

**An exploratory study on the role of master-level  
studies in career mobility of young graduate workers  
in Hong Kong**

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# **An exploratory study on the role of master-level studies in career mobility of young graduate workers in Hong Kong**

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## **Abstract**

Informed by human capital theory as well as signalling and screening theory, I have conducted qualitative research using a hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches to understand the new role of master's-level studies in the career mobility of young Hong Kong graduate workers. Rather than regarding master's studies as a 'direct' vehicle for upward mobility, graduate workers view it as a vehicle for 'investment' in their human and social capital that may be mobilised in exchange of superior career opportunities to gain upward mobility immediately or sometimes represents a form of *locked* capital that has delayed activation under different conditions. The hierarchy of study's needs and goals outlines the landscape of motivation for their biographic learning when negotiating a risk society. I have also created the term *object of recognition* to identify the roots of different forms of career advancement as well as the *engine theory* characterised by the metaphors – *human engine* and *social engine* as explaining the mechanism of getting upward career mobility resulting from education. I have found that through master's studies, students aim to make *internal* and *external changes* to increase/update their knowledge and skills as well as to upgrade their academic or professional qualifications. I suggest that graduate workers equip themselves with the *human engine* and the *social engine* in order to climb the social ladder. This enrichment in mobility language helps us understand today's social reality. This paper ends with practice-based tips for prospective master's students and careers practitioners. Based on the findings of the research, these tips provide them theoretically and practically informed new insights into enhancement of young Hong Kong graduate workers' early career outcomes by making use of master's education.

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## List of Abbreviations

AGT	Achievement Goal Theory
ASWO	Assistant Social Work Officer
<i>c.f.</i>	Compare
CPA	Certified Public Accountant
CV	Curriculum Vitae
EU	European Union
HCT	Human Capital Theory
HE	Higher Education
HK	Hong Kong
HKSAR	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
HRM	Human Resources Management
<i>ibid.</i>	<i>ibidem</i>
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MEd	Master of Education
MPhil	Master of philosophy
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NIAE	National Institute of Adult Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OED	Origin-Education-Destination
PExpE	Post-Experience Education
PGE	Postgraduate Education
RN	Registered Nurse
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SWA	Social Work Assistant
UGC	University Grants Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States
UX	User Experience
<i>vs.</i>	<i>versus</i>

## **Acronyms of Industries**

Arch	Architecture
Bank	Banking
Engg	Engineering
F&A	Finance and Accounting
IT	Information Technology
Logt	Logistics
Med	Medicine
Others	Other Businesses
Rech	Technology
SW	Social Work



# 1. Introduction

As a careers teacher at a Hong Kong (HK) secondary school, I endeavour to help my students pursue studies at universities. My mission as a teacher is not uncommon in HK owing to the traditional Chinese thought that “knowledge brings wealth”<sup>1</sup> and Confucianism’s respect for education (Sung et al., 2000; Wong and Slater, 2002; Li, 2017). Confucian philosophy highly esteems the pursuit of learning as a vehicle to self-improvement (Cho and Yoon, 2012). In addition to HK, Korea has a Confucian social base “that puts premium on education and has blind faith in the value of education” (Yeom, 2016: 54) such that parents are willing to invest substantially in their children’s education. Historically and culturally, laymen in Korea generally have high expectations for career mobility through education, thus keeping higher education in high demand. They believe in the positive effects of education on career mobility (ibid.). I also see many university graduates pursuing graduate studies by continuing to invest their time, money and effort into becoming more successful in their careers. Some succeeded but some failed.

Trista and Bobby were my students in their secondary levels (i.e. years 12 to 17) and are participants in this study. To the best of my knowledge, neither enjoyed learning; instead, they were pragmatic learners and saw learning and examinations as a means to having higher earnings and improved social-economic status in terms of living standards such as types of dwelling, number of car(s) and so forth (Ekehammar et al., 1987) in the adulthood. Due to their good examination results, they gained admission tickets to universities to pursue their bachelor degrees in Computer Science and English after matriculation respectively. When their three-year undergraduate programmes were completed, they immediately obtained full-time employment with the stable earnings they aimed for. Recently, I learned that they returned to school to earn their master’s degrees. I am curious as to why they would return to universities to take master’s courses. If they had already obtained what they wanted, what did they further want to gain from their master’s studies? Was their investment in their education worth making?

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<sup>1</sup> (「書中自有黃金屋」《勸學詩》)

What did they experience after graduation? Did they benefit from their master's studies in terms of career mobility? If so, how?

Traditionally, not only in China and Korea but also elsewhere in the world, UK for example, Higher Education (HE) has been viewed traditionally as a direct vehicle of upward mobility throughout the world (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013); therefore, more education would mean better career prospects. The returns on investments in education could be well explained by human capital theory (Becker, 1962), which states that knowledge and skills can be upgraded through continuous training, resulting in improved personal competence, job performance and subsequent investment returns. It has also been empirically proven that earnings are positively correlated with level of education (Mok, 2016a). However, despite the massification of HE in HK (Lee, 2016), the occupational and earnings mobility of HK graduates seems problematic (HKSAR, 2016). Like people in other regions of the world, many young HK adults with bachelor degrees have found their dreams to achieve upward mobility under this traditional thought burst. On the one hand, there is a substantial supply of workers with degrees, thereby leading to credential/qualification inflation (Tooley, 1996; Wolbers et al., 2001; Huijgen, 1990), which means that the market value of education is reduced. On the other hand, the labour market fails to keep pace with such expansions by offering an adequate number of graduate-level jobs (Kariya, 2011), meaning that students have been bumped down in the labour market (Muysken and Weel, 1999; Wolbers et al., 2001) and displaced from the graduate job market. “Yet, higher educational attainment has not led to better job prospects, with an increasing share of people engaged in lower-paid associate professional jobs, and to some extent, service and sales jobs” (Legco, 2015: 9). Michael – one study participant – is an example. His story is a successful case of climbing the social ladder from a place that originally belongs to his counterparts with inferior academic qualification to a higher stratum that matches his qualification.

From the government figures (UGC, 2017) illustrated in Table 1 of Appendix I, HK has been producing an increasing number of undergraduates (from 14,290 in 2000/2001 to 21,034 in 2015/2016), while post-graduates have remained rather constant in the 2010s (around 4,000 per year). In a 2015 study on earnings mobility in HK (HKSAR, 2016), a downturn in upward earnings mobility for HE graduates was reported. Thus, those graduates should have realised that HE would have no longer been

regarded as a sufficient condition for upward mobility when they entered the labour market (see Figure 3). In this sense, I am curious as to why they decided to go back to school to pursue a master's degree, even though they did not enjoy school or had been disappointed by the underemployment associated with a malfunction in their previous education that failed to bring them their expected and desired career destinations like their predecessors. Furthermore, what did they experience after graduation? Since better careers and earnings are no longer a direct consequence of education, can we better understand the values and rationale behind HE including the added value students pursue through education? How did their new degrees work in achieving mobility in occupation and earnings? Can we learn from some stories of young HK adults to enrich our knowledge of mobility mechanisms? In my definition, 'young' refers to those aged 25 to 35 years. This age group is characterised as more energetic and achievement oriented (Howe and Strauss, 2003; Baker, 2010). Therefore, they are expected to be keen on becoming upwardly mobile. This research does not focus on why the massification of HE in HK has not increased the upward mobility of HK youth; instead, it examines the stories of young graduate employees in HK regarding their career paths after graduation. I attempt to explore the role of master's-level studies in career mobility based on these stories. The results presented here are useful for those who are struggling to opt for an investment in master's studies in order to climb the career ladder to make educated decision. In addition, to date, in the academia the acquisition of postgraduate qualifications has not been well integrated into the career mobility literature (Lindley and Machin, 2012: 265; Ecclestone, 2007); thus, the research results about the participants' experiences as well as the frameworks and theories that have emerged to help explain how people experience further education and career mobility thereafter contribute to the literature by inserting a new starting point for further studies of career mobility with regard to graduate-level studies.

This research study is designed under interpretivism as the philosophical framework and is grounded in the perspective of social constructivism as the ontological and epistemological position. Using a hybrid qualitative method combining both deductive and inductive approaches (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), why HK young graduate workers pursue master's studies and how it benefits career mobility are explored and theorised. Based on literature review, I define a structure of initial codes and develop a question set for data collection. Preliminary codes can help me integrate

concepts already well known in the extant literature (Bradley et al., 2007: 1763). I draw on existing concepts to accomplish the analysis by collecting data through conducting face-to-face interviews. I use a group of individuals aged 25–35 who have completed master’s studies and have full-time employment as the object of the research to explore their experiences relating to their studies and careers. The development of the framework and theory is based on both deduction – informed by the literature review, and induction – grounded on data from the interviews. Both western and local literature will be reviewed as “Hong Kong is frequently described as a place where ‘East meets West’, reflecting the culture’s mix of the territory’s Chinese roots with the culture brought to it during its time as a British colony” (Chronicle, 2019). Contextually, through this study I attempt to determine the beliefs and values associated with master’s studies, why students reinvest in education, what graduate workers experience in the labour market after graduation and how they become more mobile in their occupations and earnings as a result of their master’s education.

The next chapter defines the central research concepts and their relationships and reviews the extant literature, debates and theories used to develop the research questions. The key themes of the literature are used to develop the specific data collection questions. The order of the sections is designed to signpost how the answers are explored in the research. The methodology chapter explains how the study is conducted and how the results are obtained. I also point out why the hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches is appropriate to answer the research question. The five-phase research process that Denzin and Lincoln (2011) provide is adopted, and how these processes were conducted is described. Following this, the data analysis chapter presents the results and details the process of developing theoretical frameworks and theories to explain the participants’ experiences. Combining what has already been shown in the literature review with what has emerged from this research, I discuss what the findings mean with respect to theoretical issues and relationships in previous research. The implication section should be highlighted, as it might be most ‘useful’ and ‘practical’ to those who intend to pursue master’s studies and careers practitioners. The last chapter concludes the study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter defines the central research concepts – capital, career mobility and master’s education – before reviewing the literature on the evolution of youth transitions from school to work, giving rise the notion of a risk society in which individuals act as producers of their own labour situations and creators of their own biographies (Beck, 1992). As a result, this generation in HK (in this research, the demographic cohort born between 1981 and 1991) has to continuously negotiate uncertainty and risk throughout their lives. Their belief in individual skills, capabilities and decisions as the keys to successful outcomes resulting in the importance of credentials against achievement is addressed. Indeed, due to this and other motives of the knowledge-based economy as well as unemployment (Wan, 2011), like many governments, HK has started the project of HE massification to cater to the growing demand for labour with high skills, such as business knowledge, due to the economic transformation from a manufacturing-orientation to a service-orientation. As well, there are “jobs without workers and workers without jobs” (Wong, 1998: 405); however, career mobility has not been found to increase accordingly (Mok, 2016a). The traditional transmitting role of education in career mobility has become problematic (Lee, 2016). Scholars have attempted to account for the phenomenon basically from the angles of demand and supply. On the demand side, the relatively slow pace of economic development could not produce an adequate number of high-level graduate jobs, while on the supply side the increase in the number of HE graduates has led to credential inflation, causing opportunity traps and social congestion in society. The notions of uncertainty and the risk society characterise the people in this era, as termed the Generation Y – the demographic cohort born between the late 1970s and the late 1990s (Kwok, 2012), differently from those in other generations (Twenge and Campbell, 2008). These notions also give meaning and value to studies of intra-generational mobility, as individuals expect to be more mobile in society and endeavour to climb the social ladder by using their best strategies when they reach periods of uncertainty in their lifespans. If more education implies higher-ranking occupations and more earnings, people with an undergraduate education would naturally engage in master’s education to obtain what they desire; however, the role of

education as a direct vehicle of upward mobility (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013) seems problematic, as they have experienced. This may have weakened their confidence in education for mobility; in this regard, their motives to obtain master degrees have become more diverse and interesting. Therefore, uncertainty in this risk society and the declining role of education in upward mobility establish the context for this study.

This chapter also brings us to see HK young employees' general career concerns in this risk society in relation to their need for learning, giving rise to the notion of "responsible learners" (Webb and Warren, 2009) who are willing to invest in education to increase their human capital. Their belief that education can make a difference in earnings and the value they see in obtaining a master's degree are addressed. Three motivational theories, namely self-determination theory, achievement goal theory and expectancy theory, are reviewed to provide a theoretical background for the research, data collection and questions to explain why young HK graduate adults are willing to return to school while working. The chapter ends with the long-lasting debate over the causes of the positive relationship between schooling and earnings as represented by human capital theory as well as signalling and screening theory, providing a theoretical framework for the research and explaining the prospective findings.

## 2.2. Career mobility and Master's Programmes

"By career mobility is understood any transition of an individual or social object or value – anything that has been created or modified by human activity – from one social position to another" (Sorokin, 1964: 133). Stuart (2012) regards mobility as "a move from one part of society to another..." (p.10). The very notion of mobility can be conceptualised as differences in economic circumstances between generations (e.g. children and parents), which is referred to as inter-generational mobility, for which a vast amount of research has been done. Another concept is intra-generational mobility, which refers to mobility within the same generation and visualises a person's mobility as their work history from, say, first to present employment (Marshall et al., 1997), representing 'rags to riches' cases in cases of upward mobility, but this has largely been ignored (Stuart, 2012). In short, mobility is assumed to be "climbing up some kind of

fixed social ladder of income or style of life” (Halsey, 2013: 645). This study of career mobility concerns origin-to-destination trajectories. Referring to the notions of “position” (Sorokin, 1964) and “part” (Stuart, 2012), Ekehammar et al. (1987) attempt to construct an index of socio-economic status (SES) using a weighted sum of several indicators covering various economic characteristics linked to living standards and lifestyle, specifically the type of dwelling, boat, summer house, number of cars, number of vacations abroad or interstate and television types. However, education, occupation and income are often termed in research papers as traditional “components”, “factors”, “predictors”, “determinants” and/or “indicators” of SES (e.g. Adler et al., 2000; Kluegel et al., 1977; Euteneuer, 2014; Kiser and Whelpton, 1949; Baxter, 1994; Birkelund, 2006). These do not only confine to inter-generational mobility, but also relate to intra-generational mobility in that the ‘climbing’ action can be understood to happen and re-happen throughout the career lifespan.

Sorokin (1964) argues that mobility can be horizontal or vertical (see also Legco, 2015). Horizontal mobility refers to an individual’s transition from one social group to another on the same social level. Vertical mobility describes the relations involved in the transition from one social stratum to another in which the movement is ascending (i.e. social climbing) or descending (i.e. social sinking). According to the nature of the stratification, there are ascending and descending currents of economic, political and occupational mobility. The ascending current exists either in the form of an infiltration of lower-stratum individuals into an existing higher one or the creation of a new group by these individuals followed by an insertion into a higher stratum.

“Social mobility<sup>2</sup> can be viewed as a multi-dimensional concept that is measured in terms of changes in earnings, education and occupation” (Legco, 2015: 1; OECD, 2010b). “Earnings mobility describes the movement of an individual from one income group to another within one's lifetime” (Legco, 2015: 2). Similarly, education mobility and occupational mobility can be defined in this manner along their corresponding hierarchies (see Lenski, 1954). In this research, we define *career mobility* as the sum of earnings mobility and occupational mobility. In this sense, we ignore the dimension of

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<sup>2</sup> In HKSAR reports, the notion of ‘social mobility’ seldom includes any measures of individuals’ social class that in contrast commonly appears in most western literatures. It can be viewed therefore as rather an equivalent concept of ‘career mobility’ this research focuses thereafter throughout this section.

education in defining what we call career mobility, as all participants' educational attainment must have already been increased through their studies from the bachelor's to the master's level. At this margin, we look at how participants' master's education has benefited their career mobility by listening to their stories and experiences.

There are several definitions of master's studies. For example, according to the Lithuanian law on HE, it is defined as the second-stage of university studies aimed at improving one's professional qualifications and extending one's general and scientific competence (Ginevičius and Ginevičiene, 2009). According to Capacities of Universities to Implement Master's Studies (Siauciunas, 2006), master's studies pursue two goals: increasing general knowledge and scientific competence and improving one's professional competence or qualifications. The former is oriented towards research activities serving the academic community while the latter aims to satisfy the economic needs of employers and the labour market (ILSR, 2003, 2004). Master's studies should (1) prepare the students for labour market; (2) prepare students for active participation in democratic society; (3) provide personal development; and (4) transfer and extend the knowledge students acquire (Ginevičius and Ginevičiene, 2009). In particular, "[m]aster's degree studies oriented to research activities and raising one's qualification in research are aimed at training the students for the researcher's or teacher's career" (p.139).

Conrad et al. (1993) have found that in the United States, regardless of field, master's programmes can be categorised into four broad types: (1) ancillary programmes – in relation to PhD programmes in the same department; (2) career advancement programmes – a practitioner degree aiming at providing client-centred, career-oriented training; (3) apprenticeship programmes – a platform where student apprentices working with faculty masters to become members of the guild; and (4) community-centred programmes – students and faculty work as a collegial learning community. In a study of the educational aspirations of baccalaureates one year after graduation (NCES, 1993), 15 per cent of master's programmes (mainly in the fields of arts and sciences) fall into the first category, which "provides students interested in research-related careers an option for acquiring the appropriate training and credentials" (LaPidus, 1997: 32) whereas the vast majority – 85 per cent (mainly in the fields of business, education and engineering) – pursue master's degrees belonging the remaining



three categories, known as the practice-oriented degrees characterised by “prepar[ing] people to practise a certain profession, or to improve and extend the abilities of those already practicing” (p.31), rather than focusing on the state of knowledge in a discipline (p.31). Since the early 2000s, HKSAR has begun privatising HE institutions that enjoy a high degree of flexibility and freedom in management and resource allocation in response to market changes (Wan, 2011); therefore, there is little recent data to distinguish the types of master’s degrees.

Under the old debate whether postgraduate curricula should be academic or vocational, Duke (1997) simply classifies master’s degree in a dichotomous way as the research and the taught degree. This dichotomy is widely used in HK (see Census, 2014, 2016; UGC, 2017). The distinction between the two is in part aligned with the distinction between postgraduate education (PGE) and post-experience education (PExpE). PGE is the formal and accredited education requiring and building upon what went before those who already graduated, which provides a higher level of specialised study. Conventionally, it is seen as a continuation of education taken by the elite graduates moving into research and finally academic teaching positions (ibid). PExpE, however, is much more loosely defined without clear boundaries, taught modules, credit-bearing units or courses leading to professional and managerial qualifications, which are sometimes transferable to graduate-level academic currency. Furthermore, much graduate research is now post-experience – often part-time and concurrent with employment (ibid). The notion of lifelong learning implies a “fusion and diffusion of the student role into other roles throughout life: the roles of worker and citizen in learning organisations and a learning society” (p.91); therefore, the PGE-PExpE distinction is no longer as important today. More important is that there is now an “illegitimate tendency to treat graduate education as essentially advanced preparation for the academic professional and the next stage of economic and social selection after the first degree...” (p.87). The extension of the initial ‘front-end’ HE into the master’s level and beyond provides easy means for both institutions and organisations to select people who by this mechanism can separate themselves to compete in a massified HE world.

In Dugdale (1997)’s view, “[t]he true value of a postgraduate education will increasingly be seen in longer term career development rather than immediate job or

salary prospects” (p.165). Therefore, in light of Dugdale’s work, mobility can be measured on a short-term and long-term basis. Besides, a degree is a major determinant of an individual’s life chances in the Weberian sense (Gerth and Mills 1964, cited in Wright, 2001: 111), as it is associated with one’s economic position within a social structure.

...HE qualifications govern the placement of individuals in the labour market, affect their chances of subsequent advancement and, in addition to influencing their direct financial rewards and working conditions, also condition their general career prospects (Wright, 2001: 112).

Symbolic awards in the HE system can be regarded as an interface of communication between the HE system and the public (Wright, 2001). As suggested by Wright, five spheres are selected for their apparent conceptual distinctiveness in the significance of qualifications: (1) status (honour in the Weberian sense); (2) access to limited resources; (3) knowledge; (4) social practice; and (5) preparedness. Thus, the functions of HE are to provide a large-scale sorting and labelling process. Wright’s view informs the framework of assessing the effect of master’s qualifications in this research study.

## 2.3. Evolution of Youth Transitions from School to Work

Historically, youth – between the ages of 15 and 24 (YDC, 2018) – has been regarded as a site in life-course which people are socialised to develop more concrete ideas and plans for their future position and orientation in the social order. In many economies in the post-war world, such as the UK, the nature of work and the attendant transition process from school to work evolved according to economic changes. The notion of youth transition over the past decades was characterised by Evans and Furlong (1997) metaphors – niches, pathways, trajectory and navigation – that evolved to represent the dominant theoretical perspectives in 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and

onwards respectively. Each metaphor represents the ways that transitions were understood under the particular social milieu in these different stages of evolution.

In the 1960s, the UK labour market was buoyant and graduates easily found jobs (Kiernan 1992, Roberts 1995, Unwin and Wellington 2001, cited in O'Connor and Goodwin, 2004). The transition from school to work at that time was simple, predominant, direct, one-stepped and predictable (Coles, 1995), so young people were clear about their destinations and journeys (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). The role of school was to fill niche labour demands by providing society with different 'suitable' people to meet its demands in the labour market. Later, unemployment increased due to an economic downturn. Having opportunities available instead of making individual choices, many youths extended their time at school or participated in training schemes (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Through these 'pathways', they could be allocated temporary jobs for particular work experiences. In the 1980s, "with the virtual collapse of the youth labour market, transitional outcomes came to be explained more in terms of structural factors such as social class, race, gender, educational attainment and labour market conditions rather than by reference to individual characteristics or aspirations" (p.18). Destinations were determined by a set of social forces (ibid.). The transition was then characterised by the metaphor of a 'trajectory', which revealed that the transitional outcomes were highly structured at that time (Robert et al.,1987; Bynner and Roberts,1991; Banks et al.,1992, cited in Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). In this sense, individuals had little control over their destinations. For example, when employment was scarce young people often relied on family connections to assess jobs (Allatt and Yeandle, 1992), and middle-class parents drew on their economic, social and cultural resources to maximise their children's opportunities in order to transfer their social privilege from one generation to next (Allatt, 1993). Gillies (2000) theorises family relationships have a significant social influence on a youth's trajectory or life-course. Attributes affecting transitional outcomes were no longer just individual factors such as family background, class, gender, ethnicity, school attainment and so forth; the labour market was involved as well (Evans and Furlong, 1997). "The sort of jobs young people entered were best explained by the opportunities available rather than in terms of individual choices" (Roberts, 1975).

