| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Precarity and Struggles of Employment: A Case Study of Undergraduates in Hong Kong

Shuk Ling Cheng[1] ✉ **and Aigerim Kubanychbekova[2]**
[1][2]Department of Management, City University of Hong Kong
Corresponding Author: Shuk Ling Cheng, **E-mail**: sl.cheng@cityu.edu.hk

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| ABSTRACT

Despite having acquired an education that should prepare them for the workforce, many fresh graduates are facing difficulties in securing gainful employment in Hong Kong. Drawing on the concept of "employment precarity", this study examines the predicaments that fresh university graduates encounter in Hong Kong in relation to social identity transition and job-seeking barriers. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the researchers adopt a qualitative methodology to examine the written reflections of eight undergraduate students at a university in Hong Kong. (1) The findings reveal that students experience frustration, anxiety and uncertainty during the transition, indicating a need for improvement in the current pedagogical policies. (2) Recommendations are offered for higher education policymakers and universities to help alleviate these hardships. New sets of pedagogical strategies are developed to mitigate graduates' exposure to employment precarity and to enhance their employability.

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1. Introduction

"What's next?" has been a baffling question for beleaguered fresh university graduates who find themselves sitting on a precipice of job finding. Such uncertainty about the future job prospect can engender anxiety and stress, especially in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (3), heighted by widespread diffusion. While digital connectivity offers potential freedom from physical limits, reactivation and immediate answers, however inhibits deep reflection (Choonara et al., 2022). (4) The intermediacy of connectivity hence undermines the subjective practices necessary for developing solid relationships, resulting in an erosion of existential dimensions and a reshaping of the risk, trust, and security perception (Choonara et al., 2022). All these correspond to the condition of "employment precarity" introduced by Choonara, Murgia and Carmo (2022), which is the "reconstructing experience of a person's self-realization" in the limbo of employment uncertainty and career planning. (4) In other words, employment precarity is a journey of mental insecurity for "those going through the passage from one job to another; from education to employment" (5), which can be found in the transformation of social relations or social roles, often leading to uncertainty in everyday experiences and future perceptions (Bourdieu, 1998). However, existing studies of university graduates' social role transition are limited to Western contexts such as the United States. (6) In addition, the focus on the social role transition — from university to workplace — is understudied, as most of the previous studies tend to scrutinize the role transition process after entering the workforce without understanding students' concerns prior to graduation. (11) In light of this, this book hopes to zoom into the Hong Kong context and shed light on the struggles that university graduates may face when their changes in social roles ensue.

The adaptation and adjustment to the social relations or the social roles, referring to "the process through which individuals psychologically exit one social role and enter another" (7), can constitute precarious forms of resilience. Although it is a dynamic trajectory, in which by prior learning, preparation and experiences, one can attain a gradual transition, (6) it can be equally a daunting experience for young graduates who are inexperienced and anxious about their career prospects. According to

government statistics, the July-September 2021 unemployment rate reached 6.4%, considered the peak for the last 15 years (9). The fifth wave of the pandemic laid bare the harsh realities for Hong Kong's economy — the closure of businesses, bankruptcies of companies, and mass layoffs. Particularly, fresh graduates in Hong Kong find it difficult to seek jobs in the retail and travel sectors, both of which are hard hit by the pandemic. An undergraduate from a business school reported: "If I were to rate my concern about the jobs impact of both the virus and the protests on a scale of one to 10, it would definitely be a 10" (10). In the face of the sluggish economy still reeling from the pandemic, almost half of the sub-degree graduates opt to continue their studies instead of entering the job market directly. Given the possible challenges that may coordinate/hinder individual pathways, how these graduates should properly handle these challenges precipitated by the changes of social role transition and social instability becomes the key quest to this book. Suggestions would also be made in order to mitigate their exposure to employment precarity.

2. Objectives
This qualitative case study aims to (a) Identify the concerns of undergraduates in Hong Kong regarding social role transition upon employment; (b) Gain a better understanding of current pedagogical policies of higher education institutions in Hong Kong, and (c) Explore pedagogical strategies and offer suggestions for both teachers and students to enhance fresh graduates' employability.

3. Methodology
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 80s as a branch of discourse analysis; it has become one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis since then. (1) CDA views discourse as "socially constitutive" as well as "socially conditioned". (1) Discourse analysis is regarded as a way of examining the use of language to discover patterns either in spoken or written forms as well as their correlation with societies. In other words, CDA helps researchers to examine the motivation beneath a text and to view a societal problem on a micro level. As Chouliaraki and Fairclough pointed out, "the important characteristic of economic, social, and cultural change of advanced modernity is that they exist as a discourse in addition to processes that take place outside the discourse." (12)

In this case, study, CDA is applied to the qualitative data that was collected in the form of student written assignments during an undergraduate course in Hong Kong. 60 local undergraduate students were required to reflect on the learning experience and express personal thoughts throughout the business management course, with a focus on organizational behavior and workplace psychology. There was no restriction on the text structure. Students were encouraged to write free-style self-reflection reports. 8 samples were selected after a review of the content. Samples were anonymous and encoded with student ID numbers instead of the students' names.

