Youth Employment in Hong Kong: An Education Perspective

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Introduction

• Youth unemployment and underemployment is a global phenomenon.

• Nearly every society experiencing high unemployment shows a disproportionately high rate of youth unemployment as compared to adult unemployment rates.

• Empowering and integrating youths, as well as harnessing their creative potentials and resources lay the hope for forging new frontiers of human civilization.

• Although education is closely and naturally related to youth employment, discussions of youth employment often lack an education perspective.

• Education could be an effective ways to address the problem of youth unemployment.
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Youth Unemployment in HK’s Transitional Economy (i)

• Unemployment among young people has become a particular issue in HK, especially since the financial crisis.

• Unemployment rate of youth aged 15-24 dropped from 10.7% in 2005 to 8.5% in 2008 but bounced back to 12.6% in 2009.

• Between 2005 and 2009, underemployment rate fluctuated between 3.1% and 4.8% for youth aged 15-19 and between 1.5% and 2.3% for youth aged 20-24.

• Percentage of youth aged 15-19 taking part-time jobs in their respective age group has climbed from 7.5 % in 1999 to 20.3% in 2009.

• Even young people with high academic qualifications faced unemployment problem in recent years, and such a situation has roused public concern.
Youth Unemployment in HK’s Transitional Economy (ii)

• HK faces economic restructuring and is developing into a knowledge economy.

• Restructuring and downturn have aggravated youth unemployment, and youth face an unstable economy and society.

• Most residents are in jobs that require more than basic literacy and numeracy that are warranted by 9-year compulsory education, while the majority only have received 9-year basic education without further learning in one way or another.

• HK government is moving to the target that 60% of students can attain post-secondary education level.

• The question is: what sort of education and training is needed by the young?
According to Professor Kai-ming Cheng (1990),

- Every year Hong Kong education system produces around 20,000 young people who fail to produce any significant credential.
- HK system legitimately screens and sifts people to such an extent that the majority is seen as fit only for operative jobs, a category with few jobs left.
- Based on a selective ideology, HK system only gives 18% of its secondary graduates the opportunity to receive university education.
- Even with this small elite, early specialization, overemphasis on “study”, inflexible learning paths and indulgence in indicators have all rendered higher learning restricted to the formal curriculum, often aiming only at examinations.
- Students are given limited opportunities to grow in many other human dimensions such as responsibilities, respects, emotions, values, principles and so forth that are so essential in the contemporary workplace.
Youth Unemployment in HK’s Transitional Economy (iii)

- To some extent, HK education system aggravates the problem of youth unemployment by screening students and depriving some young people of the further opportunity for learning.

- Even with learning in school and re-training, little evidence demonstrates such efforts are effective.

- While learning, rather than “exit test”, is badly needed to address the problem of youth unemployment in HK, there is a need for appropriate learning that recognizes that every child should be holistically equipped for family, work and community life.

- To help all children to know how to “learn”, it is important to keep in mind that they may have different strengths and weaknesses.

- Education is to help them to move forward in their learning path and eventually enter a productive career path.
Attitudes & Perspectives as Parts of Appropriate Learning

• An important part of appropriate learning would be right attitudes and perspectives.

• HK economy is vulnerable to external forces due to its small size and high exposure to the outside world.

• Young people are required to have sound understanding of the international society, in addition to their basic technical skills.

• In this regard, HK education system lags much behind.
A Doctoral Study @ HKU by Mee-lin Kan (2009)

• First empirical study of its kind in the HK context
• With impressive scale of empirical data collection and 97 interviewees
• Lasted more than seven and a half years
• Looking at the perspectives of young graduate recruits as knowledge workers
• Examined those of employers which embody the workings of the modern organization
• Revealed the dynamics within the graduate employment market in the context of the globalized knowledge economy
Findings from the Study by Kan (2009)

• HK employers are not happy with young employees, thinking them as lacking vital skills and comparing poorly with those who have studied overseas, regarding them as being “too materialistic and unrealistic”.

• Employers call for efforts to strengthen education system to teach students responsibility and better work attitude.

• Understanding of globalization and its implications, ability to work with people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and outstanding intellectual capacity, are essentially to differentiate the young global knowledge workers from their contemporaries lower down the hierarchy in the job stratification system.