From the 1990s onwards, the UK adult labour market was restructuring, and the youth labour market was declining. The rate of change threw the school-to-work transition of that generation into turmoil. “Neither developmental/functionalist nor structuralist theories are adequate to explain these phenomena” (Evans and Furlong, 1997: 33). The transition from youth to adulthood became more individualised (Buchmann, 1989) and disorderly (Rindfuss et al., 1987). Individualism then emerged as a predominant ideology and theory to explain the phenomena of the transition. The channels that brought individuals to predetermined niches and levels of society no longer functioned as ‘well’ as before. Transitional outcomes could not be well explained by structural factors. Even young people from privileged social backgrounds and with excellent academic credentials worried about uncertainty and even failure in the future (Lucey, 1996). Families and schools were no longer effective socialising agencies of social reproduction in the emerging notion of a ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992). A risk society is characterised by the subjective perceptions of risk and uncertainty (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) and de-traditionalisation – “those norms and values which act as collective cultural guides in our lives are waning in influence and this is reflected in a much more fluid understanding of families, employment and community life” (Cieslik and Pollock, 2002: 3). Indeed, Beck often emphasises how and to what extent “reflexive modernity” involves an ongoing “self-confrontation with the effects of risk” (Beck, 1994: 5).

Chiu (2005), in particular in her chapter – *rethinking youth problems in a risk society*, highlights that the risks Beck coined which HK young people have to face are increasingly structural and beyond control. “It is contended that the risks young people in HK have to face now are very much different from before. Risks have now become structural consequences of modernity and global capitalism, which is far beyond personal control. Life paths and life chances of young people are increasingly uncertain and fragmented, and the education – work – retirement life route ..... has become structurally unrealistic for many youths today” (Chiu, 2005: 100). As HK has developed a sophisticated social institution, including education as a result of modernity in order to regulate the odds of the economic system, HK people of different ages and genders are structured into different roles and positions with different life paths (ibid.). One of the major risks of HK young people today identified by Chiu is the discontinuity between school and the labour market; and as suggested by Beck and Camillier (2000), such

distribution of employment risk is not equally shared by all young people. School leavers who are expected to mature readily for profit making once having been employed suffer from deficit of necessary skills from formal education in HK; and the rigidity and lack of flexibility in her education system have further enlarged the gap between education and work and fragmented the life route (Chiu, 2005).

In the age of high modernity, educational and self-actualisation biographies rather than careers are a better description of life-courses (Evans and Furlong, 1997). The situation is best described by the emergence of the ‘car journey’ metaphor instead of the conventional ‘train journey’ metaphor in which a life-course operates on predetermined set of ‘rail’ – a set of pre-determined social factors associated with the ‘passengers’ (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). “Unlike the railway passenger, the individual car driver is constantly faced with a series of decisions relating to routes which will take them from their point of origin to their destination” (p.13). Infinite ranges of possibilities and options are open to the drivers as they navigate the consequences of their decisions and actions on a subjective level. Normative career sequences such as finishing school and starting full-time work are less common than before (Shanahan, 2000). Youths are no longer channelled into pre-determined labour market destinations and levels of society after leaving school, as those routes to work are diverse. The emergence of the ‘navigation’ model (Evans and Furlong, 1997) suggesting that individuals actively negotiate risk and uncertainty describes the evolution of the youth’s role in the school-to-work transition process from the ‘passenger on the train’ to the ‘driver of the car’. Individual skills and decisions are essential to the determination of outcomes (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). “[S]uccessful transitions came to be seen as dependent on individual skill and capability as well as external risks and ability to judge them” (p.18).

The processes and outcomes of different types of transitions along an individual’s life stages are influenced by one’s identity, agency and structure, which cannot be divorced from one another (ibid., see also Ecclestone, 2007). According to Ecclestone (2007), identity describes the ideas about one’s sense of self and may be broadly defined as “the ways in which the self is represented and understood in dynamic, multidimensional and evolving ways” (p.122). Agency is the capacity for autonomous, empowered action taken within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance in order to construct a life-course (also see Elder et al., 2003: 11). It builds

on people's past achievements, understandings and patterns of action; it is not an attribute people possess, but rather something they do in different contexts (Tedder, 2007). Since the Enlightenment, it has been a tradition in Western societies that education can and should help people develop their capacities for agentic and autonomous actions (Ecclestone, 2007: 124). Structure refers to the effects of structural factors (e.g. class, gender, race, economic, occupational and material conditions) that determine how identity and agency are shaped and constrained, especially for understanding educational participation, responses to learning and outcomes. The combination of identity, agency and structure illuminates the 'lived social reality' within policy discourses and practices (ibid.). Evans (2002) argues, "If policies and interventions are to be made effective, we need to sharpen our awareness of the interplay of structural forces and individuals' attempts to control their lives" (p.265). For instance, Hannover and Leipzig's study of Derby analysing the links between structure and agency in transitions to HE, employment and unemployment, it is found that young adults as 'social actors in a social landscape' shows little evidence of fatalism; instead, they endeavour to gain control of their lives (Evans, 2002). The three concepts are inextricably connected and affect the processes and outcomes of different types of transitions in the education system and the best ways to deal with them (Ecclestone, 2007).

Gallacher and Cleary view the 'transition' today as a "personal transition between two states of 'being' – the before and after of specified learning experience" (Ecclestone, 2007: 12). A transition therefore becomes a subtle process of 'becoming somebody' within imagined and realised identities in specific contexts (Ball et al., 2000). Thus, transitions are sometimes not discernible events or processes and instead may occur after subtle, subconscious changes in feelings and attitudes (ibid.). The stages of the life-course becomes blurred, and boundaries become jumbled, stretched and pluralised such that there is no saying when any individual may expect to find a job, get married, have children, build a career and retire (Sheehy, 1996). Individual biographies are increasingly diverse and heterogeneous (Alheit, 1992). The notion of life-as-transition emerges to "illuminate transition as something much more ephemeral and fluid, where the whole life is a form of transition, a permanent state of 'becoming' and 'unbecoming', much of which is unconscious, contradictory and iterative" (Ecclestone, 2009: 13). In this perspective, learning to be or not to be in transitions is an everyday process.

In late modernity, people's lives are characterised by new challenges and experiences. "Transitions are a time for change" (London, 2011: 4) and can be regarded as a fundamental feature of a 'liquid life' (Bauman, 2000). The term liquid life suggests that every social routine, relation and practice is fluid and open to change. Individuals must learn to expect uncertainty, and people are more likely to face greater challenges, as they tend to live longer than previous generations did. As a result, lifelong learning becomes the main educational consequence (Giddens, 2000). Giddens suggests that as citizens are activated, individuals and businesses can plan ahead for success in terms of investments in future knowledge and skills. Therefore, every individual must expect and prepare to face increasingly differentiated trajectories throughout their lives that result from constellations of transitions and their diverse outcomes by engaging in learning as a fundamental strategy to cope with them (Ingram et al., 2009). "Transitions may therefore be seen as personal troubles and public issues, but contemporary conditions have tended to individualise them and emphasise the individual's responsibility for their own life planning. And this is where lifelong learning steps in" (ibid.: 3).

Life per se can be viewed as an object or field of learning (Alheit, 1995). Individuals construct their own biographies while learning. While they live, their biographies are an unfinished product undergoing changes and development. Everyone is always learning to be an individual, always becoming and developing him/herself, and such a person is never complete (Jarvis, 2010). The very notion of biographical learning Alheit and Dausien (2000) developed is defined as "a self-willed, 'autopoietic' accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively 'organise' their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable life-world perspective for guiding their actions" (Alheit, 2005: 209). Its key feature is that institutionally and socially specialised fields of experience are integrated and congealed to form a new meaning for the individual (ibid.). In the world of high modernity, economic restructuring induces the importance of credentials. "Schooling means choosing and planning one's educational life-course. The educated person becomes the producer of his or her own labour situation, and in this way, his or her (own) social biography..." (Beck, 1992: 93). Based on this argument, the profile of young adults' extended

educations reflects their ability to enter the labour market (Mills and Prag, 2014). Demand for education thus increases.

## 2.4. Higher Education and Career mobility in HK

This section highlights the style, philosophy and structure of HE in HK. Drawn on local reports, it is reviewed that despite the massification of HE, HK graduates' earnings mobility is problematic.

In Huang (2017)'s review, since the late nineteenth century, as HK became a colony of the UK, her university education was significantly affected by British patterns; US general education has gradually been introduced to education system as well (in particular, see the cases of the University of Hong Kong and Lingnan University) (Huang, 2017: 88-92). Modeled on the British philosophy, before 2012, all her universities enrolled their entrants based on specialised fields or professional subjects to produce narrowly career-wise specialised graduates who were employed in the HK labor market, and the length of study was three years. However, since 2012, with a shift “from a three-year university system that favoured early specialisation within a discipline and very few conversations across disciplines to a four-year university system fully implemented with the beginning class of 2012, or the so-called 3+3+4 or simply the 3-3-4 reform, all universities in Hong Kong have been asked by the government to introduce and develop general education curricula that focus on the development of broad intellectual components” (Huang, 2017: 88).

In HK, access to tertiary education depends on academic scores, student learning profile and interview performance (HKACMGM, 2018), and is free from consideration of students' social background. Student Financial Assistance Agency<sup>3</sup> is set up to help students with financial difficulties to pursue and complete their tertiary studies regardless of whether they are UGC-funded or not; apart from this, there has also developed measures to provide fair opportunities for ethnic minorities to enter universities, for example:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wfsfaa.gov.hk/sfo/en/index.htm>



For Non-Chinese Speaking (NCS) students, all UGC-funded institutions accept alternative qualifications in Chinese Language including those under General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and General Certificate of Education (GCE) for students who have met the specified circumstances: (a) Students who have learned Chinese Language for less than 6 years while receiving primary and secondary education; or (b) Students who have learned Chinese Language for 6 years or more in schools, but have been taught an adapted and simpler Chinese Language curriculum not normally applicable to the majority of students in our local schools. (EDB, 2019)

Figure 1. Hong Kong Universities participated in QS ranking 2012–2013

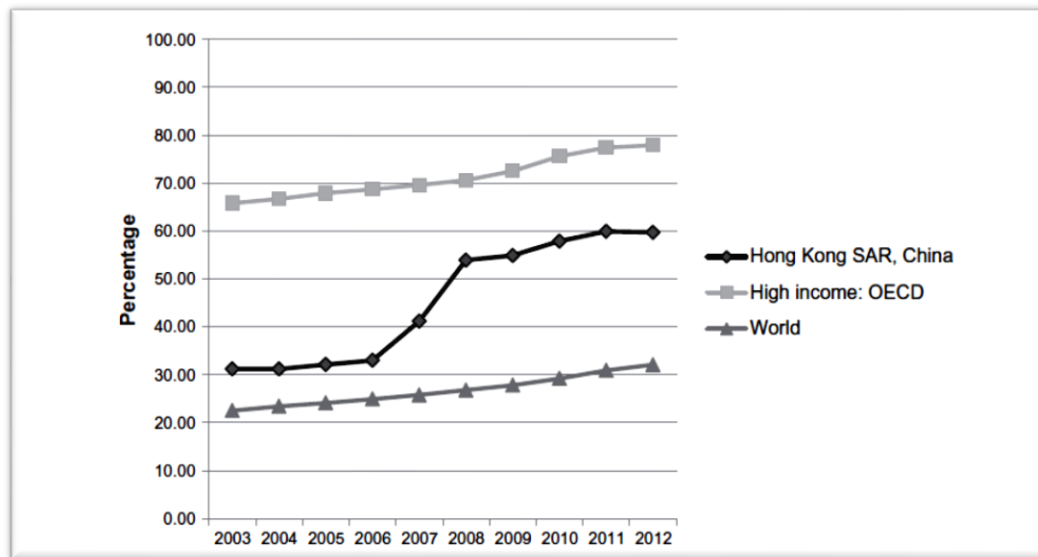
<b>Universities</b>	<b>Overall Scores</b>	<b>Ranks</b>
University of Hong Kong	87.9	23
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	83.5	33
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	80.1	40
City University of Hong Kong	66.9	95
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	54.6	159

According to QS world university ranking (QS Top Universities, 2012)<sup>4</sup>, among the top five universities in HK (Figure 1), the top three universities should be considered as elite universities being on par with one another, each differing little in

<sup>4</sup> QS world university rankings: Overall for 2012. Available at: <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2012>.

Overall Score (Times Higher Education, 2012)<sup>5</sup> from the other, being separated by about four points on the Overall scale (SOH and HO, 2014). There are four more universities with lower ranking (not shown in Figure 1) in HK. Chan (2018) suggests that university reputation will affect the earnings of graduates. Graduates from elite universities are more productive and hence will improve their access to occupations. These graduates also gain greater chances to be selected for higher-paid jobs and enjoy an earning premium (see also Mok, 2016b). Likewise, a field study from the UK found that “[job] applicants from the Top 2 and Top 3 Universities face lower salary prospects by 4.2% points and 8.1% points than the applicant from the Top 1 University” (Drydakis, 2016: 200).

Figure 2. Gross tertiary enrolment rate in Hong Kong, 2003–2013 (%)



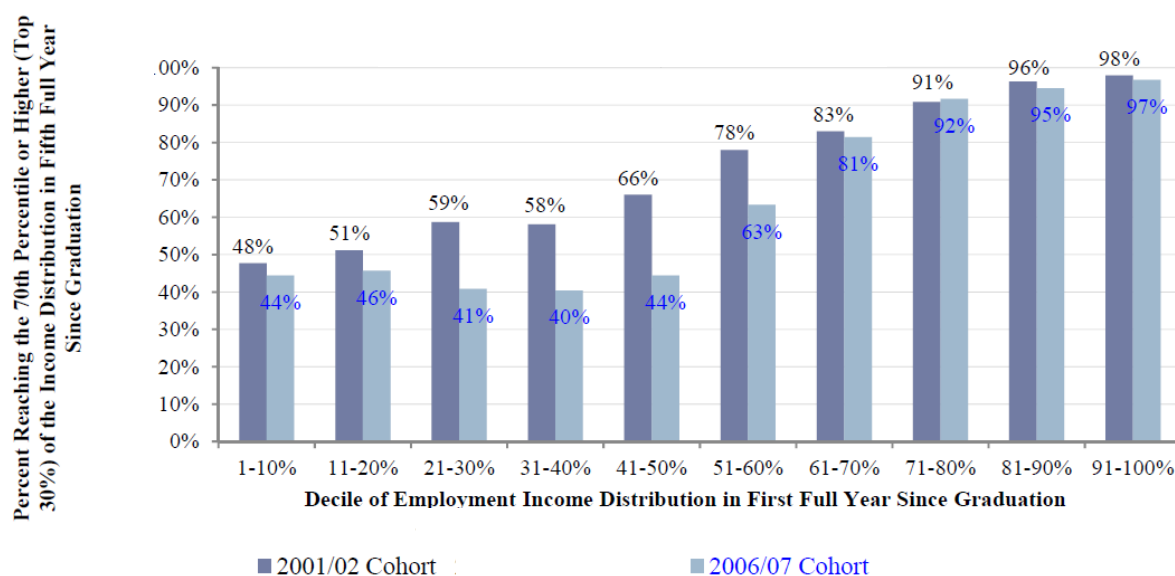
Note: Gross tertiary enrolment rate is the total rate of enrolment in tertiary education regardless of age. It is expressed as a percentage of the total population in the five-year age group that follows the departure from secondary school.

Source: World-Bank (2015) cited in Lee (2016: 14)

<sup>5</sup>The Times Higher Education World Universities Ranking 2011–2012. Available at: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2011-12/world-ranking>.

In HK – a meritocratic city due to the motives of the knowledge-based economy and unemployment (Wan, 2011), an increasing trend in HE participation (HKSAR, 2001) can be observed, as illustrated in Figure 2. Recently, HE has expanded almost exclusively in the private sector (Lee, 2016: 13), as illustrated in Table 2 (Appendix I). Table 3 shows the student enrolment in University Grants Committee (UGC) funded programmes over time, which indicates a substantial increase in local government-funded degree places from 1998/99 to 2013/14. In terms of first-year, first-degree places of government-funded tertiary programmes, the student enrolment rate increased significantly from 7,417 (participation rate: 8.8%) in 1989 to 14,779 (participation rate: 18.1%) in 1996 (UGC, 2017). In a 2016 population by-census report (Census, 2016), it was reported that the accumulated populations of degree holders aged 15 or older (excluding foreign domestic helpers) in 2006, 2011 and 2016 were 744,951 (13.0%), 969,561 (16.2%) and 1,310,545 (21.2%) respectively (p.53). This indicates that number of HK citizens with degrees has increased in the past ten years.

Figure 3. Five-year individual earnings mobility of publicly funded first-degree graduates



Source: HKSAR (2016: 12)

However, as Lee (2016) found, the massification of HE in HK “failed to enhance the upward mobility of the youth in the city” (p.13). In a study on earnings mobility among publicly funded first-degree graduates conducted by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), it was found that the number of students reaching the top 30 per cent of the income distribution in their fifth full year since graduation was less in the 2006/07 than in the 2001/02 cohort (HKSAR, 2016: 12), as illustrated in Figure 3. It also reported that the five-year individual earnings mobility of publicly funded first-degree holders and postgraduates in the 2001/02 cohort (2003/04 to 2009/10) were 89% and 84% respectively; unfortunately, the figures decreased to 81% and 65% respectively in the 2006/07 cohort (2007/08 to 2013/14) (ibid.: 12-13), suggesting a downturn in earnings mobility for HE graduates.

In the report about social mobility in HK (Legco, 2015) prepared by the research team of the Legislation Council, HK benefited from a rapid expansion of HE in the 1990s and sub-degree education in the 2000s. People with post-secondary education accounted for 27.3% of the total population in 2011, more than double that in 1991 (11.3%) (p.4). Notwithstanding this buoyant educational environment, it alarmed society that downward occupational mobility had arisen, as HK degree holders aged 15–29 were increasingly driven into clerical and service/sales jobs from 2001–2011 (p.7). The first paragraph of the introduction says:

For many years, Hong Kong has been viewed as a city of opportunities with ample opportunities for people to move up the social ladder through their own efforts. Social mobility is essential to the creation of social harmony by building a more open and fairer society where every individual is free to succeed. Yet a recent concern is perceived reduced social mobility in Hong Kong, which has become the subject of a recent motion debate in the Legislative Council and an issue of discussion in the community (p.1).

While the implications that arise from the idea of ‘education-based meritocracy’ are central to neo-liberal theory of industrialism, HE is often regarded as a conduit for social mobility through which students can secure improved opportunities. In viewing HE as a vehicle of upward mobility, universities play an important role in facilitating

the aspirations of those who choose to embark on HE (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013). However, many HK young adults with degrees have found their dreams falling short under this traditional thought. Legco (2015) also reports:

...there was an increasing share of people working as managers, professionals and associate professionals during 1991–2011, in line with the expansion of education opportunities and higher demand for workers with better knowledge and skills during the period. The combined share of these higher-skilled jobs in total workforce increased visibly from 23.2% in 1991 to 39.0% in 2011. Yet much of the improvement since the early 2000s was fuelled by the increase in the share of people working as associate professionals from 10.3% in 1991 to 21.1% in 2011, implying limited job opportunities for higher-paid managerial and professional jobs. (p.6)

HK is not a unique in this regard. Mok (2016a) studied emerging trends in HK, Guangzhou and Taipei, and concluded that the massification of HE did not necessarily lead to more occupational opportunities for young graduates. Many researchers worldwide have also revealed that the mediating role of education in social mobility is problematic. Iannelli and Paterson (2007) explore the extent to which the association between classes of origin and destination is mediated by education in the UK. Their findings reveal that the mediating effect was weak from 1937 to 1976, when education was expanding in both Scotland and Great Britain as a whole (each had different educational systems). Similar phenomena were found in Japan, for example. Kondo (2000) examines trends in social mobility in post-war Japan, focusing on the mediating role of education. It was found that despite educational expansion, mobility did not increase. On 15 March 2016, Goldthorpe (2016) delivered a lecture at the British Academy, stating, “[s]uccessive governments, committed to increasing mobility, have regarded educational policy as the essential means to this end. Yet despite all this expansion and reform, inequalities in relative mobility chances have remained little altered” (transcribed by theguardian, 2016). He continues, “the upward mobility from the ‘50s to the ‘70s is attributed to a major expansion of professional and managerial jobs during a period termed ‘the golden age of social mobility’; but conversely, the progress made by this generation means that an increasing number of their children are

now at heightened risk of moving down the social ladder” (ibid.). BCG (2017)’s social mobility report echoes Goldthorpe’s view:

Social mobility in the UK increased from a low base from the 1940s through to the 1970s. In this period both absolute social class [in terms of occupation (p.6)] and income mobility increased. Since the 1980s, social mobility appears to have stalled or deteriorated in terms of social class and income measures respectively. The UK (along with the US) is one of the lowest performing countries for income mobility across the OECD. The UK ranks better in educational mobility, but this does not appear to translate into earnings. (p.2)

The broken promise of graduating from HE with excellent job prospects has been intensified by globalisation. Globalisation causes structural changes in the polarisation of university admissions and career markets, so there is an insufficient number of jobs for graduates to enter, which in turn leads to under- or unemployment (Lauder, 2014). Mok and Neubauer (2016) account for this by citing (1) digital Taylorism; (2) outsourcing phenomena; and (3) the increasing global supply of highly skilled graduates – global auction. The expansion of HE may not necessarily enhance national competitiveness in the global labour market (p.4-5).

Słomczyński and Furdyna (1977) examine whether increasing one’s education after entering the labour force would result in any significant movement among social strata in Poland. Their findings reveal that people who are educationally mobile have greater opportunities than the rest of the population to move upward in the socio-occupational hierarchy. The more individuals increase their level of education the more they advance in the occupational structure (p.119). Nevertheless, Lindley and Machin (2012) found that:

...more people are acquiring postgraduate degrees and not stopping their education to enter the labour market after their undergraduate studies. This seems to be a key part of the quest for more and more education, especially the acquisition of master’s degrees. The 1980s

were characterised by sharp increases in wages for undergraduates, but these seem to have dried up more recently (possibly due to increased graduate supply finally dampening down wages in the late 1990s and 2000s) and people have realised the need to obtain a postgraduate degree to distinguish themselves. (p.283)

I have highlighted that following in the UK's footsteps, HK graduates' downward career mobility have arisen despite the massification of HE. Other local reasons for this, as Lee (2016) recounts, are that (1) the process of HE massification in HK has been heavily shaped by the interests of the city's elites; (2) under the "more market, less state" mantra of neo-liberalism, HE massification has taken a partial privatisation model minimising the government's financial commitment so that publicly funded HE is highly selective and increasingly biased towards wealthy students; and (3) graduates from self-financed programmes are severely disadvantaged in terms of employability despite their investment, which results in wage compression and unemployment (*ibid.*). Therefore, although enrolment in HE has increased sharply, little evidence suggests that upward social mobility has improved (p.24). Di Stasio et al. (2016) find that "education is more likely to function as a positional good in countries with weakly developed vocational education systems, where individuals have an incentive to acquire higher levels of education in order to stay ahead of the labour queue" (p.53) and vice versa. Their study relates to human capital theory as well as signalling and screening theory, both of which are addressed in the following section.

## 2.5. Human Capital and Signalling and Screening Theory

It is evident that formal education is positively correlated with earnings (Beblavy et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2015; Yunus and Said, 2016) and employment (Cellini et al., 2013; Yunus and Said, 2016). Human capital theory (HCT) as well as signalling and screening theory are two popular theories that provide a theoretical justification for the correlation between education and earnings as mediated by productivity.

