

**The Roles Played by Unions in the Provision of
Continuing Education
in the
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region**

By

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Statement of Original Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Preface

With the advent of knowledge-based economic structures, globalization and the rapid growth in computer-based technologies, the traditional Chinese philosophy of one skill lasting for one's whole working life is no longer effective. A high quality workforce is a strong basis for economic growth, so upgrading the quality of the workforce is a policy priority for all policy makers. In his 2007 policy address, Hong Kong's Chief Executive, Donald Tsang, stated,

Employment is an issue that has to be tackled by setting long-term strategies. Hong Kong's economic growth model has changed. The need for training and self-improvement is not just confined to low-skilled, low educated and middle-aged workers. We need to turn our training policy into a long-term social investment. (Tsang, 2007, p. 32)

However, although the Hong Kong Government highlighted this problem, it did not put forward the policies and measures to deal with it.

For most people, Continuing Education is the traditional pathway to knowledge and skills recognition after leaving the formal education system. In this era of the knowledge-based economy, where every employee has to keep up with the demand for ever-changing skills and knowledge, continuing study is one of the ways to sustain a place in the labour market and enhance employability.

In facing the poor level of investment in Continuing Education provided by the Hong Kong Government, the unions, as the protector of the interests of Hong Kong workers, has a proven track-record of making a major contribution. The research presented in this thesis examines the background, the reasons and the framework within which Hong Kong's unions have played their role in meeting employees' training needs, assisting working adults to achieve their development through Continuing Education.

List of Abbreviations

CE:	Continuing Education
CEF:	Continuing Education Fund
ERB:	Employees Retraining Board
FLU:	The Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions
FTU:	Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions
HKSAR:	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
HKTUC:	Hong Kong and Kowloon Trade Union Council
ITAC:	Industrial Training Advisory Committee of Qualification Framework
TUC:	Trade Union Congress of United Kingdom
VET:	Vocational Education and Training
VTC:	Hong Kong Vocational Training Council
YPET:	Youth Pre-employment Programme
YWETS:	Youth Work Experience and Training Scheme

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Abstract

This thesis develops the argument that unions in Hong Kong have an important role to play in narrowing the gap between employees' educational needs and the provision of courses. The thesis demonstrates that the special history and the unique features of Hong Kong unions produced opportunities for them to offer education services to employees. The study confirms that the unions' education services meet employees' needs for Continuing Education.

Hong Kong unions' provision of educational services is the result of their need to differentiate themselves from other unions in a competitive environment as well as of union members demanding those services in the absence of the Hong Kong Government providing them. The unions' lack of a legal right to engage in collective bargaining led to the fragmentation of the union movement, with different unions guided by different ideals, and in turn to unions having to provide a range of services, including education services, to attract members and to consolidate their power. In addition, union members demanded that the unions provide educational services since the Hong Kong Government (both before and after 1997, when China assumed sovereignty over Hong Kong) failed to develop proper Continuing Education policies, which in turn led to employees getting the opportunity to study in union training centres.

A survey of the demand for Continuing Education by HKU SPACE (Hong Kong University, School of Professional and Continuing Education, 2001) shows that 8% of participants in Continuing Education in Hong Kong studied with the biggest union group, the FTU. This demonstrates that the unions play an important role in the provision of Continuing Education.

The research demonstrates that the unique background of Hong Kong unions, their flexible education arrangements and low course fees, and the close relationship between union members and unions, motivate employees to study and help them overcome barriers to study. Unions are not only concerned with employees' day-to-day

work-related knowledge but also with “holistic” life and health issues. The ideal of regarding Continuing Education as a labour right supports the unions’ policy to invest their resources in helping employees to study.

The thesis argues that Hong Kong unions have an important role to play in narrowing the gap between employees’ educational needs and the actual provision of courses. The thesis demonstrates that the special history and the unique features of Hong Kong unions produced opportunities for unions to offer education services to employees. The study confirms that the unions’ education services meet employees’ needs for Continuing Education.

Seven recommendations are made which are intended to assist unions in narrowing the gap between the educational needs of employees and the provision of education services in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.