• Due to a lack of understanding of global trends and weaknesses in English communication abilities, majority HK-educated graduates are not qualified for appointment to the most selective job positions in the global job market.
HK Youth Working in Mainland China

- Due to the worsening employment problem in HK and the speedy development of the economy of China, HK youth are increasingly likely to work in Mainland China.

- The open-door policy of China has stepped into a totally new stage.

- Working on the Mainland should not be considered a second choice, but rather as an aggressive action in searching for more opportunities and upgrading standards.

- Should HK youth work on the Mainland, they should devote themselves to their careers, understand local social systems, and develop wider interpersonal relationships.

- The major obstacle preventing them from doing so are their misunderstanding of Mainland’s realities, and the alienation developed thereafter.
Generic Curriculum

Past

Now
Liberal Education (LE) as a Solution (i)

- Rooted in the teaching methods of Ancient Greece, LE has been described as a philosophy of education that empowers individuals with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and a stronger sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement.
- Featured by challenging encounters with important issues, it is more a way of studying than a specific course or field of study.
- Usually global and pluralistic in scope, it can include a general education curriculum which provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and learning strategies in addition to in-depth study in at least one academic area.
- Ideally, LE produces persons who are open-minded and free from provincialism, dogma, preconception, and ideology; conscious of their opinions and judgments; reflective of their actions; and aware of their place in the social and natural worlds.
- Liberally educated people are skeptical of their own traditions, and trained to think for themselves rather than defer to authority.
Liberal Education (LE) as a Solution (ii)

• As emphasis on specialized knowledge grew, humanistic concepts such as imagination and critical thinking were disappearing from university curricula.
• They cannot be tested by standardized testing, which only places emphasis on honing technical knowledge, and its quantitative, multiple-choice nature prompts rote learning in the classroom.
• It is estimated that 30% of university graduates in the US are likely to eventually work in jobs that do not exist yet.
• A post-secondary education must prepare students for an increasingly complex labor market.
• Rather than provide narrowly designed technical courses, a LE would foster critical thinking and analytical skills to allow students to adapt to a rapidly changing workforce.
• Arum and Roska (2011) argue that students who take traditional liberal arts and science courses fare better in terms of the increase in skills measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment than students who take undergraduate course in more pre-professional fields.
Liberal Education (LE) as a Solution (iii)

• HEIs embracing the core values and methods of LE, successfully tested and sharpened for centuries, challenge students to understand and examine the world around them from a range of different perspectives and methodologies, and to master at least one core disciplinary area in detail.

• Lecturers challenge students to address big ideas and questions in courses that involve substantial engagement
  – with critical analysis of canonical texts from diverse traditions
  – with creative expression in the fine arts
  – with the construction of explanations for natural and social phenomena through the natural and social sciences

• LE is not only effective at enhancing student learning, but in producing graduates well-equipped for the challenges of the 21st century economy.

• Studies have shown that the essential learning outcomes of a LE are aligned with the skills most desired in prospective workers by private sector employers.
Criticism of Liberal Education: Division of Labor

• Although first concept by Aristotle, Durkheim completed much theorization.

• In Asia, such argument was also visible in works by ancient Confucian thinkers.

• Emphasis on practical significance of knowledge gained prominence in the modern development of East Asian societies including China, Japan and Korea, especially in their encountering with the technologically advanced West.

• Yet, division of labor has long been a human phenomenon.

• Despite differences between professions, every individual has her/his inalienable human dignity.

• Rational and moral thinking play critical roles in ensuring such a dignity, and fostering such thinkings relies heavily on LE.
Criticism of Liberal Education: Mind-Body Dualism

• Mind-body dualism holds that mind and body, as distinct kinds of substances or natures, not only differ in meaning but refer to different kinds of entities.

• Descartes formulated the problem in the form in which it exists today.

• Mind-body dualism has cost human society dearly by taking the central focus away from our dynamic nature of human beings, our relationship with the environment and our real health concerns, and to that extent blocked the development of effective interventions.

• In real life, mind is inseparable from body.
End Remarks

- A need for the fusion of specialized and general education, especially at tertiary education level.
- HK education reforms are moving into a right direction.
- Much harder said than done: HK’s introduction of a general education curricular structure and a liberal education pedagogical philosophy is challenged by two institutionalized features
  - British model of education
  - Chinese culture of teaching and learning
Thank you for listening!

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