Lin (2001) defines capital as the “investment of resources with expected returns in the marketplace” (p.3). In this perspective, it is resources twice processed – first being invested and then mobilised in the marketplace in pursuit of profit – as a goal in action. The first process refers to the outcome of a production process in which the resource has been added value, while the second process can be viewed as the causal factor in the production through which it is exchanged to generate profit. The notion of these processes reveals that both investment and mobilisation involve time and effort. Capital theory evolved into the neo-capital theory in which the renditions of capital notably include human capital, cultural capital and social capital.

Under neo-capital theory, human capital (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974), as Johnson (1960) argues, suggests that labourers can become capitalists not from a diffusion of ownership of physical property or stocks, but from the acquisition of knowledge and skills that have economic value. In this sense, the distinction between labourers and capitalists blurs. Schultz (1961) distinguishes human capital from physical capital by the added value (knowledge and skills) that is embedded in the labourers themselves. This added value, similar to classical Marxian theory, can be increased through investments by the labourers, who can now be seen as the investors. As Becker explicates, human capital is most forceful in terms of education. The result of his search for better explanation of the growth of income in most countries has been the accumulation of a tremendous amount of circumstantial evidence testifying to the economic importance of human capital, especially of education – more highly educated and skilled persons almost always tend to earn more than others (Becker, 1964: 2). And as he emphasises, this finding is true in places no matter whether they are well-developed or under-developed, in the west or in the east, in the past or today:

This is true of developed countries as different as the United States and the Soviet Union, of underdeveloped countries as different as India and Cuba, and of the United States one hundred years ago as well as today (p.2).

Lin (2001) further says, “[h]uman capital is operationalised and measured by education, training, and experience” (p.9). The capital is conceived as being shared by the workers and employers in production and exchange; thus, the acquisition of human capital



becomes a common interest of workers and companies. Based on HCT in his study of social returns to HE investment in HK, Voon (2001) associates the private individual benefits and social benefits from human capital improvement with wage increments and GDP growth respectively. A distinct alternative explanation of human capital is the theory of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1989) argues that society's dominant class imposes its culture on the next generation by engaging in pedagogic actions that occur in school, among families or in other informal occasions to internalise the dominant symbols and meanings in order to reproduce the salience of the dominant culture and form a 'habitus'. However, in his view, cultural capital suggests the production process shifts from the worker's free will and self-interest (p.14).

In contrast to human and cultural capital, which are viewed as investments of personal resources for the production of profit and rather independently atomized elements located in society, social capital is an "investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace" (Lin, 2001: 19) through which people engage in interactions and networking in order to produce profits. Social capital is seen as "a social asset by virtue of actors' connections and access to resources in the network or group of which they are members" (p.19). Lin (2001) offers four reasons for why social capital enhances the outcomes of actions. First, the flow of information is facilitated. It allows organisations to recruit better, unrecognised individuals, and it allows individuals to find better organisations that can use their capital and provide appropriate rewards. Second, social ties may exert influence on agents such as recruiters; thus, 'putting in a good word' may weigh heavily in the hiring process. Third, these social ties, conceived as certifications of the individual's social credentials, reflect his/her accessibility to use resources through social networks and relations. Finally, social relations reinforce identity and recognition. "Being assured of and recognised for one's worthiness as an individual and a member of a social group sharing similar interests and resources not only provides emotional support but also public acknowledgment of one's claim to certain resources" (p.20). These four elements – information, influence, social credentials and reinforcement – explain why social capital works in the political and economic market (ibid.). The labour market thus can be viewed as comprising individuals with capital – the capitalists – who move from place to place.

Schuller and Watson (2009) provide a set of value propositions: (1) people are natural learners, but need different kinds of services at different points in their lives; (2) inefficiency means human potential is being wasted; (3) equality and fairness are fundamental, so opportunities and effort always need to be available to redress initial and recurring disadvantages; (4) learning has to do with power, for better and worse; (5) education fosters social capital, and learning should bring people together with a common goal; and (6) to survive and thrive, the world needs us to learn (p.10–14). Based on these propositions, they suggest a framework of identity capital, human capital and social capital in the form of assets having values for individuals. Identity capital refers to the ability to maintain a healthy self-esteem and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. It relates to individual fulfilment. Human capital refers to skills and qualifications. It is built mainly through education and training. People deploy their human capital in the workplace as a means of production, in turn being utilised at the social and community level, and personal income. Social capital refers to participation in local or global networks of shared values so that people might contribute to common goals. Social capital supports learning and is in turn strengthened by it. Getting more education is an effective way of increasing one's access to networks. Resources like social support, information channels and credentials are embedded within an individual's social networks (Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi, 2015; see also Waters, 2009). Schuller and Watson (2009) argue that the three capitals work inter-dependently. "Without the formal and informal networks which make up social capital, people will find it hard both to build up the skills and qualifications which make up human capital, and to apply them productively. Conversely, without skills, they will find it harder to gain access to networks. Without self-esteem which makes up identity capital, it is difficult both to learn and to apply that learning and so on" (p.16).

Since the 1960s, the most novel development in the economics of education has been the idea that education can be regarded as an investment analogous to investing in tools or equipment in factories; therefore, the evaluation of an investment in education can be processed in a manner similar to that of firms when they decide to invest in new machinery (Coleman, 1988; Popov, 2014). "Just as physical capital is created by changes in materials to form tools that facilitate production, human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways" (Coleman, 1988: 100). In this sense, human capital not only refers to an

actor's fixed endowments, such as physical appearance, innate abilities, instinctual drive, stamina and so forth, but it also includes the actor's education – knowledge, skills and abilities achieved through the investment of their time and labour (Becker, 1964). According to Oakes and Rossi (2003), human capital is a resource that may be used to acquire socially valued goods: “those with specialised knowledge have (monopoly) control over a scarce resource” (p.776-7). The HCT hypothesises that through augmenting their innate capacity and skills (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961), “education raises the productivity of an individual and higher wages exist” (Mohamad Yunus, 2017: 152). Mincer and Polachek (1974) also show that earnings depend on schooling and work experience.

The causes of the positive relationship between schooling and earnings have been part of a long-lasting debate over the economic role of education (Hirsch, 1977; Thurow, 1975; see Bauer et al., 2005; Di Stasio et al., 2016). According to HCT, knowledge and skills obtained in school directly increase one's productivity and in turn results in higher earnings; however, another view based on sorting model is that since higher-educated workers probably have better intrinsic characteristics, such as better work attitudes and performance (Weiss, 1995), workers might use this correlation as a means to signal their abilities and productivity and employers who believe that education is correlated with productivity might screen workers for their education level in their hiring decisions and are willing to pay more for those with higher education levels. In this case, the sorting model can be regarded as an extension of the human capital model (Mohamad Yunus, 2017; Muysken and Weel, 1999). However, when ability is associated with innate productivity – unaltered by acquired education – the model refers to a situation completely opposite to HCT: education actually does not raise productivity at all, it just signals of the worker's innate characteristics (Popov, 2014).

“The sorting model reveals that the primary function of education is to give indication to employers in the labour market, and the innate productivity is related to the characteristics of workers” (Mohamad Yunus, 2017: 154). Under this model are the signalling and screening hypothesis (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973). The signalling hypothesis suggests that workers are informed about their productivity according to their education level and aim to signal their innate abilities to prospective employers. Under the screening hypothesis, since employers lack the information to distinguish

between productive and less-productive workers, education level can serve as a signal that allows them to discern workers of different quality. They simply screen employees by looking at their level of educational attainment and infer their innate abilities (Mohamad Yunus, 2017). In other words, schooling enhances earnings not because it makes individuals more productive per se but rather because “it credentiales them as more productive” (Hungerford and Solon, 1987: 175) and is used as a signalling device that allows employers to assess the inherent productivity of potential employees (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973). However, credential effects decrease with length of tenure, as longer tenure allows the organisation to gather sufficient and accurate information to assess a worker’s productivity without relying on the signal value of formal credentials (Xiu and Gunderson, 2013).

During recruiting, when education is manipulated as a signalling device to compete in the labour market, a higher level of education would increase the chance of obtaining a skilled job, though once the aspiring job has been offered the returns to marginal education vanish (Muysken and Weel, 1999). Bills and Brown (2011) term this ‘credentialist hiring’. “Credentialism can refer to the extent to which societies allocate individuals to slots in the occupational hierarchy on the basis of the educational qualifications that the candidates present at the point of hire” (p.1). Educational credentialism is often conceived of as non-linear wage returns to schooling, and these non-linearities are interpreted as sheepskin effects (Habermalz, 2003). The notion of the sheepskin effect originates from the tradition that diploma and degree certificates were formerly written on sheepskins (Brown and Sessions, 2004: 96). The sheepskin effect is commonly defined as “the wage gap between credentialed and non-credentialed employees conditional on their years of schooling” (ibid.: 493). It indicates that those who complete all courses in a school or university but do not graduate earn less in the labour market than those who earned the degree (Kun Andras, 2014). In this regard, it is a wage increase associated with the attainment of a degree as opposed to the completion of a schooling level without credentials (ibid.). Sheepskin effects that describe certificates as signals accrediting higher innate productivity can be used to evaluate the signalling and screening theory of education (Bauer et al., 2005; Mohamad Yunus, 2017). Hungerford and Solon (1987) first present evidence to confirm the existence of strong sheepskin effects in the returns to education in the US. They identified significantly larger returns to diploma years (in years 12 and 16 in the US) than to other

years of education; in this case, certificates of graduation have economic returns independent from years of education. This suggests that besides the productivity-enhancing contribution of schooling, workers are also rewarded for obtaining the diploma that comes with completing a particular level of education. Graduation sends a signal (Weiss, 1988). This finding confirms the signalling and screening hypotheses. Following this, Flores-Lagunes and Light (2010) and Jaeger and Page (1996) find evidence of substantial sheepskin effects in the US. Kun Andras (2014) research confirms the existence of the sheepskin effect in the Hungarian labour market (p.497). Besides, sheepskin effects are also evident in New Zealand according to Gibson (2000); in Sweden according to Antelius (2000); in Canada according to Ferrer and Riddell (2002); in Japan according to Bauer et al. (2005); in Spain according to Pons (2006) and Pons and Blanco (2005); and in Malaysia according to Mohamad Yunus (2017). Apart from developed countries, examples of sheepskin effects are also found in developing countries such as Libya, Colombia, Guatemala and the Philippines (Xiu and Gunderson, 2013: 227).

Heywood and Wei (2004) explored whether education serves an important signalling function in the competitive HK labour market by testing for differences in returns to education between the employed and self-employed in HK. They found that (1) the returns to education for the self-employed are generally significantly smaller than those for the employed; (2) the increased returns for the employed are concentrated on completion of the signal or credential; and (3) the incremental returns to university education are often extremely small or absent for the self-employed except professionals (2004: 13). The research results show that education serves an important signalling function in the HK labour market.

Despite this results, Heywood and Wei (2004) found that those self-employed who attend university earn more than those who merely complete secondary school, testifying that education also increases the productivity of the self-employed in HK. “The fact that this is so for the self-employed hints that education arguments human capital and that university returns for the employed are not only a function of university credentials as a signal” (2004: 13)

The explanations for the return on education are reviewed in this section. Becker portrays education as an investment in human capital, embodied in people, as a production input in exchange for economic benefits. He emphasises that his findings are true independent of time and space. In the past and today, it is known that HCT has been widely used as a theoretical foundation to explain not only private individual benefits but also social benefits, in HK and elsewhere in the world (see Woo, 1991; Schultz, 1961; Solow, 1962; Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1994; Azhar, 1991; Lau et al., 1991; Lucas, 1990; cited in Voon, 2001). Nonetheless, Arrow and Spence provide alternative approach to explain for such a return, coining the signalling and screening theory, which has been used in HK's research studies (e.g. Heywood and Wei, 2004). In this regard, it is evident that these two well-known theories despite the fact that they originate from the west, are well applicable to HK context.

## 2.6. Reasons for the Disappointment

As the employment structure and the upgrading of occupational activity have not kept up with the expansion of education, it has resulted in credential/qualification inflation (Tooley, 1996; Wolbers et al., 2001; Huijgen, 1990). Jackson et al. (2005) review British findings and conclude that the importance of education in mediating mobility is declining. Employers' concerns vary and education is of reduced value to them in making personnel decisions. In China, marginal students with sub-standard achievement can also be recruited under her expansion of HE (Mok and Wu, 2016). Therefore, even though education expansion may benefit people from the working class, it increases competition at all levels and consequently erodes the labour market value of educational qualifications. Central to the problem is the economy. The section "It's the economy, stupid" in Reay (2013) article argues that the rise of middle-class employment in the second half of the twentieth century led to upward social mobility measured in absolute terms (Savage, 2007); since then, the growth in middle-class occupations has stalled. There is no longer "room at the top" (Reay, 2013: 669) for candidates who aspire to those jobs. Therefore, another reason education expansion cannot become a vehicle of social mobility is that most jobs no longer require high levels of education (ibid). In a society where opportunities to move upwards grow more

slowly than the supply of qualified individuals, expanding educational participation may have little effect (Boudon, 1974). Besides Boudon's work, 'job competition theory' (Thurow, 1975) also provides a structural explanation for the decreasing occupational returns to credentials (Wolbers et al., 2001). Details are explained below.

According to McGuinness (2006), an individual is said to be over-educated if he/she possesses a level of education in excess of that which is required for his/her particular job (p.387). Over-education means that a proportion of their educational investment is unproductive relative to similarly educated counterparts whose jobs match their education levels. The phenomenon is costly to both individuals and the economy. According to HCT, workers will always be paid their marginal product as determined by the level of human capital they have accumulated through formal education and on-the-job training. Thus, over-education associated with worker under-utilisation and wage rates below the marginal product appear to be inconsistent with HCT. However, the over-education phenomenon does not necessarily overturn HCT because those workers may be 'over-educated' in the short term but may possibly adjust their production processes in order to better utilise their human capital. In this view, HCT can therefore be rationalised by allowing for the existence of short-term disequilibrium; however, if over-education persists, this argument can no longer be held.

A dramatic increase in education and skills without increasing wages has been reported in some Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries since the early 1980s (McGuinness, 2006) and in Greater China in the 2010s (Mok, 2016a). Part of the signalling framework, job competition theory or queuing theory (Thurow, 1975) provides a structural explanation for the decreasing occupational returns to credentials. "Human capital theory and the queuing theory share a common assumption: they both acknowledge the relationship, whether direct or indirect, between education and productivity" (Di Stasio et al., 2016: 54). Another assumption is that all individuals within the model strive for the highest certificates and labour market positions. Suppose a type of dual labour market consists of skilled and unskilled labour and the former can replace the latter to work unskilled jobs. In equilibrium, employers demand both types of labour to produce two types of goods; however, if the supply of skilled labour increases due to educational expansion, but the economy and occupational upgrading cannot keep up with and compensate for skilled labour

expansion (i.e. the queue of qualified people is longer than the queue of available jobs), limited numbers of jobs are available in both sectors, leading to the consequence that some skilled labour can still occupy full employment in the skilled sector whereas the remaining skilled workers are forced to compete in the unskilled sector for low-level jobs to wait for opportunities to find their matched jobs one day. Therefore, skilled workers often successfully occupy unskilled jobs, bumping down skilled workers while unskilled labour is crowded out of the labour market (see also Muysken and Weel, 1999; Wolbers et al., 2001). This phenomenon is evident in HK. Chiu and Wong (2000) in their study of HK youth unemployment coin this as a process of ‘squeezing down’; more importantly, they find that this is a systemic risk rather than one faced by individuals. This in turn widens the gap between educational levels in their occupational returns (Boylan, 1993; Van Der Ploeg, 1994; Wolbers et al., 2001). Wolbers et al. (2001) and McGuinness (2006) argue that when those previously well-matched workers in the economy are bumped down in the labour market, they have superior qualifications and become over-educated when moving into lower-level occupations, thus raising the mean educational level within these occupations and unintentionally rendering some previously adequately educated workers undereducated. Under the framework of HCT, an individual is less likely to participate in further education when supply is high but returns are low; however, under the job competition model, the same individual is more likely to invest in education, as it is a defensive necessity: necessary to protect their place in the queue (McGuinness, 2006). “The larger the numbers of educated persons in the economy the more imperative for individuals to invest in education... In many ways the model is very similar to the signalling framework in that individual investments are motivated by preserving ones position...” (p.392). In employers’ side, they compete for employees with the highest credentials in order to reduce the costs of job training (Thurow, 1975; Hirsch, 1977); in employees’ side, particularly postgraduates, regardless the labour market benefits associated with postgraduate training are somewhat obscure (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991) because the costs are high and the returns are limited due to the ceiling effect, if the value of education decreases and they wish to avoid downward mobility, they must achieve an even higher level of education (Werfhorst and Andersen, 2005).

“A corollary of queuing theory is that positional competition drives up over-investment in education, as individuals have an incentive to stay ahead of the queue and



over-investing in education is a defensive strategy to maintain one's position in the queue" (Di Stasio et al., 2016: 53). It therefore provides a clear explanation for over-education.

Bills and Brown (2011) point out that educational credentialism incurs a persistent trend towards increasing educational requirements for jobs, which we can refer to as credential inflation, that has clear affinities with that of 'over-education' or 'over-qualification' (p.2). In the dictionary, the meaning of inflation comes with an increase of supply against equilibrium. Credential inflation is a consequence of HE expansion, and it means that "the values of the degrees and credentials in the labour market tend to decrease" (Kariya, 2011: 70). In Kariya (2011) analysis, "university education has expanded rapidly, although the labour market has failed to keep pace with such expansions, offering fewer 'university-level' jobs than before. This causes credential inflation" (p.90) (see also Dolton and Silles, 2008). As a result, university degrees, especially those not from the top-tier universities, are no longer valuable enough to guarantee stable, high-skill positions in the market; therefore, graduates from those universities obtain positions in sales and service occupations, largely by replacing workers without degrees. This creates a significant symptom of credential inflation – credential gap, or "how closely matched are the educational attainments of job holders with credentials required for entry into their current jobs" (Livingstone, 1998: 72).

In the last decade, instead of upward social mobility, the reality has been 'social congestion' (Brown, 2013: 683). As everyone seeks to gain a positional advantage over other contestants, it leads to an 'opportunity trap' (Brown, 2003, 2013). Burlutskaiia (2014) says, "HE is ceasing to serve as a resource that offers people the ability to occupy a higher position in the labour market and to achieve advancement in career; more often, the only role it plays is as insurance against failure" (p.61). As Dugdale (1997) reviews, "[t]he creation of a mass higher education system in the UK has led to a fundamental change in the structure of the graduate labour market" (p.143). The tremendous expansion of HE leading to an increasing supply of well-educated labour in the market results in the need to redefine the concept and nature of graduate jobs. These jobs were increasingly competitive in the labour market, especially in fastest growing sectors. In the 1990s, a substantial increase in graduate under-employment and unemployment due to the rapid rise in graduate output was reported (Mok and Wu,

2016). Similarly, Mok and Wu report that university graduates in China face difficulties in getting matched jobs and many complain of insufficient upward career mobility. What is more, declining returns to education from 1988 to 2009 have been reported (Meng et al., 2012). Due to massification of HE, Tomlinson (2007) and Dolado et al. (2000) find that British and Spanish graduates face crowding-out effects, whereby they have to accept low-level jobs requiring low-level education or remain unemployed.

A knowledge-based economy demands high-skilled workers in intensified global economic competition; therefore, HE should expand to train more people in these high-skilled areas (Brown et al., 2008). However, because the knowledge-based economy may not necessarily produce an adequate number of high-skilled positions to match the pace of the expansion of HE and because global competition simultaneously requires less-skilled and unstable jobs by putting increasing pressure on employers to boost efficiency and cut labour costs, there are discrepancies between knowledge-based economy ideals and reality (Kariya, 2011). Kariya points out that the social problem arising from the inflation of the value of educational credentials is, as Brown (2003) say, that the logic of the knowledge economy ushers in the opportunity trap: “as opportunities for education increase, they are proving harder to cash” (p.149-50).

Furthermore, as Bedi and Edwards (2002) point out, HE expansion allows broader admission of marginal students who were not eligible for college admission before the expansion. The massified HE system recruits sub-standard students, resulting in the deteriorating quality of graduates and lower productivity in the labour market. In spite of the declining benefits of degrees, prospective students do not hesitate to participate in HE, and it is hard to decrease the demand for HE, as young adults still believe they would enjoy better prospects in the labour market with a good qualifications. This incurs an opportunity trap. “[E]xtending opportunities based on human capital investment will not deliver individual freedom or prosperity but rather contribute to an opportunity trap. The trap points to increasing social congestion for decent jobs as people scramble for highly rated schools, colleges and jobs” (Brown et al., 2011: 135). In this regard, completing HE is a necessary but not sufficient condition for getting better jobs. Put differently, “if everyone stands on tiptoe, nobody gets a better view; but if you do not stand on tiptoe, you have no chance of seeing” (Mok and Wu, 2016: 91). Di Stasio et al. (2016) challenge the absolute goodness of education and attribute the

problem of over-education to institutions: “If education is an absolute good, there is no need for individuals to over-invest in education, and the aggregate level of over-education should be low.....institutions create incentives for job seekers to (over)invest in education, as well as for employers to reward schooling (over)investments” (p.53).

In the next section, people characterised by a risk society that induces the importance of credentials and, by contrast, a world in which education cannot guarantee anything, will be learned.

## 2.7. Generation Y in Hong Kong

According to Kwok (2012)’s research in HK, Generation Y does not have a standard definition or name. Kwok regards it as the demographic cohort born between the 1970s and the late 1990s (i.e. the offspring of the Baby Boomers). Some commentators use birth years ranging from the early 1980s to the early 2000s to define this generation (Howe and Strauss, 2003; Sutherland and Thompson, 2001). The term *millennial* has also been used to designate those born between 1978 and 1999 (see Tyler, 2007). The target group of this study (i.e. those born from 1980 to 1989) belong to this generation.

Twenge (2006) refers to those born in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s as ‘Generation Me’, reflecting that this cohort is most prominently defined by their focus on the self. Hui (2010), a human resources director in north Asia with Jones Lang LaSalle, describes this cohort based on her experiences:

The post-‘80s generation is characterised by individualism. What appeals to them is the idea of a place where it is fun to work. Compared with older generations, they make having a good work-life balance a high priority. As they generally have a high level of academic qualifications, they often look for higher salaries and faster promotions. Failure to achieve this can easily lead to a sense of frustration. At the same time, the post-80s generation expects more

autonomy at work and they are not afraid to tell people what they want in terms of rewards, recognition and elements of fun.

