour and the “grassroots” hard. Under this “new economy”, it is difficult for them to find a job. As the youths are without qualifications and working experience, the problem they face is even difficult. In this era of “intellectual” economic development, these aged 15 to 19 youngsters who are without special skills, even they are able to have a job, the job would only be of low-skilled, low pay and without prospect. Under such circumstances, many young people find themselves in the dead end of “uncertainty” and “working without a sense of achievement”.

Today, young people leaving school for job are those born in mid 1980s. In school, they did not face any real difficulties. The society, the education system, the families have never prepared them for work. During the period when the economy in Hong Kong was good, it absorbed a lot of youngsters into the working force every year. They provided on-the-job training, so that these youngsters could have a chance to work and study at the same time. In fact, the Vocational Training Council and Construction Industry Training Authority have organized a number of short-term or long-term skill-acquiring programmes, and the “apprenticeship scheme” etc. These programmes are tailor-made for school leavers and had trained a number of secondary school dropouts for the industrial and commercial sectors. In 1980s and 1990s, youth employment was not a problem. “Being an apprentice” was a common and acceptable career path for those did not excel academically in school. The characteristics of “labour-intensive” and “skills-intensive” of the industrial and commercial sectors enabled them to take in a large number of youth without tertiary education. However, with the poor economic environment, all trades cut back their employees. This, together with the industry and commerce moving to the north, has turned youth unemployment into a serious social problem in Hong Kong.

Facing the problem of youth unemployment, the Government is more active by organizing the “Youth Pre-employment Training Programme”.

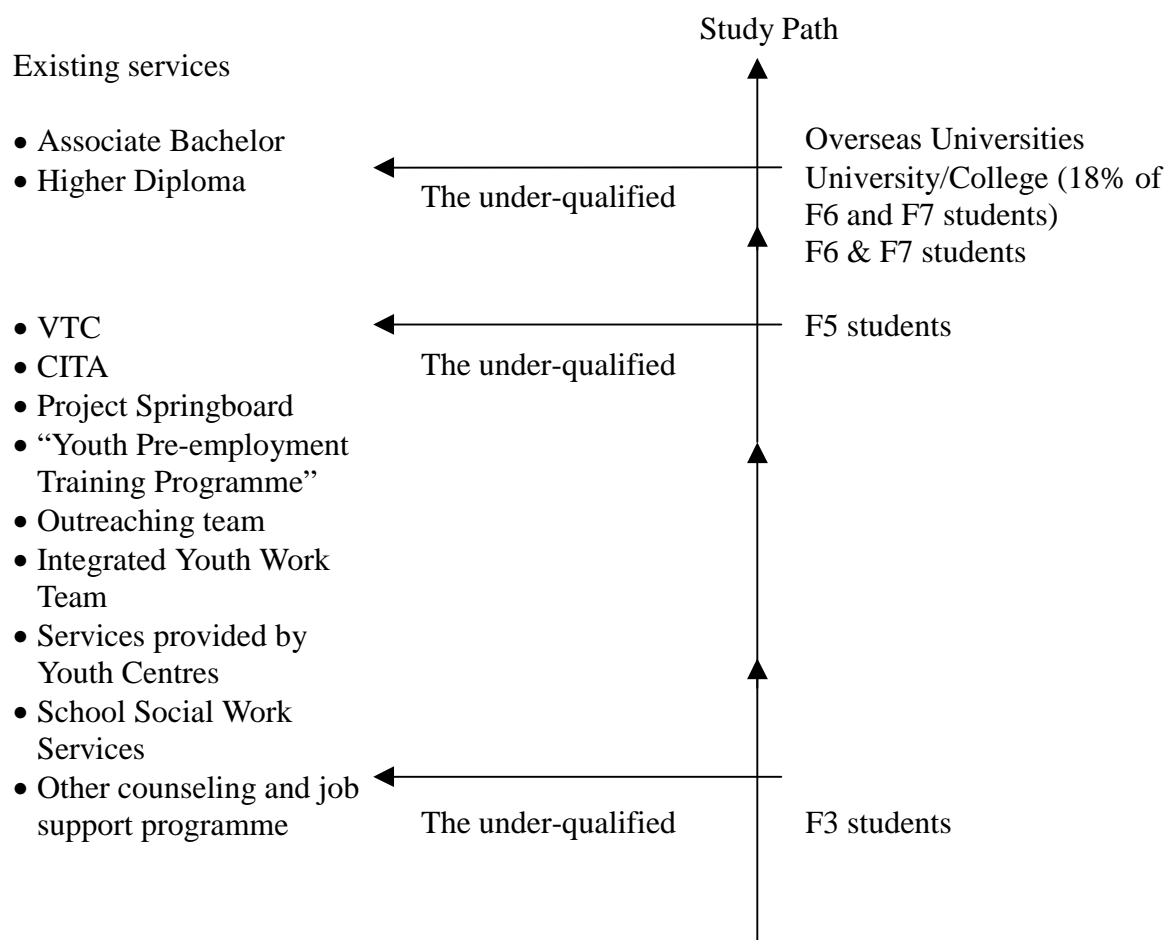
In 1998, the HKSAR was aware of the problem of school leavers aged 15 to 19 in this poor economic environment. The Government thus requested the Vocational Training Council, Construction Industry Training Authority and the government “Night Schools” to increase their intake to allow F. 5 graduates to further their study. The Government also granted funds to the youth organization to organize activities to allow these youngsters to learn and develop their potentials before entering the workforce. However, the effect was minimal. Since June 1999, youth unemployment was getting worse. As a result, the Labour Department as a means to tackle this problem has launched the “Youth Pre-employment Training Programme”.