4. Discussion
With reference to students' self-reflection report extracts, it is recognized that they share common concerns about employment uncertainty upon graduation. First and foremost, Student A describes the job-seeking process as a *"challenging but exciting journey"* since it is difficult to find *"a suitable job that fits one's expectations with encouraging working environment"*. It is therefore revealed that the challenges that graduate very often face would be professional role and work environment expectations mismatch, which could potentially produce a "transition shock" as graduates enter the workforce. "Transition shock" refers to *"the expectations of graduates' new to the environment are different to reality, resulting in negative emotions such as fear, anxiety and frustration"*. (13) Student A also confesses that he/she is still *"lost about what he/she should do in the future"*. This reflects that life after graduation seems confusing for undergraduate students, given that the job-seeking process is a huge challenge associated with uncertainty.

Student A
"Next year, I am going to enter a new stage of my life and start to work, which seems to be a challenging but exciting journey for me. However, it is difficult for many people to find a suitable job that fits their expectations and has an encouraging working environment...Although I am graduating in less than 6 months, I am still lost about what I should do in the future."

Over and above that, Student B reveals similar concerns over the job-seeking process. There is *"no clear image of his/her career path"* since all the jobs that Student B has done before were part-time jobs; therefore, with very few previous work experiences, Student B feels that job hunting could be difficult. Meanwhile, parental and peer pressure are sources of stress and anxiety along the way, as Student B is graduating soon. Transition shock, as mentioned above, may further worsen the negative experiences that graduates encounter when they lack "work-like learning" such as internship and placement. (14)

Student B
"As a final year student, I still did not have a clear image of my career path, and I can feel my parents' rising anxiety about this because they talked to me more frequently and have asked some of their friends to give me advice, and I start realizing that this may be a problem...When the scheduled graduation time is coming closer, my pressure and worry keep rising due to the uncertainties of the future...So far, all jobs that I have been done or doing are part-time jobs, with few working experiences; sometimes I do not know how I can perform better when hunting for a job."

Student C admits that physical discomfort and negative mental thoughts arise during their previous part-time job. "Loss of motivation and confidence" occurred when Student C experienced difficulties adapting to the new working environment. Role change was identified as a major stressor when young adults transition into new social roles such as employment or marriage. (15)

Student C
"I used to have a part-time sales job. The head of the department requires employees to always smile and understand the purpose of the product very well to answer customer questions and to achieve a certain amount of product sales every month. Otherwise, I will face vicious criticism from the department manager. Whenever I think about working, I will have physical discomfort. I got up every weekday, threw up, and then went to work. This led to my loss of motivation and confidence. It even made me have very negative thoughts. At that time, I thought that even after graduation, it was difficult for me to have a passionate and aggressive attitude toward work."

Student D explicitly expresses confusion towards future career paths, which derives pressure and anxiety. Even though this student has attended many career orientation talks at school, it is still confusing for him/her to find a direction. Student D also gives reasons for the worries, as *"all these worries stem from the uncertainty"*, which echoes with the idea of graduates' employment precarity. Student D has biased perceptions of "work" based on other's experiences and opinions *"We have heard a lot of complaints about working from various platforms. And this happened in every industry."* This may disrupt the process of social role transition or even create new barriers on the way.

Student D
"I was pretty lost searching for my career path in these few years. Especially when I am getting closer to graduation, the pressure and anxiety grow greater and greater. Although many career orientations talks have been held in school for people like me, I still feel confused about the future and my goal. I guess all my worries stem from the uncertainty. I cannot decide which path to go, which is extremely time wasting if going in the wrong way, and on the other hand, I cannot find my interested industry to devote, so I prefer to follow others...Working is not an exciting or attractive activity for almost all human beings; we have heard a lot of complaints about working from various platforms. And this happened in every industry."

Student E, on the other hand, has a problem adapting to the *"fast-paced and impatient culture of Hong Kong"*, not to mention the corporate culture in the local context. Moreover, Student E prefers to *"control"* one's life so as to gain *"a sense of stability"*. This statement is associated with the avoidance of a precarious mental status, which originates from the unfamiliarity with local culture and work environment.

Student E
"I often think that I am having a harder time adjusting than my peers because I get easily angered by the fast-paced and impatient culture of Hong Kong. People cutting in line, not holding the door for others, and not saying "thank you" infuriates me...I want to control my life and the situations around me; being in control provides me with a sense of stability."

Student F, Student G and Student H have described their precarious mental status in different ways. For Student F, he/she feels perplexed and depicts future career paths as "a boundless road ahead", which is a metaphor that reflects the uncertainty of employment upon graduation. Student G directly uses the adjective "unpredictable" to narrate the future career path, then explains the reason underneath as *"everyone's path is unique"* and *"there is no guidelines to follow"*, which relates to the issue of "uncertain" state after school life. Student H provides a straightforward claim that he/she is *"confused about choosing future job"*; this confusion towards the new page of life after graduation derives from the uncertain and precarious inner status.