(Source: <https://www.cpjobs.com/hk/article/post-%E2%80%9393-80s>)

Members of this cohort are considered the children of baby boomers. They have lived in an era of relative peace and prosperity in which economic booms have been high, have grown up in a child-centred society and have been adored from infancy by their parents and other adults (Sutherland and Thompson, 2001). This era is characterised by fewer and fewer ‘unwanted’ babies due to the emergence of widespread use of birth control (ibid.) and pro-child ethics in society and schools (Twenge, 2006). Twenge regards this generation as more individualistic and self-oriented than any before because they have put overt emphasis on individual ‘specialness’. Kwok (2012) studied Generation Y’s working encounters in HK and other Chinese cities. According to his review, young Generation Y adults like questioning, have strong personal views on work and their relationships with others and do not tend to follow conventions (p.239). They are assertive and believe they are ‘right’ (Howe and Strauss, 2003). They are motivated (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999), as they are often told that ‘you can be or do anything, as long as you try hard enough and follow your dreams’ (Twenge, 2006).

In Howe and Strauss (2003)’s view, this generation is motivated to achieve and tends to take advantage of opportunities. Twenge points out that their unceasing encouragement results in unrealistically high expectations, producing pressure and anxiety in contrast to their exuberant confidence at earlier ages. Howe and Strauss (2003), however, view Generation Y as still self-confident, goal-oriented and optimistic. In his research in HK, Kwok (2012) finds that they exhibit an unrealistic desire to find ‘perfect’ jobs to satisfy their not-yet-well-defined needs; they are directionless and unable to develop any plans to realise their goals. It echoes what Schneider and Stevenson (1999) say in their book *‘The Ambitious Generation’*, illustrating the potential adversity associated with the school-to-work transition for teenagers in the US. It has been reported that young adults “have extraordinarily high aspirations for future work – as doctors, lawyers, executives and athletes – that far exceed the projected availability of these jobs” (Staff and Mortimer, 2003: 363). Nonetheless, they give little thought to the steps (e.g. educational attainments) that are necessary to achieve these high

occupational goals. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) stress the importance of aligned ambitions, or “educational expectations that are consistent with their occupational aspirations” (p.79). Their analyses suggest that more than half of youths have misaligned ambitions: 40 per cent overestimate and 16 per cent underestimate the education required for their desired future occupations (p.81). It is clear that youths with misaligned ambitions are at a higher risk of ‘floundering’ in the transition from school to work, which can include changing majors, deferring graduation, dropping out, mismatched degrees with the jobs come up after graduation, and so on (see Staff and Mortimer, 2003: 364). In this regard, this generation is ambitious and energetic, but with their optimistic and opportunistic view, they rush into achieving beautiful goals without a clear plan.

Generation Y is characterised as having very high expectations and a strong sense of entitlement (Twenge, 2006). Because of easier access to higher education and having already invested a great deal of their time, money and effort into advancing their credentials, these young adults generally have high expectations regarding their future careers and employment status, as Wood (2004) reports. Due to rapid social changes, they enter the workforce expecting less financial and job security than their predecessor – Generation X – does (Rawlins et al. 2008; Cennamo and Gardner 2008; Lyons 2004, cited in Kwok, 2012). They believe that HE will help launch them into greatness and success, so they work hard in school to earn grades, leading to a tendency to achieve (Howe and Strauss, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2006; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999). Krahn and Galambos (2014) confirm that the Generation Y has a stronger belief in job entitlement: “If someone has worked hard in school, they are entitled to a good job; and everyone has the right to the kind of job that their education and training has prepared them for” (p.100). However, as Kwok (2012) points out, the gap between their inflated expectations and the reality of rapid economic, technological and social changes (e.g. industrial restructuring has decreased the demand for local manufacturing workers) gives rise to a relatively high turnover rate and geographical mobility, as globalisation introduces employment insecurity, important positions have already been occupied by the Baby Boomers and the rewarding jobs Generation Y admires have not expanded accordingly. Therefore, Generation Y workers usually need to fight for their own interests. Job switching is common, as they are born into a rapidly expanding economy

in an era of rapid technological advancement; thus, they can easily access unlimited, worldwide sources of information.

In Kwok (2012) findings, since most of the middle class in HK climbed the social ladder by means of education and professional knowledge, their success influenced their children to follow in their footsteps. However, unlike mainland Chinese, whose parents widely use *guanxi* (i.e. relationships with people) to extend advantages, “[i]t is noted that the [HK] middle class mainly maintained their class status by their own efforts and knowledge rather than accepting the wealth of their parents. They were socialised by their parents to accept open competition for jobs” (p.240). Furthermore, even those with lower SES in HK regard education a means to success, even though they cannot reach it. In Kwok’s study, Thomas, aged 19, has attained secondary education and serves as a temporary worker in an IT company and said, “It is not easy for the common people in Hong Kong to climb the ladder of success with no education, no skills and knowledge, no money and no connections” (p.239). Therefore, Kwok concludes that if Generation Y cannot internalise achievement motivation, they may suffer from downward mobility (p.240).

On the one hand, the emergence of the risk society gives rise to the uncertainty Generation Y must continuously negotiate throughout their life-courses. The metaphor of the ‘driver of the car’ instead of the ‘passenger on the train’ suggests that they emphasise educational and self-actualisation biographies rather than careers. They believe that individual skills, capabilities and decisions are keys to successful outcomes, resulting in the importance of credentials against achievement. The portfolio of young adults’ extended educations reflects their ability to enter and re-enter the labour market. On the other hand, Generation-Y workers in this era embracing individualism have strong motivations and high expectations to achieve and succeed as a result of socialisation under a child-centred culture. Under the social influence and successful stories of their predecessors, young adults – whatever their academic qualification and SES – continue to believe that HE will help launch them into greatness and success. As Hui (2010) says, they are keen on rewards, recognition and elements of fun. Under strong job-entitlement beliefs resulting from academic qualifications, HK young adults – advocates of open competition for jobs – endeavour to climb the social ladder by

continuously advancing their efforts and knowledge. According to Kwok (2012), the internalisation of achievement motivation is a necessary condition for upward mobility.

## 2.8. Career Concerns in a Risk Society

Historically, adult education has been connected with learning for personal growth, social inclusiveness, democratic understanding and citizenship (Aspin and Chapman, 2001; Crick and Joldersma, 2006). Nevertheless, there has been a shift in policy discourse towards the continuation of learning for economic progress and development (Biesta, 2006).

Why do young adults wish to attend educational institutions? Sheehy (1997) outlines their learning motivation: “[i]n young adulthood we survive by figuring out how best to please or perform for the powerful ones who will protect and reward us: parents, teachers, lovers, mates, bosses, mentors. It is all about proving ourselves” (p.150). In Jarvis (1995) review, he reports two main reasons for adults to go to class from the National Institute of Adult Education’s (NIAE) report: to “work” and to “know more about the subject/learn the correct way” (NIAE, 1970). Among the sample, their motives are basically external and internal: prepare for a new job, help with the present job, become better informed, spare-time enjoyment. home-centred and everyday tasks, meet new people and escape from the daily routine (Johnstone and Rivera, 1965). These are actually unsurprising as they are in accord with the challenges they face in life-courses. Lengrand (1975) highlights some common challenges that people face, such as obstacles and resistance at work, innovation, acceleration of change, demographic expansion, evolution of scientific knowledge and technology, political challenges, information, leisure management, crisis in patterns of life and relationships, health and ideological crises. Because older models of formal education are no longer ‘useful’ to most people today and because lifestyles are ever changing, it generates a learning need for adults. In the functionalist view, in order to cope with life's changes and challenges and be more productive and innovative in employment, they are motivated to go back to class (OECD, 2004). It resonates with the consensus of local governments and international organisations like the OECD, European Union (EU) and United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) that the world needs us to learn (see OECD, 2004, 1973; UNESCO, 1997; Field, 2000).

In *Passage: Predictable crises of adult life*, Sheehy (1976) suggests different stages of life with their characteristic challenges and opportunities. Following the passage into adult working life, most young adults reach the second stage to begin their careers and raise families. Development within this stage may not be smooth or continuous. “The very meaning of work itself is changing” (Field, 2000: 10). In their ‘turbulent thirties’ and ‘furious forties’, some people change jobs, positions, locations and/or partners. These transitions generate particular learning needs (Schuller and Watson, 2009). They learn to increase their human capital. As underpinned by OECD and UNESCO reports, people must learn in order to cope with new challenges.

Characterised by a risk society, reflexive learners who are aware of being responsible for their own actions, such as investing in their development to increase their human and social capital, are said to be ‘responsible learners’ (Webb and Warren, 2009). Webb and Warren also find that responsible learners are willing to engage in different forms of learning when facing skill transitions; individuals learn to adapt to changing workplace requirements with a view towards increasing employability, new migrants learn to support employment and home-to-work transitions and older employed learners acquire new knowledge and skills to return to the labour market.

## 2.9. Beliefs in Earnings Differences

As shown in Table 4 (HKSAR, 2016), the median starting salaries (defined as employment income in the first full taxable year since graduation) of postgraduates are significantly higher than those of bachelor degree holders, and a similar case is seen between degree holders and sub-degreed workers across the three cohorts (2001/02, 2006/07 and 2011/12). It shows a hierarchy of salaries by education level in HK. Furthermore, the difference between postgraduates and bachelor degree holders is much greater than that between bachelor degree holders and sub-degreed workers. In this regard, postgraduates seem to enjoy a greater salary increase than bachelor degree



holders do. It generates a monetary incentive for those only with bachelor degrees to pursue postgraduate studies for economic fulfilment.

In the last decade, while bachelor degree graduates experienced upward earnings mobility, they could observe postgraduates moving further upward, even though they were in the top tier in earnings. Tables 5(a) and 5(b) show the income distribution of publicly funded bachelor degree graduates in the 2001/02 and 2006/07 cohorts respectively. The entries are the percentage within each overall income decile for each full year since graduation. Bold red figures indicate the income decile of the median graduate. It is evident that bachelor degree graduates in both cohorts enjoyed rather substantial upward mobility (HKSAR, 2016). Tables 5(c) and 5(d) show similar figures for postgraduates. They reveal that even though the median incomes of postgraduates reached the fourth quantile (i.e. the second top 20 per cent of the whole income distribution) at the beginning, they would likely move further upward into the top 20 percent after several years. Therefore, the belief that HE, including undergraduate and postgraduate education, can make a difference in earnings is evident in this city.

## 2.10. Belief in the Value of a Master's Degree

Iliško et al. (2014) point out that education is all about hope and is actually a future-oriented activity. “A vision of the future can be seen as a powerful device that can promote change in the present and empower students to make decisions about a possible future” (p.92). Their study reveals that the development of an envisioned ‘preferable future’ and ‘feared future’ relating to political, economic, social, ecological, cultural and environmental dimensions was found to contribute to choices about their future. From the perspectives of students in HE, “proactive futures (Hutchinson, 1992) provide images of society where each individual undertakes initiative and responsibility in building a more sustainable school and society” (p.100), and the images of society link with one’s study to a certain extent.

Graduates pursuing further learning have values in relation to their hopes. Based on Shimizu and Higuchi (2009) findings, the typical MBA student in Japan says that the

motivation for pursuing an advanced degree is to “make a positive contribution to his or her job” and to get “an interesting job at a higher salary” (p.99). Specifically, the reasons for choosing to pursue an MBA, ranked by significance ( $\geq 3\%$ ), are as follows: (1) give a theoretical/academic framework to work experience; (2) useful for jobs; (3) change jobs or start one’s own business; (4) the challenge; (5) change; (6) nominated by one’s company; (7) connections and networking; (8) change positions to different department; and (9) acquire specific knowledge (p.88). Except for (6), all of the above reasons can be regarded as motives to build identity, human and social capital. In this sense, the motivating factors for undergraduates for pursuing master’s studies are associated with value of the degree.

Using big data from annual online surveys of graduating students (Global MBA Graduate Surveys) from 2003 through 2005, Bruce (2009) finds that “the majority of students rated the overall value of the MBA as outstanding or excellent, regardless of the type of MBA program in which they were enrolled” (p.40). As a matter of fact, research tells us that it is common for on-job professionals to engage in formal education again. In a study into the perceived value of an MBA in pharmaceutical marketing and management, Alkhateeb et al. (2012) report that 33 per cent of the 57 pharmacist preceptors responding to the survey who had already obtained their undergraduate and/or doctoral degree in pharmacy had plans to pursue MBA degree programmes. They also found that “[a]n MBA in pharmaceutical marketing and management could provide pharmacists with advanced knowledge of the operational and strategic business aspects of pharmacy practice and give pharmacy graduates [seeking career advancement] an advantage in an increasingly competitive job market”(p.1). As Messmer (1998) points out, earning an MBA can help professionals contribute to their organisations and improve their career opportunities and is especially advantageous to those with intentions to climb to a higher management position. Based on their 2006 survey in Japan, Shimizu and Higuchi (2009) find that, on average, students who received an MBA had a greater return on investment in terms of wages over and above their undergraduate counterparts regardless of whether the students were self-financed or company-sponsored; furthermore, the MBA could help those who are at a disadvantage in the workplace such as those graduating from inferior universities by levelling the playing field. What is more, the MBA also brought additional nonmonetary benefits, such as allowing them to select jobs and employers in job transitions. The

reasons companies cite for encouraging and investing in workers' education are (1) to ensure the availability of talented human resources; (2) to provide incentives for younger workers; (3) to use education as an alternative to promotion; and (4) to utilise the skills that the graduate acquires (p.61). However, the last reason often goes unsatisfied, as graduates increasingly leave their company after acquiring their degree (p.61-2).

Nonetheless, academic qualifications as a good predictor of high-level job performance seem unable to be proven. In their study on the effect of academic qualifications on selection interview decisions, Olian et al. (1988) find that qualifications account for about 35 per cent of the variance in selection-interview decisions. Moreover, as cited by Singer and Bruhns (1991), results of validation studies in which academic or educational qualifications are used as predictors of job performance have shown that although these variables fail to predict unskilled or semi-skilled job performance, they significantly predict managerial performance as well as performance in certain skilled occupations (p.551). However, it was reported that academic qualifications were given a lower weighting in selection decisions (Miner, 1976). In another study of the validity of job predictors, Dakin and Armstrong (1989) find that personnel consultants rate work experience first whereas academic qualifications were significantly lower at fifth and sixth place respectively. Howard (1986) shows that previous academic experience has a primary impact on an individual's cognitive abilities, motivation and general effectiveness. In this sense, work experience could be seen as having a more specific and direct effect on job performance, whereas academic qualifications could be seen as exerting a more global and indirect influence (Singer and Bruhns, 1991). Furthermore, perspectives from professionals and students about whether academic qualifications or work experience is a more valid predictor of high-level job performance differ. Barr and Hitt (1986) find that professional interviewers' favourability ratings were not significantly affected by candidates' education levels, but interestingly, student interviewers' favourability ratings were significantly influenced. Similarly, in another study it is shown that the effect of work experience was consistently greater than that of academic qualifications in managers' selection decisions, whereas the effect of academic qualifications was relatively greater than that of work experience for students (Singer and Bruhns, 1991). These findings coherently suggest that professionals consider work experience to be

more important than academic qualifications; nevertheless, students view it differently by placing greater emphasis on academic qualifications. Olian et al. (1988) address the students' focus as the "importance these credentials take on in their present stage of life" (p.187). Another reason Singer and Bruhns (1991) propose is that students generally believe that qualifications or credentials enhance future employment prospects.

Credentials, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, are "qualities, achievements, etc. that make one suitable; qualifications, documents showing that a person is what he claims to be, is trustworthy". Credentialists emphasise the status rather than the skills it imparts (Boylan, 1993). From their view, education confers status, which groups and individuals use when competing for income and other rewards (Berg, 1970; Boudon, 1974; Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976). For instance, Wichansky (2014) discusses user experience (UX) professional credentialing. Based on discussion with several UX professionals, she finds that having a professional certification indicates that the individual has met at least the minimum standard of knowledge and practice for UX work; it is a sign that he or she is willing to put his/her knowledge to a test developed by a peer group to see if he or she measures up. It also provides a network of professionals to know and be known by; it lends an extra measure of confidence, especially for new entrants, and fosters professional development. Last but not least, certification can provide an advantage when competing for work. The Board of Certified Professional Ergonomists (BCPE) reports that certified professionals have increased salaries, job promotions, job opportunities and enriched personal lives (p.84).

In the above review, we understand that graduates generally believe that HE brings them hope associated with its perceived values. The following sections review three motivational theories that address the upcoming data in this study, explaining why HK young adults invest in education and re-training by going back to school while working.

## 2.11. Self-Determination Theory

The concept of motivation, according to Locke and Latham (2004), "refers to internal factors that impel action and to external factors that can act as inducements to

action” (p.388). Motivation influences an individual’s action, including its direction (choice), intensity (effort) and duration (persistence). It can also affect not only people’s acquisition of skills and abilities but also to what extent they utilise them.

To understand why employees pursue studies, we require a theoretical framework describing their psychological needs. Self-determination theory (SDT), a social cognitive motivational theory, addresses both the direction of behaviour and why certain outcomes are desired by elucidating basic psychological needs (Johnson et al., 2016). SDT conceptualises basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness as innate and essential to ongoing psychological growth, internalisation and well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2000a). SDT argues that humans are optimally motivated and experience well-being when they have their basic psychological needs satisfied. The need for autonomy drawn from the notion of the locus of causality refers to a sense of ownership of their behaviour and psychological freedom (Deci and Ryan, 2000), reflecting the need to be the origin of one’s actions rather than being pushed and pulled by external forces (deCharms, 1968). The need for competence is defined as the need to feel a sense of mastery over the environment and develop new skills (White, 1959). It is regarded as “inherent to our natural tendency to explore and manipulate the environment as well as in the search for optimal challenges” (Broeck et al., 2016: 1198-9). The need for relatedness represents the need to feel connected to others, to care and be cared for; this need is satisfied when an individual sees him/herself as a member of a group, experiences a sense of communion and develops close relations (p.1199).

The quality of motivation refers to the type or kind of motivation that underlies learning behaviour. It can be distinguished from the quantity, level or amount of motivation that learners display for a particular learning activity (Ryan and Deci, 2000b; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). According to Vansteenkiste et al. (2005), a first attempt to deal with motivation quality is to discern whether the learning is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. The former refers to learning undertaken simply for its inherent enjoyment; the reward is the satisfaction associated with the activity itself. The latter refers to learning that is done to attain an outcome that is separable from that learning per se (Deci, 1971; Deci, 1975). The conceptualisation was then refined by differentiating extrinsic motivation into types of regulation that vary in their degree of

relative autonomy (Ryan and Connell, 1989; Ryan and Deci, 2000b). With this extension, the focus changed to autonomous versus controlled motivation. “Autonomous motivation involves the experience of volition and choice, whereas controlled motivation involves the experience of being pressured or coerced” (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006: 19).

SDT conceptualises the three psychological needs as essential for ongoing psychological growth and internalisation. A need for competence underlies intrinsic motivation; that is, people engage in activities to experience competence and effectance (i.e. a feeling of efficacy) (White, 1959: 329). The notion of ‘psychological growth’ stems from the belief in SDT that intrinsically motivated individuals are “involved in an ongoing, cyclical process of seeking out (or creating) optimally challenging situations and then attempting to conquer those challenges—or put differently, intrinsic motivation leads to the psychological growth of the individual” (Deci and Ryan, 1980: 42). When people possess a primary motivational propensity to engage in activities in which they perceive themselves as the initiator of their behaviour, they feel a sense of personal causation and experience causality pleasure, forming the basis of intrinsic motivation (deCharms, 1968; Nuttin, 1973). In this sense, “the needs for competence and personal causation (which is closely related to the concept of autonomy) are the energizing bases for intrinsically motivated behaviour” (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006: 20).

Initial conceptualisations of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were viewed as antagonistic (deCharms, 1968; Lepper and Greene, 1978), but later research (Koestner et al., 1984; Ryan et al., 1983; Ryan, 1982) found that extrinsic motivation does not necessarily undermine intrinsic motivation; on the contrary, it may enhance it (Luyten and Lens, 1981), implying that extrinsic motivation is not invariantly controlled (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). According to Vansteenkiste et al., four types of extrinsic motivation are identified according to their degrees of autonomy, depending on the extent to which people have been successful at internalising the initially external regulation of their behaviour (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Connell, 1989; Ryan et al., 1985). The least autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is external regulation, referring to behaviour prompted by external contingencies and experienced as coerced. The contingencies and reasons for performing the behaviour have not been internalised (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Introjected regulation, the second type of extrinsic

motivation, refers to people's engagement in an activity with internal pressure based either on the pursuit of self-aggrandizement and self-worth or the avoidance of guilt and shame. "With introjection, regulation of the behaviour has been partially internalized, and hence is within the person, but the person has not accepted it as his or her own. Therefore, the activity does not emanate from the person's sense of self and is experienced as being pressured or coerced" (p.21). Both external and introjected regulation represent an external perceived locus of causality (deCharms, 1968). In the case of identification, people identify the value of an activity and thus accept regulation of the activity as their own. Due to a personal appreciation of an activity's relevance, they are likely to identify with its importance and consequently be willing to engage in the activity volitionally. Identification is a fuller form of internalisation and is characterised by an internal perceived locus of causality. Lastly, internalisation, which is a central process of socialisation, refers a second instantiation of people's growth-oriented endowment. Like intrinsic motivation, the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are considered important energizers of internalisation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan, 1995). These types of regulation specify a spectrum of extrinsic motivation, reflecting the degree to which people have internalised a behavioural regulation.

A second, complementary approach to conceptualising learners' quality of motivation involves considering the content of the goals students value. "Within SDT, intrinsic goals, such as community contribution, health, personal growth, and affiliation, are differentiated from extrinsic goals, such as fame, financial success, and physical appearance" (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006: 22). Intrinsic goals refer to actions that satisfy psychological needs. In addition to the processes of intrinsic motivation and internalisation, the pursuit of intrinsic goals is regarded as a third manifestation of the natural growth orientation. When people are engaged in extrinsic goals, they tend to orient towards interpersonal comparisons (Patrick et al., 2004; Sirgy, 1998) and acquiring external signs of self-worth (Kasser et al., 2004). The pursuit of different goals is linked to basic psychological need for satisfaction (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

The concept of goal motivation (autonomous vs. controlled) is quite different from the concept of goal content (intrinsic vs. extrinsic). The former refers to the reasons why people are pursuing the particular goal contents (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Vansteenkiste et

al. (2006) gave an illustrative example for this: “...students could have an after-school job to earn money (extrinsic goal content) because they feel pressured by their parents (controlled motive) or because they value going to college and will need the money (autonomous motive)” (p.23). However, Sheldon and Kasser (1995) find that, on average, the pursuit of intrinsic goals tends to be positively correlated with autonomous motives (i.e. intrinsic interest or internalised importance), whereas the pursuit of extrinsic goal contents is more likely to be associated with controlled motives (i.e. external or introjected reasons).

## 2.12. Achievement Goal Theory

Achievement goal theory (AGT) presumes that every individual is an intentional, goal-directed being who strives to demonstrate ability or competence in achievement situations (Kristiansen et al., 2012). AGT research has posited a learning goal structure referred to as the motivational climate, which influences individuals’ adoption of achievement goals (Ames, 1992a; Ames, 1992b).