In brief, “Youth Pre-employment Training Programme” consists of three parts: training courses, workplace attachment and on-the-job training. It allows young school leavers aged 15 to 19 to have the chance to be trained and to practice before entering the employment market. Four modules are offered to trained the youngsters and these are: Module A – leadership, self-discipline and team building training; Module B – job search and interpersonal skills training; Module C – computer application training; and Module D – job-specific skill training. Within the training period, professional social workers will support and counsel those in need. The first stage of YPTP was completed in March 2000. It had organized 951 training

programmes and had 22,132 intakes. Afterwards, the Labour Department carried out a survey to investigate the employment situation of the graduates. Among 7,700 graduates who have the motivation for work, 3,900 successfully secured a job. The successful rate was 50.6%. As the reply of the survey was on a voluntary basis, it is believed that the actual employment rate would be higher.

With such positive feedback, the Financial Committee of the Legislative Council grants another HK\$24,600,000 for two YPTPs for 2000/01 and 2001/02. It is expected that 24,000 students will join these programmes. In order to gain more employment opportunities, an extra three-month on-the-job training arrangement was included in the Second YPTP. Students could then gain practical working experience in order to increase their competitive edge. The 2001/02 YPTP commenced in September 2001. As there was no independent, all-rounded and systematic evaluation on the YPTP, the Office of the YPTP of the Labour Department, in May 2001, commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre of the PolyU to evaluate the operations and cost-effectiveness of the YPTP and to suggest ways for improvement.

The research finds that the general public, including employers, youth, parents and secondary school teachers, accepted and welcomed the function and the role of YPTP in general because it did lower the youth unemployment rate and enhanced the employability of the participants. In fact, the YPTP targets those school leavers aged 15 to 19. This programme is mainly beneficial to school dropouts who, because of various reasons, could not continue with their study. Some beneficiaries are Form 3 school leavers. I try to indicate in the chart below the importance and function of YPTP to these youngsters: that is, providing these unemployed youngsters concrete **Opportunities and Hope**. (Refer to the diagram below)



