

# Exploring the Difficulties of Open Employment Facing Intellectually-disabled Youth in Hong Kong: Current Situation and Recommendations

## Executive Summary

Overseas studies suggest that open employment of disabled persons (including the intellectually-disabled) benefits not only them personally, but also brings much positivity to businesses, public spending, and social inclusion. Open employment usually refers to gainful employment in the general labor market. The ultimate aims of promoting open employment of the disabled are social integration and financial independence. The Hong Kong Government has allocated considerable resources to nurturing and educating the intellectually-disabled from an early age, nonetheless, the chance to open employment still evades many of them. The present study aims to determine the hindering factors behind open employment for the intellectually-disabled; mulling over the views of stakeholders, public policy delivery, service provisions, as well as related overseas experience. We will put forward a number of recommendations in view of the findings.

The current situation of open employment of the intellectually-disabled in Hong Kong is rather unclear; official figures regarding their employment rates and related matters seem to be missing. According to statistics provided by Special Schools, which provide education to intellectually-disabled children, about 90 percent of school leavers progressed onto vocational training, vocational rehabilitation service, day training service, or a care center. Less than 10 percent of school leavers with mild intellectual disability were able to directly find open employment.

The “2007 Rehabilitation Programme Plan” stipulates that the role of the government is to ensure that disabled people enjoy equal opportunity to open employment. To attain the goal, the Government stepped up the provision of vocational training and employment service. Nowadays, the majority of people with mild intellectual disability and are capable of open employment will enter Integrated

Vocational Training Centre for employment preparation. Graduates of the Vocational Training Centre who have the potential but are unable to find employment will continue to receive training through various programs provided by the Social Welfare Department such as “Sunnyway” and “On the Job Training Programme for People with Disabilities” , or will be referred to supported employment services.

To better understand the difficulties to open employment encountered by the intellectually-disabled, the research team interviewed relevant stakeholders such as principals, teachers and social workers of Special Schools, parents, the intellectually-disabled, representatives of vocational training centers, NGOs, as well as businesses and social enterprises with intellectually-disabled employees. We have also interviewed the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department, HKSAR and Dr. Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, a lawmaker who is outspoken about the welfare of the disabled. Simply put, personal constraints implied that the intellectually-disabled needed longer and ample support in order to land a job. Crucial factors that thwarted open employment of the intellectually-disabled included an overall misperception of the abilities and strengths of this group, inept attempt at promoting their employment, and parents’ tendency to over-protect their children. Successful open employment hinged on the support given by social workers and parents, the involvement of employer and supervisor, as well as the provision of appropriate and effective training. Interviewees suggested a revamping of various vocational training services in view of the sizable overlapping contents. As to whether Hong Kong should implement the quota system, interviewees’ opinions were divided.

There is abundant evidence from overseas showing that supported employment can help even people with different types of severe disability (including mental, intellectual and learning) to find open employment. According to the European Union of Supported Employment, supported employment comprises of five stages – client engagement, vocational profiling, job finding, employer engagement, and

on/off the job support. A key element to supported employment is sustained support that involves services like job coaching, professional training, personalized supervision, technical support, as well as other forms of assistance. In addition, having stable and continual funding, and complementary welfare policies is essential for supported employment to succeed.

Taking into account the obstacles of open employment and overseas experience, the research team proposed a number of recommendations:

First, on current policies and systems:

Improve the system of social assistance for people with disabilities; enhance the linkage and flow between services; revamp vocational training programs; extend the period of employment support; examine the curricula of upper secondary Special School and vocational training programs; and campaign strategically for the employment of the intellectually-disabled.

Second, on proposed policies:

Compile data bank of the intellectually-disabled; develop individual casework of employment service users; and create the posts of job coach and on-site coach.

Third, on proposed programs:

Encourage volunteering among the unemployed; set up an integrated website for job seekers and potential employers to facilitate employment; and identify potential roles and tasks in industries and businesses.

These recommendations are meant to fill the gaps in current policies and services; they intend to help the intellectually-disabled to apply their strengths and do what they are good at in an integrated work environment, with the ultimate aim of empowering the intellectually-disabled and social inclusion. Some of the above recommendations pertain to policies and may take a longer time to incubate and deliberate. However, there are also others that, if resources permit, can be started

relatively shortly for the immediate benefit of the community, and thus carry the recommendation of the research team, including:

- setting up an integrated website for job seekers and potential employers
- identification of potential roles and tasks in industries and businesses
- extension of the employment support period
- establishment of the post of on-site coach
- encouragement of volunteering among the unemployed
- campaigning for the employment of the intellectually-disabled