Achievement goals have been identified as either mastery goal orientation or performance goal orientation (Ames, 1992a). The former is characterised as the goal of developing one’s ability through learning or task mastery to gain competence, whereas the latter implies demonstrating one’s competence and superiority over others or achieving success with little effort (Elliot and Dweck, 2005; Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002; Xiang et al., 2003). Mastery goals are often deemed more advantageous for academic achievement, as they are more often associated with intrinsic interest and motivation in learning, autonomy, effort and positive attitudes towards learning and well-being (Elliot, 1999; Jagacinski, 2000; Johnson and Sinatra, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2002). Performance goals, on the contrary, focus more on self-worth rather than the task (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002), leading to more negative outcomes, such as extrinsically regulated motivation, in that the extrinsic nature of evaluation is highlighted (Kristiansen et al., 2012). AGT is often used to explain phenomena in sports, where competitions and which have become enterprises focused on making money (e.g. Kristiansen et al., 2012; Xiang et al., 2003; Treasure and Roberts, 1995; Harwood and Chan, 2010).



## 2.13. Expectancy Theory

Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), the first over-arching theory of workplace motivation (Locke and Latham, 2004), suggests that people are motivated to engage in certain activities if they feel competent enough and trust that their efforts will result in the attainment of desired performance goals that will, in turn, obtain certain favourable outcomes or rewards. In detail, it explains motivation (force) in the sense of a mathematical formula depending on valence, expectancy and instrumentality.

Force refers to the compulsion of an individual to behave in a given way, valence the preference for consequent reward, expectancy the perceived likelihood that the behaviour will result in the intended outcome and instrumentality the perception that the intended outcome will lead to the consequent reward. Force is therefore seen as the sum of the products of multiple valences, instrumentalities and expectancies involved in a course of action (Smith, 2009: 476).

By and large, the central theme of the theory is that an individual's behaviour is a function of the degree to which their behaviour is instrumental in the attainment of some outcome as well as his/her evaluations of these outcomes (Reinhardt and Wahba, 1975). References to expectancy theory as an explanation of sales and marketing strategy, management and actions are effective and explicable (Smith et al., 2000; Smith, 2009).

## 2.14. Summary

The object of research is Generation Y, characterised as individualistic, highly motivated to achieve and having strong job entitlement beliefs but misaligned ambitions. It is interesting to know, when negotiating risk and uncertainty as 'car journeys' within the job sphere in this risk society, why young HK graduate workers went back to school and how master's-level education benefited their career mobility.

In this paper, the notion of career mobility is defined as the sum of earnings mobility and occupational mobility. Master's education is set up to increase one's knowledge, professional competence and qualifications and is treated as advanced preparation for academic professionalism, and more correlating to this study – “the next stage of economic and social selection after the first degree” (Duke, 1997: 87). It matters an individual's opportunities, such as placement in the labour market, are influenced by chances of subsequent advancement and even financial rewards and working conditions (Wright, 2001). In this risk society and in the context of the declining role of education in upward career mobility, the study is designed to share some young HK employees' stories as to why their generation still makes use of master's education to become ‘somebody’ along the career ladders within their imagined and realised identities as well as how master's education matters those responsible learners' life chances in terms of career mobility. The former is explored in light of SDT, AGT and expectancy theory, while for the latter, data collection questions are designed to examine how increases in human capital and improvements in qualifications are emphasised based on HCT and the sorting model.

The long-lasting debate around whether education functions as a positional good in the labour market is highlighted. As Di Stasio et al. (2016) review, HCT suggests that employers compete for the most productive candidates at the lowest cost, grounded on the assumption that “education is productivity-enhancing: each additional year of schooling is an investment in skills that increases individual productivity” (p.54). The signalling and screening theory argues that education simply signals productivity potential rather than directly increasing productivity. “Educational attainment correlates with unobservable aspects (e.g. willingness to learn, readiness to sustain effort, perseverance, capacity to acquire new knowledge and skills) that make individuals more productive in the labour market” (p.54). Later, I shall discuss my findings on how a master's-level education benefits career mobility using two metaphorical engines emerging from this study – the *human engine* and the *social engine* – that drive individuals to use postgraduate education to move up the careers ladder by responding to these two theories that provide a theoretical justification for the correlation between education and earnings.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Introduction

The methodology is the rationale for the research approach and the lens through which the data collection and analysis occur. It describes the general research strategy that outlines the ways in which the research is undertaken (Howell, 2012) and the broad philosophical underpinning to the research methods. This chapter outlines and unpacks the research problem – what is the role of Master education in career mobility, explains how the research is done by addressing the philosophical assumptions, interprets the framework and methods and looks at the practicalities of the study. It clarifies the academic basis for the choices in research methods.

Researchers used to adopt quantitative methods to determine the extent to which education could explain career mobility. For instance, Anderson (1961) draws on data from Centers (1949) to challenge the role of education in raising social status, Blau and Duncan (1967) compares the occupational status of two generations by analysing effect size, Erikson (1992) and Breen (2004) emphasise origin-education-destination (OED) correlations and the HK government (HKSAR, 2016) has used figures and graphs to point out the earnings differences between postgraduates and undergraduates. However, besides counting occurrences, calculating correlations and describing trends, little research is available to interpret how an individual gains upward mobility from education. The research topic is sensitive to context. The ‘role’ of master’s-level study takes on a variety of meanings in different contexts (Silverman, 2001), leading to different specific research. By contextual sensitivity, I attempt to understand the social phenomenon by searching out meanings rather than behaviour in order to attempt to document the world from the point of view of the people studied (Hammersley, 1992: 165). Instead of measuring the social world as it exists, I seek to examine how it ought to be from the perspective of social science (Elias, 1978). To investigate the aforementioned research problem, a qualitative method for inquiry is “well suited for understanding phenomena within their context, uncovering links among concepts and behaviours, and generating and refining theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles and Huberman 1994; Crabtree and Miller 1999; Morse 1999; Ragin 1999; Sofaer 1999;

Patton 2002; Campbell and Gregor 2004; Quinn 2005, cited in Bradley et al., 2007). In this sense, an analysis of words rather than numbers is more appropriate to explain and understand HE's 'role' more deeply.

Since I adhere to a conceptual framework and prescriptive research questions, a wholly inductive analysis is not possible; conversely, employing a purely deductive analysis with qualitative data is not ideal as it can lead to bias or prevent new themes and theories from emerging (Skillman et al., 2019; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Tracy, 2012). I therefore adopted a hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches for the inquiry. The deductive approach offers a start list of conceptual codes (Bradley et al., 2007) for the purpose of evaluating the capital theory (Lin, 2001), human capital theory (Becker, 1962, 1964) and the signalling and screening theory (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973); while an inductive method guides a data driven approach (mentioned below) in which the participants' experiences are represented (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I selected a section of human's life span to explore the role of education in careers mobility by looking into their experiences. Contextually, I explore how further education (master's studies) brings an individual, who graduated from a university not too long ago and with full-time employment experience, from one place to another under the OED model (Breen, 2004). The object of this research is the lived experiences of a group of individuals who share a common or similar culture or sub-culture (i.e. demographic and academic background), actions and experiences (i.e. engagement in master's studies on full-time employment), including 'what' and 'how' they experienced their studies and mobility (Creswell, 2013: 79). Based on the inductive analysis, new concepts are formed and new theories are emerged (Wallace, 1971).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) compiled a five-phase research process that informs qualitative researchers and puts philosophy and theory in perspective. It includes (1) self-awareness of the researcher, (2) theoretical paradigms and perspectives, (3) research strategies, (4) methods of data collection and analysis and (5) the practice of interpretation and evaluation. By making use of this framework, I first bracket myself by declaring my views towards the research followed by issues concerning research ethics. Second, the ontological perspective as well as epistemology under social constructivism as our interpretative framework is addressed. Third, the process of developing the hierarchy of research questions – from research area to research topic,

from general to specific research questions, followed by the data collection questions – is illustrated, and I explain why and how interviews and a hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches are used to obtain the data and develop the theory. Fourth, the data collection and analysis process is described. I shall make the data analysis process as transparent as possible with the help of exemplar illustration. Last, I shall mention the measures to maximise the validity and reliability in the interpretation of the data as well as why they are applicable and appropriate methods to address the research problem.

### 3.2. Self-Awareness of the Researcher

In this section, my history and views relating to this research study are addressed. I also describe the ethical and political concerns.

I am a full-time mathematics teacher and have served as a career adviser for students in a secondary school in HK. The OECD advocates for the concept of all purposeful learning activity from cradle to grave to meet the need for continuing upgrades to work and life skills throughout life, especially for those who live in HK where changes due to globalisation and technology advancements occur rapidly (OECD, 2004). I advocate this view and support every young adult in his or her decision to continue his or her education. According to constructivism, interviewers and interviewees are actively engaged in constructing meanings collaboratively (Silverman, 2011), and I could facilitate this through my academic background (MEd and MBA), which has helped me not only better understand the language and culture of the research subjects but also more accurately report their lived experiences. Despite this, I should transcend or suspend my previous knowledge and experience to understand the phenomenon with a sense of ‘newness’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). Bracketing is a well-accepted process for setting aside beliefs, feelings, and perceptions to be more open and faithful to the phenomenon (Colaizzi 1978; Streubert & Carpenter 1999, cited in Anderson and Spencer, 2002). I should appropriately position myself outside of the research study by accurately identifying my personal experiences with master’s studies relating to careers guidance and those from the participants in the study.

In terms of ethics and politics, I declare that every interview participant and I shall reap no profits from the research and have no benefits from whatever the results that emerge. An ethical approval application was approved by the university prior to conducting the study after reviewing each section of my ethical practice, such as informed consent, participant recruitment and selection, data security, anonymity and confidentiality.

I sought and received my school's principal's approval to interview alumni and staff. I contacted alumni through social media sites like Facebook, where I had already built wide network with alumni. Besides, I was also allowed to use the school campus for interviews provided that it caused no disturbance to daily teaching and learning activities. A data protection/informed consent letter was drafted and was approved by the university to be given to each interviewee before each interview, ensuring that each (1) understood the purpose of the study, (2) was willing to participate in this research voluntarily and reserved the right to withdraw from it at any time, (3) knew that the collected data would be confidential and would not be used or shared for purposes other than those of the research project, (4) agreed to have the interview recorded with an MP3 recorder, the audio file of which would be password protected and stored in my personal cloud and would only be accessed by me or those authorised by the university upon request, (5) agreed the use of verbatim quotes in the final dissertation and (6) could report to the university directly via the contact information for the university ethics officers printed on the letter. In the sampling, I started a few interviews with convenience sampling and continued by using snowball sampling. I learned of prospective interviewees through random referrals by primary interviewees and selected appropriate subjects based on purposeful sampling criteria (Patton, 1990). Secondary participants were asked to contact me directly, provided they were interested in the study. The practice prevented the secondary participants' personal or private contact information from being released without their knowledge or consent. On the day of the interview, the sites were public but one-on-one (i.e. not easily disturbed nor overheard by a third party) to balance safety and confidentiality. No sensitive data, such as personal information, marital status or salary, were collected. During the data analysis, the interviews were transcribed in private area with the audio files being played through earphones. All reported data, including the names of participants and their companies, are anonymised (i.e. pseudonyms are used) to ensure privacy and confidentiality so that

nobody can identify the origin of any quote. The data and results are not to be used beyond this paper for any kind of reference or action to avoid misuse by third parties.

### 3.3. Theoretical paradigms and perspectives

Philosophy means “the use of abstract ideas and beliefs that inform our research” (Creswell, 2013: 16). It is important, as it shapes how I formulate my problem, devise the research questions to study as well as collect data and information to answer them. In addition, clarifying the philosophical assumptions underlying the research helps the researcher and reviewers be in alignment, making the evaluation fairer (ibid.: 18-9). In this phase, the philosophical and theoretical frameworks that bring certain paradigms, perspectives and “a basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990: 17) to the inquiry are addressed. To inform the study of the research problem, a qualitative approach to inquiry is used, as defined by Creswell (2013):

...To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change (Creswell, 2013: 44).

This approach exemplifies the common belief that qualitative researchers can provide a ‘deeper’ understanding of social phenomena than could be obtained from purely quantitative data (Silverman, 2001: 32). In contrast to positivism, interpretivism regards valid social knowledge not as quantitative facts but as the meanings that humans ascribe to their actions. We seek to explain the social world through the understandings that human agents have of it. This approach allows us to construct meaning by understanding how humans create and act within cultural contexts.

This research study is designed with interpretivism as the philosophical framework and is grounded in the perspective of social constructivism as the ontological position. Social constructivism asserts that multiple social realities and meanings are continually being constructed by social actors. “The knowledge to be produced is not representation of the world; instead, it is part of the world it describes” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 107). With the epistemological assumption, subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views (Creswell, 2013), so the study was designed such that through the subjective experiences of people and their language, I examined reality by listening how they view their social worlds. Their lived experiences were reported as accurately as possible. Based on the concepts and theories in extant literature, I relied on their quotes and experiences as evidence to co-construct social reality with them.

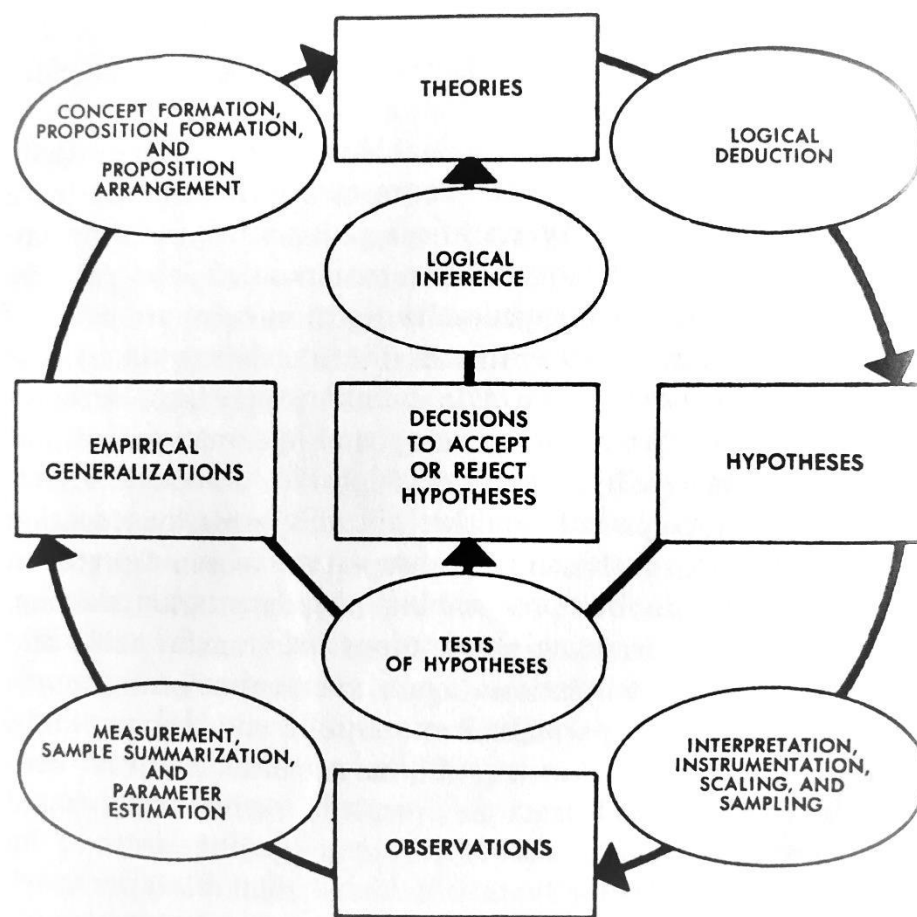
### 3.4. Research Strategies

“A model of science must include both theories and observation, both conceptualising and data gathering, and both generalising and specifying” (Baker, 1988: 53). Its process is traditionally thought to be deductive and inductive and is practised in this study. The former refers to a process in which hypotheses are derived from a generalised explanation – a theory while the latter means that the researcher develops generalisations based on a limited amount of data (ibid.). Figure 4 shows the Wallace model that contains “five principal information components whose transformations into one another are controlled by six principal sets of methods...” (Wallace, 1971: 16). The deductive half of the research process starts with the theories and moves through the process of deduction to observations in which already developed theories are used to generate hypotheses that can be tested with new observations. It then follows by the inductive half of the research process. Based on observations, the researcher is moving from “seeing to knowing and from observing to naming, from taking in the variety and range of sights to sorting these out into the patterns that make the variety comprehensible” (Baker, 1988: 55). As Popper (1961) views, theories do not automatically follow from generalisations but they require a kind of imaginative leap, a creative or irrational element which does not spring from empirical evidence or from the generalisations derived from the evidence (1961: 32). Another step in the research cycle



is to test the hypotheses based on the empirical generalisations whether they should be accepted or rejected, and then establish the implications of these tests for the theory upon which the hypotheses depend (Baker, 1988: 58). This process of appraising the results of testing a hypothesis sometimes may yield unanticipated observations that are “anomalous, surprising, either because it seems inconsistent with prevailing theory or with other established facts” (Merton, 1968: 158), or stimulate the creation of new theories that are unanticipated in the study design, giving rise to the “serendipity” component of research – the discovery, by chance or sagacity, of valid results which were not sought for (Merton, 1968: 157).

Figure 4<sup>6</sup>. The principal informational components, methodological controls, and information transformations of the scientific process



Source: Wallace (1971: 18)

<sup>6</sup> Note: Information components are shown in rectangles; methodological controls are shown in ovals; information transformations are shown by arrows.

Based on literatures, I identified conceptual codes and categories (Bradley et al., 2007) – *knowledge* and *skills* giving rise to *human capital* (Becker, 1962, 1964) and *qualification* giving rise to *social capital* (Arrow, 1973; Spence, 1973), and hypothesised that the two capitals (Lin, 2001) are associated with higher wages (Weiss, 1995; Tan, 2014). I evaluated it, and I refined and expanded the analytic themes by applying principles of inductive analysis (Skillman et al., 2019) to emerge new theoretical insights not bound by them.

Locke (2007) suggests a set of guidelines for the development of inductive theories: (1) start with valid philosophical axioms as the base; (2) develop a substantial body of observations or data; (3) formulate valid concepts; (4) look for evidence of causality and identify causal mechanisms; (5) tie in valid concepts from other sources and theories where applicable; (6) integrate the totality of findings and concepts into a non-contradictory whole; (7) identify the domain and boundary conditions for the theory; (8) make theory building a careful, painstaking, and gradual process.

Under constructivism, I have recruited 20 young adults aged 25–35 living and having full-time employment in HK who had already completed master's studies to participate in my research. To explain why HK young graduate workers return to school and pursue master's studies, we must first understand the general characteristics and culture/sub-culture of them. I did this by reviewing the literature as well as through data collection and analysis to particularly understand more about their ideas and beliefs regarding a master's education and careers based on these shared patterns of mental activities. Concepts were formulated through examining their common language and responses relating to importance of the master's degrees in terms of career rewards. Informed by the context of a risk society (as 'drivers of cars'), their common characteristics, their beliefs in earning differences, and based on the knowledge of their individualistic characteristics, such as enthusiasm in competence and autonomy, I devised questions to examine their learning needs and goals. The data obtained on their learning goals are used to triangulate those obtained by exploring their learning needs to form a whole non-contradictory concepts and taxonomy. We also use deductive method of applying motivation theories to infer the type of learning motivation they possessed. Questions were set to test the hypothesis that they are self-motivated to learn.

How a master's education benefits career mobility is experience-focused. It encompasses participants' lived experiences during their studies and after graduation, and I explore the relationship between the two. On the one hand, I set questions to learn what they had acquired and how they had benefited from their master's courses with regard to distinguishing themselves from others so as to understand reality in relation to Duke (1997)'s description of the master's degree as "the next stage of economic and social selection after the first degree" (p.87). On the other hand, I enquire whether what they have acquired from further education or training could make a difference in the labour market as well as whether they were happy or disappointed with the role their education and credentials played in increasing their career mobility. I drew on my observations and their experiences to carefully look at the mechanism of how master's education increases mobility with help of the mixture of capital theory and signalling and screening theory to emerge a new theory. Respondent validation was ensured by asking 'what if you had not studied for your master's degree?' from the other way round to see if corroborating evidence that master's studies made a difference in their careers paths could be found.

This research starts with theories at the 12:00 position on the research clock (Figure 4) – namely the capital theory, human capital theory and its counterpart, the signalling and screening theory. Deductively, they generate hypotheses that human capital and social capital are associated with higher earnings in two different ways. I then conducted a qualitative research on a sample to evaluate and expand theories based on observation and analysis of responses to enable them to be combined and to evolve into a new theory in terms of careers mobility. I also use deductive approach by drawing on the Expectancy theory during the inductive analysis. The limitation of the sample determines the domain and boundary conditions for the theory.

### 3.5. Methods of data collection and analysis

In this section, the practicalities of this study, including the construction of the research, the method of data collection, sampling strategies to identify participants and the data analysis are to be addressed.

This research aims to explore the role of master's-level studies in career mobility. Such an exploration consists of examining the motivation to study and the mechanism of how a master's education benefits young graduate workers' career mobility. They refer to our general research questions: why do students return to school and pursue master's studies and how does a master's education benefit career mobility?

Informed by the key concepts and themes in the literature, I used the five levels of abstraction in research (Punch, 2006) – the research area, research topic, general research questions, specific research questions and data collection questions (see Figure 5) – to guide the research and address the research problem.

Figure 5. Hierarchy of research questions

Research Area: Career mobility

Research Topic: The role of master's studies on career mobility

<b>General Research Questions</b>	<b>Specific Research Questions</b>	<b>Key Data Collection Questions</b>
Why did they decide to go back to school to pursue master's studies?	What can be learned about the culture in terms of master's studies and careers?	No specific data collection questions have been set; instead, I look for common language that emerged from the transcriptions.
	What are their beliefs and values in regard to master's studies?	Why did you think the master's programme you engaged so important? What was your expected return and added value?
	How do they view further education and their careers?	What and to what extent did you expect the course and qualification to contribute to your career preparedness?
	What were their learning needs? Was there an alternative way, other than	What was your deficiency in performing your jobs well? Had you ever experienced it? What did you think of your deficiency in performing an advanced job or position that

	formal studies, to satisfy those needs?	you aspired? How could you improve yourself to make up for that deficiency?
	What were their study goals?	What did you want to get from the master's programme? How probable did you think you would succeed in getting them?
	Who motivated them to take the master's studies?	Who or what has inspired you to apply for the master's programme?
How did a master's education benefit career mobility?	What did they get from the course?	What did you acquire and benefit from your master's courses?
	What did they experience in the labour market after graduation?	For what you had identified as deficient, did the course help you close that gap? Did you feel you were more competent (i.e. efficacy increased) in your job after completing the programme? Did you realise any difference in work performance?
		To what extent did your employers (current and potential) value your new abilities and new qualifications? Did your employers convey a new expectation of you after obtaining your new degree? What was your experience when you brought your new qualifications to the job market?
	According to their real experiences, how did their master's courses work in helping them advance their career mobility?	Did you apply to or change jobs? Were these efforts successful? Why or why not?
		What effect did you expect your master's qualification just obtained to have on your career advancement? To what extent did the course help you advance your position and/or income in these years after graduation?

		What if you had not studied for your master's degree?
		What do you think a promotion depends upon?