The chart shows that “Youth Pre-employment Training Programme” has an important and significant “alternate path” and “stepping stone” for the youngsters. It provides ample opportunities to those who want to work and those who want to further study. To assess one’s employability, there are two indexes: One is Actual Value and the other is Perceived Value. The former is that depending on one’s education level, professional training as well as relevant skills and knowledge, one shall get proportional actual rewards (salary, welfare, social statuses, etc.) The labour supply, employers and employee’s demand and current economic climate of that profession determine the latter. In short, for professionals, like doctors, lawyers and architects, both “value indexes” are high and their employability is correspondingly high. Both value indexes for the youngsters aged 15 to 19 are relatively low. Thus, their employability is low and it is difficult for them to enter into the job market. At the same time, one’s employability is a continuum. If one keeps on further study, one will have more opportunities. Many people comment that “YPTP” could not solve youth unemployment problems, which, in fact, is not the fundamental aim of “Youth Pre-employment Training Programme” when taken into account the multi-causation of youth employment. The core function of YPTP is to increase the “Perceived Value” of these trained youngsters, so that they could have more opportunities. Although there are insufficient job vacancies for young people currently, but these youngsters, being trained, have more self-confidence, better job-finding skills and

communication skills ... All these help to re-establish both their Perceived Value and Actual Value. In this connection, the “Youth Pre-employment Training Programme”, which is implemented solely by the Labour Department, gains unexpected achievements. It is because it provides a target-oriented, comprehensive, personal and job counseling training for school leavers within a specific duration. It successfully centralizes and connects the followings:

1. Traditional counseling for unattached youth brought about by their physical and mental growth (Module 1 and 2): allowing youngsters to have self-understanding, communication skills, interpersonal relationship, job-finding techniques, and thus re-establishing their relationships with friends, family and work place;
2. For those who could not receive tertiary education in local or overseas universities, having gone through the programme, their employability is being strengthened (Module 3 and 4);
3. It provides appropriate training for youngsters aged 15 to 19 enhancing their personal qualifications, working motivation and interests;
4. It provides relatively stable and reliable labour force with potentials for development for the employers;
5. On-the-job training experiences that help to integrate theory and practice in a contextual manner.

Thus, we firmly believe that the YPTP should be continued and strengthened.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In Hong Kong and in many parts of the world, the past two decades have been marked by jarring economic, labour market, and workplace transformations on a global scale. Public and academic discussions about these changes are dominated by themes such as the end of work, downsizing, and economic insecurity. Clearly, unemployment is the leading economic and social problem of the 21st century. As a result, there is mounting concern about the marginalization of central groups in the labour market and how economic polarization is threatening the social cohesion of many nations. Making this point, the International Labour Organization’s 1996/1997 *World Employment* report states: “The world employment situation remains grim. Unemployment remains stubbornly high in many industrialized countries... there has been growing concern over the social exclusion that this is breeding” (International Labour Organization, 1996, p. xiii).

Echoing this with an emphasis on youth, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) observed in its July 1996 Employment Outlook that “the current economic and social state of many young people falls far short of what is desirable... As long as total unemployment remains high, it is unrealistic to expect a significant improvement in youth job prospects...” (OECD, 1996, p. x). There is no doubt that 15 to 24-years’ old have faced the highest risk of unemployment in many industrialized countries, even though unemployment is far from being strictly a youth problem.” But we cannot simply generalize from our understanding of adult unemployment to the experiences of youth. To fully comprehend the nature of the current unemployment crisis, especially its implications

for individuals and society in the early 21st century, one must focus on what it means now for young people starting out in a labour market.