Student F
"Today, being about to graduate, I am perplexed as the road ahead is boundless."

Student G
"The future is unpredictable, and everyone's path is unique; there are no guidelines to follow."

Student H
"When I became a university student, I always thought and felt confused about choosing my future job."

5. Pedagogical Implication and Recommendations
5.1 Mandatory Internship Experience
Internship programs usually benefit undergraduate students, higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as employers in different ways, which is regarded as "developing a win-win link". (16). From the angle of employers, graduates with relevant internship experience have a higher level of employability. The Hong Kong Healthcare Market Research and Consulting Ltd. conducted market research in June 2022, in which HR managers were asked for their opinions on the recruitment of fresh graduates. The results revealed that most of the HR managers in Hong Kong (89.9%) would prefer hiring fresh graduates with relevant job experience

even if they did not possess a degree relevant to the position (17). This finding highlights the importance of relevant internship experience in job hunting and its positive relationship with employability. For HEIs, this has entailed a renewed concern for their graduates' integration into the labor market. (16)

From the perspective of HEIs, internship programs could provide students with a smoother social role transition from school to the labor market. Internships could help university students to gain certain skills as preparation for work; these include written and oral communication, critical thinking, problem-solving and teamwork skills, which are difficult to learn and practice in classroom settings. (18) Jackson (2016) also introduced the essence of *"embracing pre-professional identity"* into university curriculum design. (2) With practical experience from internship jobs, undergraduates could better blend into the real workplace both technically and mentally, which helps to alleviate the feeling of "uncertainty" and "precarity".

Concerns about internships being compulsory or voluntary in business degree curriculums have been pointed out in previous studies. (12,16,19,20) For HEIs, the promotion of employability by making mandatory internships one of the graduation requirements has become a priority in Hong Kong. It was reported that computer science undergraduates from the City University of Hong Kong had reached 100% full-time employment upon graduation, where the internship was made mandatory as one of the graduation requirements. (21) In the initial stage, HEI policymakers could consider making internship experience one of the compulsory graduation requirements for students of business school. By evaluating the effectiveness of the initial stage, this policy could then be further extended to other departments and majors so that students from different academic areas could be benefited.

5.2 Social Interaction with Alumni
It is of paramount importance for graduates to acquire specialized skills and knowledge in preparation for entering the workforce. What is more, they should also gain awareness of employer expectations, as well as standards of job behavior. Existing studies have pointed out that conventional academic teachings may be inadequate for students to progress from school to workplace; therefore, social interactions with alumni may serve as crucial resources that help graduates reduce surprises and uncertainties after entering the workforce whilst facilitating seamless social role transition. (6) Alumni could keep students up-to-date on professional development by acting as a guide of career development which, give tips and guidance to recent graduates. This further facilitates student role exit and helps construct a new professional social identity. The construction of a new professional social identity gives meaning and purpose to newcomers to an organization, which boosts the role transition of graduates as a result. (22)

Workshops and sharing sessions can be organized by individual academic units and departments targeting undergraduates from different majors. Notable alumni and new alumni can be invited to give separate sharing sessions for students in regard to the latest development of the job market, as well as the "dos and don'ts" in the actual workplace. A well-designed mentoring programme can be launched as a short-term measure to give graduates a chance to deepen their understanding of different professions and industries in order to help them better *"internalize the professional rules, values, standards and norms"*, which would be beneficial for their social role transition. (6)

6. Conclusion
This qualitative case study has identified the concerns of undergraduates in Hong Kong regarding social role transition upon employment, including the hardship of the jobseeking process, uncertainty of adapting to a new work environment, long-term prospect of job industry development and mismatched expectations. Additionally, it is aware that undergraduate internships are deeply embedded in higher education institutions, though it requires more attention on its integration with degree programme curriculum, as well as the different socio-cultural contexts in different countries. Hence, HEIs are suggested to review the internship program design and promote communication among the three stakeholders involved: employers, HEIs and students, so as to align expectations together. (16) Meanwhile, social interaction with alumni is proposed as a short-term measure to give graduates a chance to deepen their understanding of different professions and industries so as to alleviate graduates' panic upon graduation.

One of the limitations of this case study comes from the fact that this study was conducted using only students' opinions from the same course and only from one university in Hong Kong. In other words, since this study focused on a relatively small sample of university students in Hong Kong, its findings cannot be generalized. Therefore, a potential future research direction is to assess the feasibility of extending compulsory internships to other academic areas, such as the School of Creative Media. Additional research is also necessary for understanding the perceptions of internships for HEIs and employers in Hong Kong. Conducting interviews with employers and HEI policymakers or distributing questionnaires on a larger scale for data collection may produce more comprehensive research findings. Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) can be conducted with computer software such as Atlas.ti, so as to facilitate critical discourse analysis systematically when analyzing different layers of discourses, including interview verbatim transcripts and survey results. Improvements should also be made in terms of internship design to narrow the gap between the supply of fresh graduates and employers' demand and expectations for well-prepared young talents.

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ORCID iD: 0000-0001-9893-3818

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