Data were collected through one-to-one and face-to-face interviews. An interview can be regarded as a guided conversation between a researcher and the informants from whom we want to learn something. Using interviews is not only practical, achievable and effective but also economical. “[C]ompared with other methods in qualitative studies, interviews are relatively economical in terms of time and resources” (Silverman, 2011: 169). Especially in this study, individual experiences from the past are collected. In addition, in a constructivist view, the type of knowledge we are concerned with is how the interview participants actively create meaning (Silverman, 2001: 95). This is based on Holstein and Gubrium’s idea of ‘the active interview’: “Construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details. The respondent can hardly ‘spoil’ what he or she is, in effect, subjectively creating” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 117).

The interviews were semi-structured to seek a balance between obtaining sufficient data to address the research questions and providing an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication based on the emotionalist view (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 116). Interviewees were allowed to talk freely with some probing and rapport to ascribe meanings. As some of the interviewees were my former students, I sought to overcome the presumed power imbalance with the interviewees through the seating arrangements and by maintaining a friendly attitude.

An interview guide consisting of a number of questions on the topics I wished to explore and cover in the conversation had to be developed. Informed by the literature review and the interview trial – a less structured interview with more open-ended questions on the topic, the interview guide was developed and confirmed (appendix IIB). The interview questions were categorised into six sections: general experience,

personal needs, values, motivation to study, post-graduation experiences and returns on studies including careers mobility. However, I was free to follow different conversation paths over the course of interview and prompt the interviewees to clarify or expand on certain points. A remark should be made here that a refinement of the interview guide was made as the work progressed. In order to justify whether the respondents were overqualified for their current jobs, a question was added after a few interviews: Does the new post/job after graduation require a master's degree?

Including the first trial, I conducted successive interviews to develop a full set of theoretical codes, categories and themes. As the information expanded, the description required more specific knowledge. I adopted purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) to deliberately seek informants with particular knowledge or experience to gather information-rich cases so that the breadth and depth of the concepts and phenomena could be better understood. Contextually, I deliberately sought M.Phil. (PGE research degrees) graduates as interviewees when I found that all interviewed participants were taught master's degree holders. This not only allows us to achieve numbers that appropriately represent various demographic characteristics of the population, but also helps flesh out the properties of a tentative category (in this case: *knowledge and skills upgrades to improve work performance*). This process of data collection ceased when I found that gathered data about the theoretical categories and themes revealed no new properties nor further theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2006). In this research, a sample size of 15 interviews was used as a baseline (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Corbin and Strauss, 2007; *c.f.* Harley et al., 2009) and I stopped after conducting 5 additional interviews (Dave and Nick included;  $n = 20$ ) to reach the saturation point. We made use the guidelines suggested by Locke (2007) for the development of inductive theories to develop models and generate theories. The theories developed were emerged from a hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches that was grounded in literatures as well as data that were systematically gathered and analysed to reflect respondents' experiences.

Participants in this study all experienced master's studies and are members of a shared culture. Via social media and referrals, I recruited adults aged 25–35 living and having full-time employment in HK who had already completed master's studies to participate in this study. Their participation was voluntary. Interviews started with convenience sampling of my school's alumni. Snowball sampling and successive

random referrals kept the interviews going, and I developed a purposive sample to gather information-rich cases. Appendix IIA shows the profile of the interview participants (13 males and 7 females; all Cantonese), including their education and career backgrounds. Except for Dave and Nick, all interviewees had bachelor degrees and full-time employment before pursuing their master's studies. All of them had graduated from their master's programmes prior to the interviews. Their careers span the industries of medicine (Med), technology (Tech), information technology (IT), engineering (Engg), architecture (Arch), finance and accounting (F&A), banking (Bank), social work (SW), logistics (Logt) and other businesses (Others). This wide variety of industries capturing the breadth of variation within the population minimises bias in the views emerging from the meanings given from this sample to represent the experiences of the population, which includes those who have alternative meanings ascribed to their experiences. However, they are rather homogeneous in terms of ethnicity. Information about their religion and socio-economic background was not accessed.

Each interview was recorded (Van Manen, 1990)<sup>7</sup> and transcribed verbatim (see an exemplar in appendix IIC) with consent. The transcripts were entered into the NVivo data management programme and a comprehensive process of data coding and identification of themes was undertaken. In the process of data analysis, we began with a word-based technique (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). It is one of the easiest ways to identify themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) and was used in Strauss (1992) research. We can understand what people are talking about by looking the words they use, as repetitions of keywords in context are often salient in the minds of respondents. In Ryan and Bernard's view, some of the most obvious themes emerging from a corpus of data are those "topics that occur and reoccur" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975: 83) and "recurring regularities" (Guba, 1978: 53), and we can know "how frequent people circle through the same network of ideas" (D' Andrade, 1991: 287) by listening to their long stretches of talk. Opler (1945) also points out that in observing a cultural system, the importance of any theme is related to how often it appears. In this regard, it works as a starting point to help us not only understand a general landscape of HK young graduate workers associated with further education and work, but also facilitate the development of

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<sup>7</sup> Van Manen (1990) suggests taped conversation.



theoretical models and theories based on the hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches using the language of the object of research.

Themes come from the data and my prior theoretical understanding from the literature review, experiences and the codes emerging from the preliminary data analysis with the word-based technique. I built and categorised the codes by observing the patterns in the data from the bottom up and inductively organising them into abstract units of useful information. I coded the transcriptions, identified significant statements or quotes and developed clusters of meaning from them into themes. For instance, in analysing participants' responses to the question "why did you think the master's programme you engaged in is so important?", 'job competence' arose as a code. This is a notion from the preliminary word-based data analysis and self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2000a). It then emerged as a theme by comparing similarities among the data like: "*I want to equip myself better to...*", "*I hope to show I have upgraded my skills...*", "*to facilitate a paradigm shift, especially in my thinking skills...*", "*to update...*" and "*to learn... My career prospects could be enhanced by getting self-improvement through formal training and qualification advancement...I can apply to some jobs...*" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This code, together with six others, then generated categories – *operation, personal, social and mobility* – the four levels or taxonomies of the theme – *study needs hierarchy model*. A codebook was developed and updated concurrently during the data collection and analysis process.

Research memos (appendix IID) were created to record the findings and facilitate structuring themes, categories and codes. Significant statements were used to write a structural description of what the participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994). For instance, respondents were asked "regarding your master's programme, what was your general experience with it? Do you like it? Why?" I wrote memos with detailed descriptions to reflect their views. For example, in Peter's case: I wrote down:

*It is a professional master's degree programme. It deepens the professional knowledge of medicine that Peter needs to carry out his work. From lectures and workshops, he acquired some leadership training that is important to his career.*

In David's case, I wrote:

*David (Engg) found that the benefit fell short of his expectations...He thinks that the programme is too general, and among a variety of curricula, he only found a few to be useful.*

Their responses reveal that the answers to this question were conceived of as a dichotomy. Under the theme – *general experience*, categorically *fruitful* (= useful) and *fruitless* (= not useful) emerged. Under the *fruitful* category, I explored what they acquired from their master's courses, and I found that the benefits could be grouped into six codes: *new knowledge* and *technical skills*, *soft skills*, *exposure*, *social networks*, *qualifications* and *self-awareness* and *personal development*. In addition, I coded Peter's response into the corresponding codes, categories and themes.

Should interview responses be treated as direct access to experiences or as actively constructed narratives involving activities that themselves demand analysis (Silverman, 2011)? Silverman suggests that both positions are legitimate, but I should justify and explain the position that is taken (P.47). For example, almost all of the respondents said that they were 'self-initiated' to engage in the master's courses. However, self-initiation is not necessarily intrinsic motivation, as under their pragmatic value and earning difference belief, they may have passively acted under the influence of extrinsic incentives, such as earning superior credentials, rather than because they really wanted to 'enjoy' the course. Thus the word 'self-initiated' here is regarded as an actively constructed 'narrative' and refers to a situation in which they were not 'forced' to take the studies and instead exercised their free will to 'fully agree' that they should do so.

### 3.6. The Practice of Interpretation and Evaluation

I strive to understand the stories and lived experiences of the participants as well as obtain detailed meanings. I use 'writing' as interpretation, so its practice, including the strategy and style, must be addressed. To produce a quality report, I asked myself,

“[d]id I get it right?” (Stake, 1995: 107) and “[d]id I publish a wrong or inaccurate account (Thomas, 1993: 39)?” I mainly rely on the quality criteria Guba and Lincoln (1994) offer to judge the interpretation of this inquiry.

Making use of Creswell (2013) compilation of four writing issues, I write in accordance with his reminders. First, I position myself in my writings; here, the reflexivity of the writer means a consciousness of biases, values and experiences that I bring to this study. I was aware that in the beginning of the snowball sampling, some of the interviewees were those whom I had known before and some reported their experiences with MBA programmes, which I have also taken before. I went through those transcripts aware of potential bias due to my similar experiences in order to ensure the transcripts reflected their pure voices. Second, I write for the general public and academics. As a result, I keep my writing style as familiar, friendly, readable and applicable to a broad audience, but professional enough in that it is interesting, memorable and, most importantly, convincing. Last, I write in an interpretation-quotation manner. Quotations consisting of eye-catching short quotes, embedded quotes and long quotes from different respondents are grouped together.

In terms of quality, post-positivist qualitative study attaches itself to the standards of study of natural science, which require “traditional research scientific criteria” (Patton, 2002): internal validity (i.e. an isomorphism of findings with reality), external validity (i.e. generalisability), reliability (in the sense of stability) and objectivity (i.e. a distanced and neutral observer) (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). The corresponding notions exclusive to constructivism parallel Guba (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose are the trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Creditability refers to internal consistency. In achieving credibility (vs. internal validity), the results were validated through literature searches, adhering to the methods that have been tried and tested (*c.f.* Anderson and Spencer, 2002), bracketing my past experiences and taking measures in the data collection and analysis stages. During the data collection process, I used an adequate sample size informed by data saturation; conducted face-to-face interviews that offer rich data in terms of body language and non-verbal communication, which increases the validity of interpreting the responses;

asked the participants to review their responses during and/or after the interview; and continued the interviews until data saturation was achieved (see Frankel, 1999; Meadows and Morse, 2001; Anderson and Spencer, 2002). In the data analysis, I validated the transcripts by repeatedly listening to participants' audio recordings to maximise accuracy and through triangulation – making use of multiple different methods to provide corroborating evidence – and respondent validation – validating the research findings by taking them back to the people I have studied to see whether the findings conform to their own experiences (Creswell, 2013; Silverman, 2011; Barbour, 2001). For instance, (1) I compared the findings obtained from the analysis of the target group's common language using the word-based technique with those obtained directly from their answers to the interview questions; (2) I asked the respondents “what if you had not studied for your master's degree?” to see if their master's studies might have made any difference in their careers paths from the other way round; (3) I triangulated the research findings with those in the literature concurrently and (4) I validated the data exploring their learning needs and goals respectively to see whether the data are consistent and coherent.

Transferability refers to the conventional notion of external validity or generalisability, which is important as the knowledge emerging from this research is from a small sample and lacks statistical analysis. In order to make sure the findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied, I kept working files including memos and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) throughout the process (ibid.). I conducted five additional interviews and found that no more insights emerged from these compared with the constructs developed from the fifteen baseline interviews. Data saturation offers an acceptable answer to the question “Are there enough data to support significant claim (the emerging theory)?” (Tracy, 2010: 841). The findings are more trustworthy in terms of transferability provided that studies of negative cases or outliers as a validation strategy are also systematically presented (Creswell, 2013). Creswell argues that “[n]ot all evidence will fit the pattern of a code or a theme. It is necessary then to report this negative analysis, and, in doing so, the researcher provides a realistic assessment of the phenomenon under study. In real life, not all evidence is either positive or negative, it is some of both” (p.251). Chapter 4 reports on a negative case that, echoing Creswell, brings me a new insight on the ‘risk society’. However, due to snowballing sampling approach, the mechanism of referrals restricts the diversity of

respondents in terms of ethnicity and social background though I adopt purposeful sampling to select participants to widen variety of industries the sample covers. The sampling approach limits the transferability of the conclusions that I can draw to represent the whole of generation Y in HK; it represents a small part of it.

Dependability – parallel to reliability – emphasises that “the way in which a study is conducted should be consistent across time, researchers, and analysis techniques” (Gasson, 2004: 94). Therefore, the process through which findings are derived and knowledge is produced should be as explicit and repeatable as possible. This is enhanced by making the research process transparent (Silverman, 2011). Meyrick (2006) also discusses transparency in data collection by urging that “the process of data collection should be detailed enough to allow readers to confirm the generation of categories and conclusions and the regularity of the processes used” (p.805). In this study, this can be accomplished by (1) keeping an audit trail of how samples are selected, (2) recording every interview, (3) developing the codebook and continuously revising it to ensure consistency in the use of the emerging themes, (4) assuring the stability of responses by sticking to the question set in the interviews by only one researcher, and (5) describing our data analysis methods and processes in a sufficiently detailed manner for future examination (see Lemay et al., 2010; Silverman, 2011).

In contrast to quantitative research traditions that regard objectivity as a goal, I understand that the nature of the data I gathered and the analytic processes in which I engaged are grounded in subjectivity. As a result, confirmability acknowledges that the research is never objective (Morrow, 2005), as data in small samples in qualitative research constitute the findings; therefore, the deliberate selection of a sample can easily manipulate the research outcomes. In this regard, data saturation with high density of transparency can minimise the degree of suspicion. Besides, as Morrow points out, “[m]any of the procedures used to accomplish the goal of dependability are also applicable here, particularly accountability through an audit trail, and the management of subjectivity is essential” (p.252). A common approach to subjectivity has been referred to as ‘bracketing’, which makes implicit assumptions and biases overt so that they can be set aside to avoid having them influence the research (Husserl, 1931). Furthermore, Creswell (2013) suggests that “both dependability and confirmability are established through an auditing of the research process” (p.246). In this study, I

developed my interview guide under supervision before the interviews; submitted the transcripts, code table, memos and working files; and reported the findings to my supervisor at each stage of the study.

“[T]he adequacy of interpretation during the process of data analysis, interpretation, and presentation is essential to round out the criteria for trustworthiness” (Morrow, 2005: 256). In Morrow’s view, data analysis, interpretation and writing are a continuous and interactive process; thus, I see them as an integrated whole. As he suggests, I ‘immersed’ myself in the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts, listening to the audio recordings and reviewing my notes and other data. These repeated forays into the data led me to “a deep understanding of all that comprises the data corpus (body of data) and how its parts interrelate” (p.256).

### 3.7. Summary

This chapter outlines the methods used to explore the role of master’s-level studies in young HK graduate workers’ mobility. I address this by exploring the lived experiences of a group of individuals who share a common or similar culture or sub-culture. The inquiry is designed to understand the social phenomenon by searching out meanings; thus, an analysis of words rather than numbers is more appropriate to explain the role and help me understand the phenomenon. As a result, this study is designed under interpretivism as its philosophical framework and is grounded in social constructivism as its ontological position. In this sense, participants’ stories and experiences are used to co-construct social reality, and the ways we know and present the knowledge are through language and writing respectively. The study is qualitative and guided by a hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches, which draws on existing concepts and models (i.e. the capital theory, the human capital theory and the signalling and screening theory) to accomplish the analysis, but is not entirely bound by them.

In terms of practicalities, using interviews is an applicable and appropriate tested and common method to collect useful data. I used convenience sampling to start and random referrals through snowball sampling to maintain momentum. Instruments such

as the interview guide have been addressed. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Guidelines for the development of inductive theories suggested by Locke (2007) was used to produce knowledge by repeatedly identifying significant statements, creating units of meaning, clustering themes, writing memos, coding with NVivo, revising the codebook and continuing to interview new people until data saturation was achieved. I highlighted some measures on the data interpretation and evaluation to increase the trustworthiness of the results of this study; nonetheless, the limitation of this study owing to the sampling approach is mentioned. In terms of ethics, I have reported how the research was conducted in an appropriate manner in assuring and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Politically, I have declared that both the subject and object of this research are interest-free.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the lived experiences of the participants in relation to pursuing master's studies and career mobility. It consists of six sections (4.2–4.7) responding to two general research questions: (1) why did they decide to go back to school to pursue master's studies; and (2) how did a master's education benefit their career mobility? Key themes such as *internal changes* and *external changes* arise inductively from the data provided by participants who have experienced full-time employment and further education at the master's level. Theories are then generated to explain the action (i.e. re-engagement in education) and the process (i.e. advancing career mobility).

Three analysis sections explore the incentives to re-enter university. To begin, I understand my research group in terms of their culture and mindset in addition to the literature review by examining the common language that reflects their thoughts in this era. Section 4.2 allows me to develop a general landscape of the target group. In section 4.3, their values and beliefs towards master's studies are uncovered. This provides a foundation to understand their learning needs and goals in relation to work. In section 4.4, I created a three-level taxonomy of study needs explaining a basket of their motives for further study. I then look at how master's courses have made a difference for the participants with regard to their study experiences, career experiences after graduation and the mechanism for mobility. Section 4.5 concerns what they have gained from the course. Following this is section 4.6 in which their experiences in the labour market in relation to work performance and employers' attitudes towards their new degree are explored. Section 4.7 allows us to understand the mechanism of using of education to increase one's career mobility. Section 4.8 summarises the main findings – their career successes relate to the extent they have mobilised their added human capital and social capital.



## 4.2. Common Language

To begin, I first overview the job culture of this generation in HK by looking at frequently occurring words in the interviews (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Their common language sets up the context, furthering my work in the literature review in understanding the general landscape of young employees' professional world and mindset relating to further education and jobs. This section aims to explore young HK working adults' culture relating to master's studies and careers through the examination of their common language in the interviews. Appendix IIE, generated by NVivo, shows the most frequently used words grouped into stemmed words in descending order of frequency that are meaningful in describing their thoughts emerging from the interviews. The 24 most frequent words classified into five categories from the transcriptions of all 20 interviews are illustrated in Figure 6. I regard the findings in this section as the starting point to understanding their culture and language.

Figure 6. Classification of the 24 most frequent words

Categories	Words
<b>Education and workplace</b>	<i>qualification, skills, knowledge, experience</i>
<b>Job views</b>	<i>professional, qualified, registered, specialised</i>
<b>Self-orientation and expectations</b>	<i>performance, success, improvement, appreciation, colleagues, recognised</i>
<b>Job values</b>	<i>promotion, salary, competence, change, switching, chance</i>
<b>General job landscape</b>	<i>better, future, prospect, competitive</i>

*Qualification, skills, knowledge* and *experience* refer to something needed in the operations in *workplace* that can be upgraded through *education* and retraining. For example,

*Susan (SW): Increase in knowledge and skills to help me improve my work performance to help people more effectively... Besides, through the course I could enrich my portfolio so that I could have a better chance to change my career field to family service.*

*Peter (Med): Before the course started, I wanted to gain qualification as well as knowledge. During my studies, I found that I wanted to gain experience.*

With regard to their *job views*, young working adults advocate *professional, specialised, qualified* and even *registered* jobs. John (architectural assistant), described the landscape of his industry:

*Qualifications are the most important. But, professional knowledge is also important in Hong Kong. One should be able to distinguish what one should do and what one is not expected to do... In this industry, professional roles in specification are important, and conduct in practice should be respected and followed.*

Alan, a bank credit approver, said:

*Before going back to school, I had learned the required knowledge, but I need the qualifications to tell people I am a professional in this field.*

Michael, an unregistered social worker before his master's study, needed a professional qualification to be registered and recognised as a social worker. He said:

*From the course, I acquired practical knowledge and experience relating to this field. As my bachelor's was in social science, I could not be qualified to be registered as a social worker; I needed this master's qualification for the title of registered social worker.*

Mark, a chemist trainee with a degree in chemical technology, took a conversion programme for a master's of nursing with a view to having secure career prospects:

*I found that in Hong Kong, work is becoming fragmented by profession. People working in general jobs cannot see their future, so, many switch to professional works, such as nursing, and their career paths may be clearer.*

Young graduate workers are happy to see their jobs or aspiring jobs as *professional* and *specialised*, requiring professional knowledge, skills and qualifications and even professional licences to be *qualified*.

Next, I categorised *colleagues*, *recognised*, *appreciation*, *performance*, *success*, and *improvement* into *self-orientation* and *expectations*.

*Peter (Med): I expect more respect from my colleagues.*

*Alan (Bank): In my department, many colleagues have master's degrees. Even juniors have their master's degrees. Nowadays, it is fashionable for young adults to obtain their master's degrees after graduation. It is very common phenomenon now, at least in this field.*

*David (Engg): ...there were a few colleagues who had already had an MBA, so I thought that having such a degree was definitely an advantage.*

*Judy (Tech): Somehow, the course helped me be recognised by potential employers since ABC University's MBA programme has a good reputation.*

*Sarah (Others): My current boss appreciates me once if I could achieve something...*

Relating to the terms *colleagues*, *recognised* and *appreciation*, this generation loves to be recognised and appreciated, and likes comparison with their counterparts. What is more, they are keen on excelling and outperforming others:

*Susan (SW): Increase of knowledge and skills to help me improve my work performance to help people more effectively... I expected I could perform my work better.*

*Peter (Med): I think my future success is attributed to the new degree because the master's qualification shortens the timeline for applying to this position.*

*Dave (F&A): My colleagues do not have master's degrees, so as a dual master's holder, I have the highest academic qualifications.*

With their wish to outperform others and their proactive job attitudes, they are keen on improv[ing] themselves in various aspects:

*Dave (F&A): I wanted to improve my analytical ability through the course. I started to reflect on room for improvement in my work... In the eyes of employers, hiring me is a value-adding decision because I am not only good at accounting, but also I can also offer help and give advice on improving other departments with my MBA degree...because the increase of knowledge can help me improve my work performance. In my opinion, in the workplace, qualification is auxiliary, experience is more important and is how we can improve and climb up.*

*Paul (Others): ...it helped me improve my communication skills; moreover, whenever I introduce myself to people, my qualifications have helped me improve my self-presentation, self-package and the impression I give people.*

To gain *recognition* and *respect* from others, this generation tends to reflect on self-deficiencies; consequently, they try to improve every aspect of themselves to excel and achieve. Their desire to outperform others frames their job world as a comparison and competition platform.

Next, I classified *competence, promotion, change, switching, salary and chance* into the category of *job value*. First, they emphasised *competence*:

*Michael (SW): Yes, I felt I was more competent in my job after completing the master's course. I could apply what I had learned in school in my workplace when I led small groups. I also realised the difference in my performance.*

*John (Arch): ...I think a company would not pick up anyone who is weak at presenting a project for the company and would not pick one who is not competent to defend his/her project. So, skills are valued greatly.*

*Nick (IT): My position requires competent people; the people required should be able to find out new solutions and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses using research techniques and data.*

They believe that *competent* people are selected for *promotion* and people with master's *qualifications* have an advantage with regard to *promotion* and *job switching*:

*William (Bank): Many colleagues in my company have master's degrees, and according to my observation, their career prospects are better than those who do not. So I expected that when I had a master's, it would be advantageous to my promotion... There are plenty of people who have bachelor's degrees. To have a competitive edge, I think one of the means is to have a master's degree. Having a master's degree is correlated to promotion.*

*Paul (Others): I wanted to equip myself with the necessary knowledge so that I can change my field to the finance industry.*

Advancements in job position, being more autonomous in job switching and salary increases are their main pursuits. They associate these with career successes.