These points are not new; indeed, they are recurrent in the literature on unemployment. Nevertheless, there have been notable shifts in emphasis. Policy research in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s identified the problem of youth unemployment, especially among Black teenagers, as requiring active policy intervention (Adams, Mangum, Stevenson, Seninger, & Mangum, 1978; Herman et al., 1968). Viewing emergent trends in the late 1970s, the OECD (1980) concluded that most youth face the transition from school to work without major difficulties. However, a hard core of disadvantaged youth experienced serious problems, and a larger and growing group encountered unemployment as a normal feature of this transition. The economic recession of the early 1980s greatly exacerbated employment problems for youth in many nations (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1988; Fiddy, 1985). In the late 1980s, the International Labour Organization observed that the concept of a “career” for youth was being threatened (International Labour Organization, 1988). Writing at the same time, Coffield (1987) noted: “In a little more than ten years the economic crisis in western societies has transformed the golden age of youth into a massive social problem” (p.87). In the 1990s, chronically high unemployment has become a structural feature of many economies. Research today is focusing not only on individual social-psychological correlates of youth unemployment, but also on how youth as a period of life has become more risky and prolonged (Petersen & Mortimer, 1994).

Thus, over the past two decades, a huge number of research and policy literature about youth unemployment have emerged. It is not our intention to replicate the many thorough reviews of this literature (see Banks & Ullah, 1988; Feather, 1990; Garonna & Ryan, 1991; Hammarstrom, 1994; Petersen & Mortimer, 1994). Rather, we would focus on the changing socioeconomic context in which youth unemployment arises. By integrating two major research perspectives – one on **school-to-work transitions**, the other on **the life course** – we offer a way of reconceptualizing the nature of youth unemployment at the end of the 20th century. There are two main reasons why this theoretical convergence provides a more thorough understanding of contemporary patterns of youth employment. First, it embeds youth labour market activities and experiences in the complex developmental processes of attaining economic independence and becoming integrated into society as adults. Second, it integrates individual developmental issues within the profound structural changes that recently have transformed labour markets.

The fundamental changes in youth labour markets and the institutions governing the school-to-work transition process in the past two decades are pushing the explanatory limits of existing scholarly approaches to studying youth unemployment. The personal and social consequences of unemployment among young people go beyond an extended period of dependence or diminished well being. Indeed, transition and **life course researchers** are reinterpreting the problem of youth unemployment. This is exactly what Irwin. S. stated, “Theoretically, the two perspectives have the advantage of being able to document and explain the diversity of **roles, events and decisions** that cumulatively determine an individual’s biography. The two perspectives build on these insights, integrating developmental issues within relevant social contexts and institutional structures, recognizing that **experiences** in teenage

and young adult years can have lasting implications for adult life course trajectories. Increasingly, the individual focus of life-course studies is being integrated with more structural focus on youth labour market research to more fully indicate how young people move from dependence to independence in the spheres of employment and family. Indeed, youth unemployment touches the fundamental issue of re-defining the relationship between individuals, particularly youth and society in terms of social expectation on youth, a young person's choice regarding future education, career plans, geographic mobility, marriage and family (Irwin 1995).

To conclude, Youth unemployment research may well be at a theoretical crossroads. Persistently high youth unemployment has become a feature of most industrialized economies. Yet to understand how young people experience unemployment today, and its individual and social implications, researchers must take into account that the youth labour market has been fundamentally restructured in the past two decades. It is well documented that some groups of young people are more at risk of unemployment than others.

In light of this changing context, I argue that it is timely for Hong Kong to identify ways of integrating the insights from social-psychological perspectives on youth unemployment with school-to-work transition and life course research. Theoretically, the core research problem is the relationship between the individual and society and how this may be in flux.

Finally, in the absence of research study of the life course and transition of our young people from school to work, we venture to make the following recommendations basing on the findings from the evaluation study on the YPTP and on current situation of youth unemployment in Hong Kong: -

1. To extend and improve the YPTP both as the effective remedial measure and as an option that increase the opportunity for the school leavers in Hong Kong;
2. Together with SWD, VTC, CITA, ERB, NGOs, the Labour Department should take the lead in forming a committee to coordinate government and non-government efforts and resources so that these can more effectively deal with the youth employment problem;
3. In the long run, there should be a youth policy in Hong Kong. The yet-to-be devised youth policy should address the youth unemployment problem. When the youth policy makes its appearance in Hong Kong, corresponding measures to deal with youth unemployment in the realms of education, family and labour will emerge. In the light of these, youth unemployment can be properly managed.

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