*Michael (SW): Switching to social work assistant (SWA) had already helped me increase my salary... After several years, I switched to another NGO (PQR)<sup>8</sup> to be an assistant social work officer (ASWO), where I could enjoy a more reasonable salary. Umm... I could start my professional life on the basis of my master's qualification, and any switches and climbing later on are based on this.*

*Alan (Bank): At that moment, I wanted to change to the field of crediting. Frankly speaking, as a front-line worker, to work in the credit department is not easy. So, I took a master's in risk management to increase the chance of successfully switching... As I intended to change fields, I needed to take courses relating to my aspired field.*

Notwithstanding their pragmatic values on jobs, HK young graduate workers do not regard further education as a 'through train' that can bring them to their destinations; instead, they believe that further education can increase their *chance* of achieving their pursuits. Steve is an example.

*Steve (IT): I was certainly not sure whether the master's degree could contribute to the well-beings of my career, but I thought that with the master's qualification, the chance would be greater.*

Lastly, it was found that their *job landscape* is characterised by the terms *competitive, better, prospect* and *future*; all of which echo the concept of *chance*. While negotiating uncertainty in the job world, they construct their own biographies by increasing their *competitive* edge over others to gain more *chances* of *improving* their *future* career prospects.

*William (Bank): Actually, there are plenty of people who are bachelor's degree holders. To have a competitive edge, I think one of*

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<sup>8</sup> A well-known Non-Government Organisation (NGO) offering social services in HK.

*the means is to have a master's degree. Having a master's degree is correlated to promotion.*

*Dave (F&A): I took an MBA to widen the scope of my knowledge, which I think will bring me better career prospects.*

*Mark (Med): People working in general careers cannot see their future, so, many switch to professional careers, such as nursing, and their career paths may be clearer.*

Susan, who is a social worker, also has a similar job landscape as those working in commercial and medical fields:

*Susan (SW): ...the qualification could help me become more competitive than those who are without it.*

These emerging themes reflect their views, beliefs and values relating to further education and jobs regardless of their field of occupations. By enquiring into their common language, I learn that they realise they live in a competitive world that requires them to make changes, and those changes allow them to have greater career prospects. They are keen on improving their knowledge, skills and qualifications to outperform others and achieve. They advocate for competence and good work performance. They are proud of presenting themselves as recognised and qualified professionals in specific fields.

The preliminary codes, categories or themes identified are “recurring regularities” (Guba, 1978: 53), reflecting a general career and education landscape of young HK graduate workers. They facilitate the development of theoretical models and theories by using the respondents’ common language. In the next section, I shall explore their beliefs and values towards further studies.

### 4.3. Values and Beliefs towards Further Studies

Through the questions “among those aspects you mentioned, which was the most important to you” and “what was your expected return when you decided to pay the money for the course”, I understand the participants’ expectations and priorities with regard to further studies and can therefore learn the values they hold towards further studies. It was found that they all advocate *pragmatic* value; for example:

*Bobby (IT): My expected returns are salary advancements and opportunities in other management positions.*

*David (Engg): Faster way to be promoted. Enjoy a considerable increase in salary.*

*Alan (Bank): Higher qualifications will help me get further promotion. I understand that in senior positions, any candidate will be considered whether s/he possesses a master’s degree or not. A master’s degree is for mobility in senior positions... My expected return is readiness for promotions and job switches in the future.*

Nonetheless, some respondents were found that they held mixed values such as *altruism* and *self-fulfilment*.

*Susan (SW): Increase of knowledge and skills helped me improve my work performance to help people more effectively.*

*John (Arch): The thesis allowed me to reflect my way of designing and its meaning to the social world.*

Susan’s and John’s study values are categorised to be *altruistic*; they view the study as a mean of helping them to bring some well-beings to people and the world. However, as a social worker, Susan’s capabilities of helping people effectively can be regarded as a requirement of field entrance and an essential element contributing to good working performance. She added:



*I expected I could perform my works better. Besides, through the course I could enrich my portfolio so that I could have a better chance to change the field to family service... my subjective feeling was that the qualification could help me become more competitive.*

In this sense, Susan indeed aimed to enrich her portfolio as soon as possible in order to be eligible to change the field to family service pragmatically from her less satisfying job position (ASWO), with a view to achieving her *altruistic* purpose. Such the *altruistic* motivation portrays itself as a derivative of her chosen occupation. Similarly, the upgrade in John's style of design in relation to the societal needs would be ultimately reflected in his work portfolio that was essential to employment:

*[My thesis] also helped me figure out the road in this profession, say, whether to work on small objects or to be a master planner. The graduation portfolio contained my works reflecting my direction and style of design, which helped present myself at any job interviews. Potential employers would examine my portfolio to see whether I could fit into their companies or not. Therefore my professional portfolio was essential to employment.*

Apart from *altruistic* motivation, the following quotes show that they expected that the master's courses would bring them *self-fulfilment*.

*Susan (SW): I was interested in family counselling, so I applied for this programme.*

*Nick (IT): It was really a rare opportunity to have two years designated for researching interesting topics I love without any financial concerns.*

*Kenny (Tech): I think self-fulfilment is the most important aspect of my studies.*

We see that the values shift from *altruism* to ones emphasising 'interest', 'love',

‘enjoyment’, ‘pleasure’, ‘satisfaction’ and ‘self-fulfilment’. As these notions are rather psychological, they are classified under psychological *fulfilment*. It encompasses aspects relating to emotions – the fulfilment of personal interest and the need for self-enjoyment, career autonomy – the degree of horizontal and vertical mobility (Sorokin, 1964) and job capability. Satisfaction with improved job capability is another kind of psychological fulfilment; for example

*Dave (F&A): My expected returns are job promotion and salary increases; I also wanted to see a gradual improvement in my job performance, which is satisfying and a pleasure.*

While *altruism* and *self-fulfilment* were associated with broader life values that were reflected in their chosen occupations, all of them held strong *pragmatic* values relating to monetary rewards in the form of better careers opportunities, such as promotions and job switching. In Kenny’s case, though he said that “*self-fulfilment* was the most important aspect of his study”, he also aimed for upgrading his position in a private sector to one in government sector that offers “higher position and salary” through the study. By and large, the value of master’s studies among these young graduate workers held is three-fold: (1) *altruistic* (2) psychologically *fulfilling* and (3) *pragmatic*. No cases from the data indicated that any participant possessed purely *altruistic* or psychological *fulfilment* values. In other words, all respondents indicated the *pragmatic* value, which emerged as a common and dominant value of master’s studies HK graduate workers advocate.

“What and to what extent did they expect the course and the qualification to contribute to their careers preparedness?” It was found that, with a view towards seeking current and potential employers’ attention for promotions and job opportunities in a competitive job market, they acted to improve their work performance and/or personal portfolios by obtaining matching qualifications.

First, some respondents were quite certain that their master’s studies and qualifications could contribute to better job preparedness. For instance:

*Mavis (Logt): Yes. I was sure that the skills, network and qualifications could contribute to the well-being of my career.*

Those who needed the qualification for their licence said:

*Michael (SW): I was sure that I could get the licence after graduating from this programme, but I was not sure whether I could gain knowledge and skills from the course.*

*John (Arch): Sure. I was sure that the degree would definitely contribute to the well-being of my career.*

Some respondents were not sure if the master's studies and further qualifications could make any career-related contributions and bring them some positive careers outcomes; however, they still engaged in certain master programmes (1) owing to observations and the feelings that people with master's degrees had more advantages than those who did not, and (2) because there would be no harms in doing so. For instance:

*Judy (Tech): I was not sure if the course would contribute to the well-being of my career. But, my feeling was that the qualification could help me become more competitive.*

*Susan (SW): Actually, I was uncertain. I was not sure if the MBA could bring me these advantages. But surely doing an MBA has no losses. People possessing an MBA have more advantages than those without that in terms of career prospects.*

Despite this uncertainty in their career advancement, they tended to believe that the advanced degrees could contribute to their better job preparedness. It reveals that young HK graduate workers think and act proactively with regard to their careers.

It is interesting to know, regardless of the degree of certainty, what they expected the course and qualifications would contribute to their career advancement. From the

data, it was found that most interviewees sought *change*. I classified such changes into *internal* and *external* categories.

In relation to *internal* changes, most interviewees expected *changes* in the range and depth of their knowledge or skills to improving their performance. For example:

*David (Engg): I could learn more through the programme to improve my work performance.*

*Steve (IT): In formal learning, I would learn hard and soft skills through compulsory projects and assignments, such as ways to research and problem-solving skills.*

They believed that the *change* brought them more career opportunities. David and Steve continued:

*David (Engg): I wanted to manage people upon promotion, so I need to be equipped with this knowledge as soon as possible... My engagement in the MBA programme was actually for the purpose of promotion.*

*Steve (IT): I expected that my improved profile with a master's qualification could help me easily change jobs.*

Career opportunities specifically mean *internal promotion* and *job change*. Respondents were keen on outperforming others in terms of work performance and personal qualification in order to increase their opportunities. They realised that there were competitors in and outside their workplaces. Their investment in the studies was to increase their competitive edge. For instance:

*William (Bank): Actually, there are plenty of people who have bachelor's degrees. To have a competitive edge, I think one of the means is to have a master's degree. Having a master's degree is correlated to promotion.*

*Bobby (IT): Most adults over 30 have a master's degree nowadays. A master's qualification has become a basic requirement for getting better jobs in the market.*

Some respondents reported that before their master's studies, they found themselves deficient in the professional knowledge and skills needed to perform their jobs well. One of the reasons was that they were ill equipped by their bachelor's studies. Another reason was that they entered the fields that were irrelevant to their first degrees, especially if their first degrees were not so career-oriented:

*Steve (IT): I needed the master's because my first degree was in system engineering, not specialised in computer science, I needed to advance my specialisation in computer science. The programme could help me supplement my knowledge and skills relating to my work.*

Trista, who majored in English, was employed in a Big-four accounting firm as a tax associate, which required completely different knowledge and skills than those she acquired in her bachelor's programme. She said:

*I found that so much of what I learned the undergraduate level could not be applied in my work because the field was irrelevant. My job and my degree were mismatched.*

Even though Nick (IT) had just obtained his degree in information engineering, he pursued an MPhil in the same field. He said,

*I appreciated the technical knowledge I acquired from the MPhil programme, which I could not have learned from my bachelor's programme.*

Some respondents regarded master's studies as re-training programmes through which they could equip different or even more specialised skills to (1) seek other jobs in different fields, (2) enter specialised branches of their professions or (3) qualify for managerial posts. For example:

(1) *Paul (Others): I wanted to equip myself with the necessary knowledge so that I can change my field to finance.*

(2) *Susan (SW): I expected I could perform my work better. Besides, through the course I expected I could enrich my portfolio so that I could have a better chance of changing my field to family service.*

(3) *David (Engg): Therefore, I did not choose other programmes relating to technical knowledge, but I chose the MBA to learn how to manage people as a requirement for promotion.*

For the *external* aspect, it was found that the respondents expected *changes* in personal package and believed that such *external changes* would result in better job opportunities. Two themes emerged to describe the *changes* in *appearance* and *academic title* as reflected on one's CV. *Appearance* refers to how impressive they are when expressing themselves in meeting people; *title* refers to a political status recognised by the social world.

*Trista (F&A): Through the course, I could upgrade my personal presentation. When I present myself to my clients with a master's qualification on my CV, I can easily convince others to 'buy' me, and clients would more easily accept my idea.*

*Peter (Med): The master's degree helped me raise my social image of having professional knowledge.*

*Sarah (Others): I expected that the course could help me deepen and widen my knowledge so that I could be more expressive in later interviews.*

Here, *appearance* is associated with self-expression when meeting people face to face. Respondents expected that, through studying and re-training, they could show and express themselves in a more knowledgeable and skilful manner when meeting people; thus, they could improve their social image and become more professionally convincing. Contrary to face-to-face meetings, an academic *title* on a CV and name card signals that they are well qualified people. Alan, Judy and Steve have the details:

*Alan (Bank): It is not a problem of knowledge; instead, it is a problem of title...I needed to be recognised by society to increase the chances of making a move.*

*Judy (Tech): I also expected a new title with my MBA.*

*Steve (IT): My expected return is a better personal profile for jobs switching.*

Moreover, *the name of the university* they graduated from matters. For instance, Susan (SW) realised that she graduated from an inferior universities when compared with her colleagues and competitors in the labour market; therefore, she wanted to upgrade her qualifications through a ‘better’ university to level up in terms of academic qualifications and status.

Some respondents expected their improved *qualification* could meet certain criteria set by society to be recognised as professionals. They used the *qualifications* reflected in the *title* shown on their personal profile to communicate with the world that they were competent to do some specified works (i.e. job eligibility). They wanted to prove themselves eligible to carry out certain tasks or at least to present themselves as convincing and competent professionals. Common examples are licences as registered nurses (e.g. Mark), architects (e.g. John), pharmacists (e.g. Peter) and social workers (e.g. Michael):

*Michael (SW): I expected the licence would entitle me to a post for a registered social worker and to work under this title. It provided me*

*a career starting line. Based on this, I could be counted among those in my profession's seniority.*

In a nutshell, it was found that the young HK graduate workers advocate two beliefs in relation to studies and careers. They regarded their studies as re-training programmes that would bring them *changes* in personal quality (i.e. *internal changes*), and they believed the programmes could improve their personal presentation (i.e. *external changes*). *Internal changes* refer to updates to or re-training in their knowledge and skills, while *external changes* refer to upgrades in their academic (including superior university) or professional qualifications, which bring advantages when communicating with the social world. Despite the uncertainty of their expected returns, young HK graduate workers who had invested in master's studies believed that such an act had no potential to harm their careers. More proactively, based on their observations of their counterparts' experience, they believe that the investment in master's studies would probably bring them positive career opportunities, such as internal *promotion* and *job switching*, mediated by *internal* and *external changes*.

In the next section, I explore what the young HK graduate workers experienced in terms of their master's studies and careers, including why they decided to go back to school to pursue master's studies; and their study experiences.

#### 4.4. Why Further Education?

It was found that HK young graduate workers went back to school mostly for reasons relating to their careers. The intention of investing in the master's programmes was to increase their career opportunities. In this section, I explore their study needs by identifying their common deficiencies in the workplace and analysing why the master's courses were so important to them. Then, I examine their study goals seeing if we can arrive at a coherent picture of this. Last, based on expectancy theory, I explore what the dominant motivator of pursuing master's studies, and who the motivators of further education are.



In analysing the responses to the questions: “before taking the master’s course, relating to your job, what was your deficiency in performing your job well? Had you ever experienced it? What did you think of your deficiency in performing an advanced job or position that you aspired?” four themes emerged: (1) deficiency in professional *knowledge*, (2) deficiency in technical and soft *skills*, (3) lack of *experience* and (4) need for *higher qualifications*. For example, Peter, a registered resident pharmacist at a public hospital with a B.Pharm degree realised that he was deficient in professional *knowledge*:

*Being a fresh graduate, I was deficient in knowledge because as a pharmacist I need to know how to cure each disease using medicine... I was deficient in professional medical knowledge because my bachelor’s training was superficial. I think my knowledge was not sufficient to provide professional information to doctors. I have experienced a scenario in which I spent a lot of time to searching for information to answer a doctor’s request. Compared to other, more experienced, pharmacists, I spent much more time on searching for answers than answering the questions promptly.*

In terms of a deficiency in performing an advancing job or position that he aspired to, he answered:

*Knowledge and experience. Besides, I lacked the management skills to get a promotion.*

David, an assistant engineer with a bachelor’s in mechanical engineering found himself deficient in both technical and soft *skills* in carrying out existing jobs and aspiring jobs:

*I experienced a deficiency in communication with my colleagues. I was also deficient in technical skills. For promotions, I thought my weakness in technical skills was a barrier.*

William, currently a compliance officer with a bachelor's degree in information systems, told me his deficit in knowledge and *experience* caused him difficulty and embarrassment when communicating with his colleagues:

*I was deficient in experience and knowledge in IT. As LMN.com<sup>9</sup> is an IT company, my BBA programme was too general and what I had learned in IT was not adequate. It resulted in communication problems when I talked with my colleagues about technical details. Very often, when my colleagues spoke about technical terms, I found difficulties in communicating with them.*

Steve and Alan – a programming analyst and a bank manager respectively – emphasised their need for *higher qualifications* to be recognised for internal promotions and transfers to other departments.

*Steve (IT): I think I was not deficient in any skills in performing my job well but... I purely wanted a qualification... maybe for promotion later on, so I chose a master's programme.*

*Alan (Bank): It is not a problem of knowledge; instead, it is a problem of title. Business is too general, and I was working on the front-line. I might not be accepted to move into the crediting department. I needed to add value to my profile. Knowledge, to me, actually is not a problem. I believe I am able to handle all the jobs in my current position, even though I did not study this degree. I needed to be recognised by society to increase the chances of making a move.*

Michael, working in a charity centre delivering social services, needed a government-recognised *qualification* to obtain a licence to become a registered social worker.

*Michael (SW): I lacked a professional social work licence. Even though I did similar work to a registered social worker, I could not*

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<sup>9</sup> A famous IT company in the field of securities.

*be recognised. I felt that I was not qualified and professional to do those jobs, even though I could... Yes, I did aspire to be promoted to a registered social worker in my organisation... In order to advance my position, I need the licence, so taking this master's programme was a must to fulfil the requirement.*

In addition, John needs a professional master's degree to be a registered architect. Mark needs a master's degree to become a registered nurse. Michael needs a master's qualification to become registered social worker.

Work *experience* could be seen as having a more specific and direct effect on job performance, thus needs for *knowledge, skills* and *experiences* can be combined, giving rise to a new theme of *better job abilities* – both existing and aspiring – requiring improved knowledge, skills and experience to achieve. *Higher qualification* relates to action(s) in pursuit of a socially recognised status. Therefore, from the angle of deficiency, their learning needs as *personal* needs for *better job abilities* and *higher qualifications* were identified.

In analysing participants' responses to the question "why did you think that the master's programme you engaged was so important?" Seven themes emerged from the data: (1) *recognition and respect*, (2) *job competence*, (3) *job legitimacy*, (4) *job security*, (5) *promotions*, and (6) *job changes* and (7) *academic fulfilment*.

#### *Recognition and respect -*

*Candy (SW): I needed a qualification if I decided to change my career direction towards staff training in organisations. Actually, I had taken many short courses to improve myself. But, qualifications are important because they are the way to be recognised by others.*

*Peter (Med): I expected my master's qualification would help me advance both my position and salary. Besides, I expect more respect from colleagues.*

Both Candy and Peter are junior staff in their organisations. They expressed they had a common need of being respected and recognised in order to change career fields, advance job positions and/or salaries.

*Job competence -*

*Dave (F&A): To increase knowledge in economics.*

*Susan (SW): I hoped to show I had upgraded my skills so that I might be able to handle more jobs to secure my place in an organisation and/or obtain freelance jobs.*

Dave and Susan highlighted their needs for obtaining added knowledge and skills that they had never acquired in previous studies to help them perform their jobs better. Dave expected broader knowledge whereas Susan focused on specific skills. Divergence depends on the interplay between training biography and job requirement of their chosen or aspiring occupations.

*Job legitimacy -*

*Mark (Med): I wanted to take a master course which could add me a qualification so that I could change the field of work... To be qualified as a registered nurse (RN).*

*Bobby (IT): My career prospects could be enhanced by getting self-improvement through formal training and qualification advancement... I can apply to jobs requiring master's qualifications as well.*

Mark and Bobby realised that added qualifications are stipulated in black and white or believed to be a norm for their aspiring jobs. Their academic background did not legitimise them to fit the aspiring positions of their chosen/aspiring careers. It created a need for qualification upgrading.

The above three themes are associated with people in the work place, in the field and the social world. Echoing the literature that the generation-Y appreciates rewards and recognition (Hui, 2010) and the pursuit of ‘qualified professional’ in their job view as discussed in section 4.2, Candy and Peter needed qualification to earn *recognition* from seniors and *respect* from colleagues. Besides, *job competence* and *legitimacy* emerged as themes. They refer to the extent to which a worker is able to carry out a specified job and the social legitimacy associated with the job requirements or licence respectively. For instance, Dave needed more generic knowledge from formal studies to “understand how his superiors think and expect” so he might help them make educated decisions. Susan could prove to others she was capable to handle more jobs by her upgraded skills. Bobby and Mark needed both knowledge and qualifications to apply for jobs requiring master degrees or licences.

Young HK graduate workers emphasise *job competence* and *job legitimacy* in the sense of matched ability and qualifications. The notion of ‘fit’ emerged from Alan (Bank)’s dialogue reveals that there is a relation between a post and qualifications:

*The field I am working requires complicated skills and experience, though I think it is easy for me. It requires master’s degree holders to fit the post... I understand that in senior positions, any candidate will be concerned whether s/he possesses a master’s degree or not.*

The focus of the master’s programme is important. He continued:

*In addition, as I intended to change fields, I needed to obtain a degree relating to my aspired field. Crediting is under the risk management department so I think the focus of my study (risk management) is right for the change.*

It is also evident that if an individual is ‘fit’ for a particular post, he or she can maintain healthy self-esteem:

*Nick (IT): My formal training gave me a foundation so that I would be confident in challenging others' ideas. Besides, in presenting ideas to seniors, my formal training and exposure from the Master programme helped me a lot to be confident.*

*Petra (IT): More self-confident, coming from greater exposure. In handling the same task I would come up in my mind with multiple strategies from different perspectives comparing with single way to solve problem before the Master.*

William (Bank), with his degree in information systems, regarded himself as not qualified for his job with his knowledge and skills. So he intended to pursue a master's in information systems for re-training:

*The master's programme was important to me because I was weak in IT, but I needed to work in an I.T. company. Although my colleagues are nice enough to teach me, I did not want to be a burden to them.*

What is called 'burden' is usually something negative in terms of self-esteem. William's case illustrates that deficit of required knowledge in a job position results in an unhealthy self-esteem.

Young HK graduate workers need *better job abilities (knowledge and skills)* and *higher qualifications* to satisfy their needs for *recognition and respect, job competence* and *job legitimacy*. The former and the latter are well inter-related – for instance, it is nonsense to pay money and effort just to earn a paper qualification without further mobilising it, or expect further recognition in workplace from the study without increase in job competency and qualification. In this regard, they represent needs in two levels – *personal* level and *social* level, for which people engaged in master studies will satisfy simultaneously. The data below presents the third level of needs – *mobility* level (i.e. *job security, promotions, and job changes*), that enable those needs in the second level make sense.

Trista, who worked as a tax associate in a Big-four accounting firm, needed *job security*. Similarly, Peter, a pharmacist in a public hospital, regarded the second degree as a norm for his position's *qualification* requirement:

*I wanted a master's degree that would secure me to work in Big Four.*

*Every pharmacist is expected to have a master's degree. A master's degree is already the norm for this position. Anyone who has it cannot outperform others; it is only a threshold.*

Both of them are in junior posts in big companies/bureaucracies. They believed that an additional degree can secure their jobs in their chosen fields that are well-known competitive in HK.

David (Engg) and Alan (Bank) aspired to get job promotion:

*Therefore, I did not choose other programmes relating to technical knowledge, but I chose an MBA in which I intended to learn how to manage people for the requirements of a promotion to a higher rank.*

*To climb up, such as through a promotion, I know the concern is whether I have a master's degree or not.*

Judy (Tech) took an MBA for *job change*:

*I did not expect I would stay in that technical position for my whole career. I am eager to try posts other than the technical one in the future.*

Mark, with a bachelor's in chemical technology, was employed as a chemist trainee in a laboratory firm, but he went back to school full time for his master's in nursing. After the re-training, he was immediately employed as a registered nurse in a public hospital. He said:

*I wanted to take a master's course that could give me a qualification so that I could change my career field.*

Trista and Peter expected *job security* resulting from being recognised as competent and legitimate professionals. Trista further said,

*In this profession, what is important is the degree and level of knowledge you have that can sound convincing.*

David and Alan were keen on *job promotion* while Judy and Mark looked for *job change*. In whichever case, *job competence* and *legitimacy* are important mediators.

Nevertheless, apart from pragmatic needs, Kenny (Tech) rather needs pleasure.

*I was interested and curious in doing research. I wanted to acquire research skills. Curiosity was important to me... I think self-fulfilment is the most important to my study.*

Kenny worked his MPhil because he wanted to enjoy learning as he said. Thus the theme *academic fulfilment* emerged referring to the satisfaction of academic curiosity driven by interest in pursuit of life happiness. I would rather regard *academic fulfilment* as a concept beyond the scope of this study as it is not related to careers, earnings and occupational mobility. As a matter of fact, it is also difficult to say which need – *academic fulfilment* or *respect and recognition* and needs in *mobility* level is/are overarching because he deliberately made use of his qualification advantage in finding a job.

*I sent one application to a private laboratory to apply for a chemist trainee and was accepted. That position did not require a master qualification in job requirement but I think a master qualification is preferable because my colleagues were all master holders. I think the master qualification actually was the key to entrance though formally it was not a must in job requirement.*



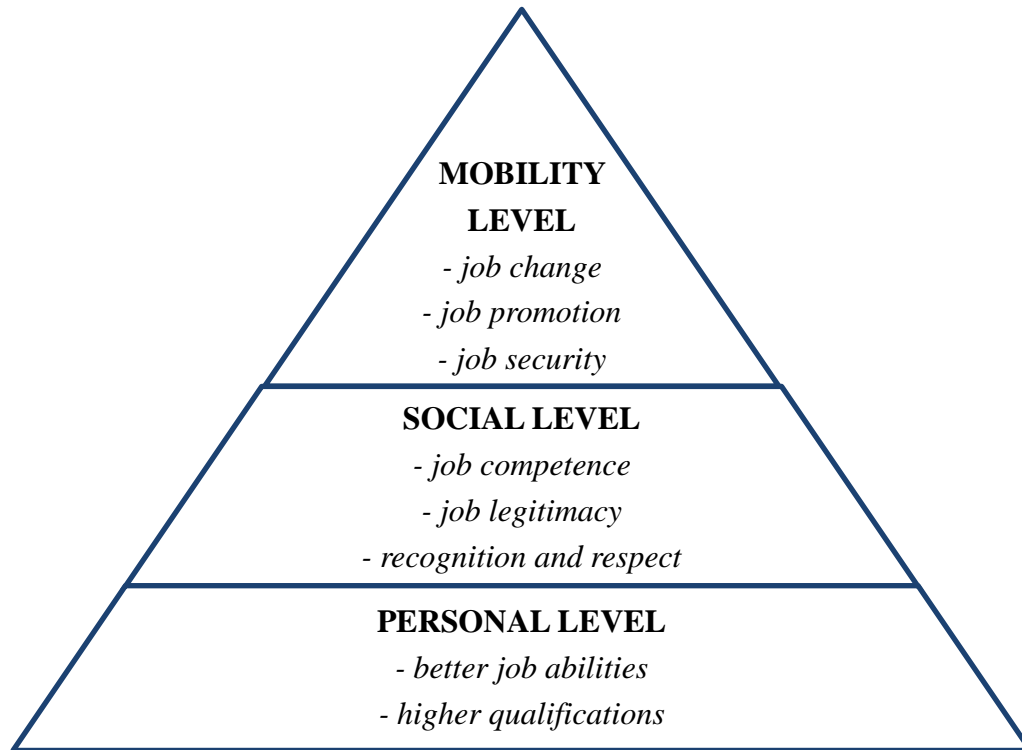
What Kenny said also reveals that he had actually prepared himself through raising his qualification to compete with others. After several years, he could successfully get a job in the government sector with better fringe benefits. Kenny's success in *job change* should attribute to his *job legitimacy* of his master qualification rather than *job competence* because the research skills and specialised knowledge he acquired from the master course was not HK-based implying that it was actually useless in practice. He said:

*If I work in a private sector, a bachelor degree is good enough; but if I want to work in a government sector, a master is the minimum. With comparison with my colleagues in my unit, my academic qualification is the least, they all possess doctorate degree.*

Young HK graduate workers need *better job abilities (knowledge and skills)* and *higher qualifications* to satisfy their needs for *recognition and respect*, *job competence*, *job legitimacy*, *job security*, *job promotion* and *job change*. All these can be categorised into different systemic levels of needs. The *hierarchy of study needs* is structured as illustrated in Figure 7. Fundamentally, *better job abilities* and *higher qualifications* can be conceptualised as needs on *personal* level for satisfying other needs in higher order. Next, the needs for *recognition and respect*, *job competence* and *job legitimacy* refer to higher *social* needs that involve others such as colleagues, current and prospective bosses, and the society. Updating their knowledge and skills and getting matching qualifications are particularly important because these are means of showing *job competency* and *legitimacy* and maintaining healthy self-esteem. They tend to communicate with the world and negotiate risks and uncertainties such as protecting their jobs or looking for aspired advanced job opportunities from illegitimacy not only through suitable qualifications but also through sufficient knowledge and skills. On the top of the hierarchy is their ultimate need in relation to *mobility* referring to *job security*, *job promotion* and *job change*, for which their lower needs are developed. In *mobility* level, some have the need to secure existing jobs in the company, and other seek internal promotions or jobs with other companies. For instance, Trista wanted a master's qualification (*personal*) to be recognised (*social*) in order to earn job legitimacy (*social*) to secure her working (*mobility*) in a Big Four accounting firm. David chose an MBA

instead of a technical master's programme to acquire managerial knowledge and skills (*personal*) to show job competency (*social*) in his aspired managerial position (*mobility*).

Figure 7. Hierarchy of study needs



While it is found that young HK graduate workers' study needs are mainly to become more competent in their knowledge and skills and to achieve higher academic status so as to prove themselves on a personal and social level, in order to satisfy their higher needs for autonomy and mobility, it is worth validating these needs with their study goals to see whether I can arrive a coherent answer as to why further education is or is not pursued.

In analysing the goals of their engagement in master's education through the question "what did you want to get from the programme?" Some themes emerged from their responses: acquiring *knowledge*, hard and soft *skills*, broadening *exposure*, making *new friends* and getting *certificates*. For example:

*John (Arch): Technical knowledge such as mathematics and professional conduct.*

*Bobby (IT): Technical know-how, market update... presentation and collaboration skills with other people.*

*Nick (IT): Definitely not the qualification. Soft skills, such as problem solving and presentation skills, are more important than the hard skills, although the hard skills are important too.*

*Judy (Tech): Knowledge, learning experience from new friends in business and the qualification.*

*Peter (Med): Before the course started, I want to get the qualification as well as knowledge.*

It was found that some took up master's studies to improve their work performance through increasing the range and depth of their *knowledge* and *skills*. The pursuit of knowledge includes professional knowledge, technical know-how, professional conduct and updating one's knowledge of market trends. The *skills* they want to acquire refer to both hard and soft skills, such as technical skills, presentation skills, collaboration skills and so forth. Another goal was to make *friends* to enlarge their professional network, which would in turn help them work smarter, just like what Nick (IT) said:

*I also built up a good network with IT workers through the MPhil programme; the network could later help me in my work.*

*Certificates*, mentioned most by the interviewees, were found to be a common goal of their studies. Some studied in order to earn certificates for professional work licences. Thus, their goals of studies can be summed up as (1) raising their job competence through acquiring new knowledge and skills, (2) enlarging their professional network and (3) levelling-up their qualifications. The enlargement of their professional network is intended for the exchange of useful information and experience in the future, so it could be viewed as a mechanism that provides the knowledge and skills to increase *job performance*. In this sense, the study goals of *job performance* and *qualification* are

consistent with study needs for *job competence*, social *recognition* and autonomy in occupational mobility.

Regarding the well-defined study goals, what is their expectancy (Vroom, 1964)? Alternatively, what is their perceived likelihood that a master's degree will result in the intended outcome? "How probable did you think you would succeed in getting them? (Ten-point scale)" It was found that all respondents were sure to get the *qualifications* and enlarge their *professional network* but not certain about gaining *knowledge* and *skills*. For example:

*David (Engg): Definitely for the certificate, and 70% for the soft skills.*

*Trista (F&A): I was sure to graduate. Roughly 60% for the hard skills.*

*Mark (Med): Hard skills: 9/10; Soft skills: 7/10; Qualification: 10/10.*

*John (Arch): Hard skills: 50%; Soft skills: 100%; Qualification: 100%.*

*William (Bank): Hard skills: 80-90%; Qualification: Sure.*

*Bobby (IT): Technical know-how: 4; Market update: 6; Presentation and collaboration skills: 8; Paper qualification: 10.*

Concerning the two outcomes for *competence* and *qualification*, if it is assumed that the respective instrumentalities are the same, the results reveal that getting qualifications seems to be a dominant force in pursuing master's studies.

As a matter of fact, if increasing human capital is important, besides formal studies, HK young graduate workers can equip themselves with *knowledge* and *skills* by other means. Four themes emerged from their responses to the question "how could you improve yourself to make up for the deficiency?" First, *learning by doing* in the workplace is informal learning occurring in the workplace (i.e. on-the-job training). It was found that it included observations from colleagues; seeking advice from superiors, mentors and colleagues; learning through normal meetings; and attempting job

challenges that require different unfamiliar skills, such as organising different functions and job rotations. On-the-job training allows workers to accumulate experience.

*Bobby (IT): I could improve myself mainly through the accumulation of working experience.*

*Mavis (Logt): I have requested job rotations to flourish in various job experiences. I have also had good communication with my superiors discussing my performance and the ways to make organisational improvements.*

*Paul (Others): Mainly through in-house on-the-job training (learning by doing) such as meetings and asking colleagues and superiors.*

Second, people engaged in *reading and studying* for self-improvement in job efficacy as well as preparation for their jobs especially those requiring technical skills. This includes reading books, magazines, manuals and internet resources.

*Trista (F&A): So I used to read more books about tax in my leisure to give the firm an impression that I was always ready for a job advancement. Besides reading, I learned from my colleagues through an online system. I was learning while doing.*

*Alan (Bank): During work, I used to study what happened in my up-streaming and down-streaming businesses by reading operations manuals and credit manuals for example. It is equivalent to studying.*

*Steve (IT): Self-learning through reading books or articles on the internet.*

Third, some interviewees attended *short courses* or *workshops* provided by their employers or other institutes directly relating to their jobs or for extended enrichment. They either are arranged as in-house staff development programmes or are organised by other institutes.

*Michael (SW): I took some short courses, such as mountain climbing and adventure-based counselling, to improve myself.*

*Judy (Tech): I participated in in-service training sessions for staff development.*

Last, another way of making up for their deficiencies is to seek advice and support from their *professional network*. Here, the social network excludes those in the workplace because interaction among colleagues should be counted in on-the-job training and *learning by doing*.

*Candy (SW): Reading about social work and discussing the field with my friends.*

*John (Arch): I asked some of the [senior alumni at XYZ University] who were regarded as my mentors.*

Despite these methods – *doing by learning, reading and studying, short courses and workshops and professional networks* to increase job competence – the respondents decided to pursue master's studies. It implies that besides equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills to improve their work performance, they went back to school with another agenda – perhaps a more important one. For instance, Alan (Bank) played down the 'transmitting' function of formal studies and viewed *reading and studying* as effective learning means:

*I can learn by various means, such as reading and surfing the internet (e.g. Wikipedia,) other than formal learning. I think reading in blogs can really help me increase my practical knowledge. Knowledge gained through formal learning, such as master's programme, is very often something I cannot practically apply in real life.*

Trista (F&A) also regarded formal studies could help her ‘*little*’ in raising *knowledge*. She said:

*DEF<sup>10</sup> publishes a full range of books and working manuals that I can refer to and study in both my work and leisure time.*

In this sense, the master’s programme could only help improve their *qualifications*.

As a result, some respondents look forward to obtaining the *credentials* more than acquiring *knowledge* and *skills* from master’s studies. Engagement in formal studies allows participants raise not only their human capital but also their value-laden social capital.

Having learned their study needs and goals, I explore their motivators. Participants were asked, “who or what inspired you to apply for the master’s programme?” Motivators such as *superiors*, *competitors*, *friends* and *mates* are found. Dave and Alan were cued and encouraged to take formal studies by their *superiors* in order to learn more and to be legitimate for promotion. Some respondents were motivated to study because of their *competitors* in or outside the workplace. Their investment in their education was to increase their competitive edge. Apart from this, some took the master’s courses because of the advice or encouragement from their *friends* and *mates*. Nonetheless, it was found that almost all of them were *self-initiated*. Based on my experience in career guidance, I realise that many people who claim to be ‘free’ to choose may not be really free; the decision-making process involves passively devising a strategy to achieve an aim. Under their pragmatic value and earning differences belief, they may have passively acted through the impact of extrinsic incentives rather than because they really wanted to ‘enjoy’ it. Thus, the theme of *self-initiation* is regarded as an actively constructed ‘narrative’ and refers to a situation in which they were not ‘forced’ to take the studies; instead, they exercised their free will to ‘fully agree’ that they should do the studies.

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<sup>10</sup> A ‘Big-Four’ accounting firm in HK.

In summary, HK young graduate workers decide to return to school based on a three-level hierarchy of *personal*, *social* and *mobility* needs. Their goals of study were found to agree with this. Their motivation of formal studies for *recognition* is confirmed through this inductive process of inquiry; they show their needs for being recognised as competent and legitimate professionals for autonomy and mobility. Based on expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), I can derive that obtaining the *qualification* is the dominant motivating force in pursuing a master's degree. Moreover, despite the many ways to increase job competence, most took the initiative to engage in master's studies. These results form a coherent picture: graduate workers treasure credentials more than knowledge and skills in their master's studies. In a nutshell, master's studies function as a way to allow participants to invest in their human and social capitals simultaneously. Thus, its role in career mobility is to provide graduate workers a vehicle for *investment*.

## 4.5. Study Experience

In this section, some general lived experiences of those who have spent one year (full-time) or a couple of years (part-time) working on their master's degree are addressed. "What are your general experience and the reasons why you like or dislike the programme? What did you acquire and benefit from the master's course?" Themes emerging from their real experiences are important, as they are used to validate if their study goals – (1) improving their working competence through acquiring new knowledge and skills, (2) growing their professional network and (3) levelling-up their qualifications – could be achieved and to link with the post-graduation career experiences in the next section.

Feedback about their learning experiences was collected and categorised as *fruitless* or *fruitful*. On the one hand, some respondents reported that the master's learning was *fruitless* (i.e. not useful). Paul (Others) said, "The course was neither inspiring nor allowed me to learn something useful to my work". One reason for this is that the curricula were not specific enough but too broad and general and only a small portion of them was useful:



*Candy (SW): The course was very broad, entertaining the needs of participants from various disciplines... As the course had to cover a wide range of content, the time spent teaching was diluted.*

*Trista (F&A): The master's programme provided me with broad knowledge in four domains of which I found only taxation useful. That means only 1/16 of the curriculum was useful.*

Besides, the knowledge the university offered was either known before or lagged behind the real world. Some were disappointed with their master's programmes because the content was mismatched with their works.

*Bobby (IT): The knowledge taught in school actually lagged behind the market.*

*Steve (IT): What I could acquire from the programme was not perfectly matched with what I need in my work. Actually, I had known this before I took up the programme...*

*Kenny (Tech): A specialised research based programme (MPhil) maybe irrelevant to what we need at work... I acquired research skills... specialised knowledge, but they are useless because I do not need them in my work. Actually, the knowledge acquired in this master's course is not HK-based; thus, it is useless in practice.*

On the other hand, many respondents reported that they liked the master's programmes and regarded the learning experiences as *fruitful* (i.e. useful). To comprehend how fruitful they were, I explored what they acquired from their master's courses, and I found that the benefits could be grouped thematically into six themes: *new knowledge and technical skills, soft skills, exposure, social network, qualification and self-awareness and personal development.*

The master's programmes provided them with *new knowledge and skills (hard and soft)* for current and potential careers:

*Peter (Med): It covers a lot of professional medical knowledge that I need in carrying out my work. It deepened my understanding of specific diseases.*

*Dave (F&A): I like the programme. I have improved thinking and presentation skills. I have become more expressive and have significantly improved in my communication skills with others. All these come from training in my studies.*

Besides, the studies widened their *exposure* and through learning, they could enlarge their *social networks* and understand more about themselves. For example:

*Petra (IT): I met many classmates who were also experienced in this industry... The programme widened my scope.*

They benefited from a *qualification* recognised by the social world to switch jobs or get promotions.

*Paul (Others): ...Whenever I introduce myself to people, the qualification helped me improve my self-presentation and -package, which has improved the impression I give people.*

Some of them regarded the studies as *fruitful* because they could benefit from *self-awareness and personal development*. Mark, for example, understood the meaning of his work through self-reflection:

*Mark (Med): I also found that nursing is not only a paid job, but also an ethical job requiring higher moral standards. I reflected on the meaning of my work from my classmates in both positive and negative sides.*

Most comments, whether positive or negative, were based on a dichotomy of usefulness, echoing respondents' pragmatic value of studies. The 'complaints' originate

from the disappointment with failing to improve their *competence* (through acquiring new knowledge and skills); nobody complained of failing to enlarge their *professional network* or get the *certificates*. This implies that increasing human capital through master's education is somewhat based on chance. Some respondents reported that they might have risked seeing little growth in their human capital.

What are the benefits of master's studies? To what extent were these goals achieved according to their lived experiences? Respondents reported that the main benefits were: upgrades in their *knowledge and skills*, an enlarged *professional network* and desirable *qualifications*. For example:

*John (Arch): I acquired knowledge and skills in design, structure and professional practice including contracts and ordinances.*

*Petra (IT): Exposure. I met new people, and I visited the Silicon Valley in the US to visit some top IT companies there. Overall, the experience was so good.*

*Mavis (Logt): Besides, the social network established during my studies supports me in such a way that I can ask them whenever I encounter any technical difficulties in my work.*

*Paul (Others): ...Whenever I introduce myself to people, the qualification has helped me improve my self-presentation and -package, which improves the impression I give people.*

Respondents reported that they could learn and upgrade their existing *knowledge and skills* so that they could be more adaptable, especially for those with first degrees that are not very related to their work and those who want to go deeper into sub-fields, be promoted to a high-ranking post or switch to another field. In addition, they acquired people skills, communication, presentation, collaboration, thinking, analytical skills, problem-solving skills and so forth, all of which could be transferrable to their workplaces. Furthermore, they found that the programmes were the eye-openers through which they could widen their scope of view and broaden their perspectives of thought through learning and seeing something new, such as operations in other departments

through visits and exchanges. Wide exposure stimulates and inspires people with new ideas. The upgrade of knowledge, hard and soft skills are associated with their study goal – *raising competence*. What is more, they met and stayed in contact with new people so that their enlarged *professional networks* as advising bodies could help them work smarter. For instance, Candy (SW) reported that she could make educated decision by consulting opinions from professional people in HRM she had met during the study. Last but not least, they could also gain necessary *qualifications* to cross thresholds in their professions (i.e. to be registered as beginner professionals) or to get promotions. These are consistent with the goals of *enlarging professional network* and *levelling-up their qualification*.

Their learning experience was assessed and benchmarked against their pre-set study goals. Young graduate workers' study experiences and their study goals could create a coherent study story. What they experienced echoed what they wanted to achieve: upgrades in their *knowledge and skills*, an enlarged *professional network* and desirable *qualifications*. Many reported that they benefited from the studies and thus regarded the programmes as *fruitful* though some complained about the unsatisfying volume of new, useful knowledge and skills from the master's programmes and consequently criticised them.

The next two sections hereafter are exceptionally important. Based on the findings, in section 4.6, how master's education benefited the participants' career mobility based on their experiences will be addressed. I analyse what they experienced after graduation and to what extent they became more mobile. Following this is the final section of this chapter – section 4.7, which explores the extent to which and under what mechanism the respondents became more mobile. To unpack this question, I first enquire if they could climb up of the career ladder to a level where they were happy. Then, I explore what factors are attributed to promotion and successful job switching and how the courses helped them advance their positions and/or incomes after graduation.

## 4.6. Experiences after Graduation

In this section, I explore the participants' post-graduation working experiences. The question "what did they experience in the labour market after master's graduation?" is central to the main theme of the next section. It consists of several sub-questions: (1) Could the course close the gap? Did they work smarter than before? (2) After graduation, to what extent did their employers value their new abilities and qualifications? Any credential gaps? (3) What were their post-graduation career experiences? Could they climb up to a career level at which they were happy? The first and second questions address to how effectively the master's programme increases one's competence and to what extent they were recognised and respected. This is to help us understand the extent to which their learning needs were satisfied. The third question provides a concrete picture of what young HK graduate workers do upon master's graduation. I attempt to use their concrete post-graduation experiences to verify their claims. I am also interested to know if the graduates are overqualified, appropriately qualified or still underqualified for their jobs.

In terms of deficiencies in job competence, through a series of questions – "What had you identified to be deficient? Did the course help you close the gap? Did you feel you were more competent (efficacy increased) in your job after completing the programme? Did you realise any difference in work performance?" – I explore to what extent they closed their ability gaps after re-training. It was found that not all respondents reported significant job performance changes after their master's studies. The degree of mobilisation in their increased human capital varied. Some reported that they could hardly identify any significant change in work performance attributed to the master's courses. For instance:

*David (Engg): A little bit, but not very helpful in closing the gap.*

*Sarah (Others): Um... no. Actually, the efficiency and quality of my work was more or less the same before and after the master's course.*

The reasons were numerous. First, the course content and their actual needs in the workplace were *mismatched* (i.e. too wide, not specific enough, not relevant or even irrelevant to work):

*Susan (SW): However, I had few chances to exhibit my skills in practice. I think...this programme does not consist of practicum. I learned through theory and demonstration. It was better than nothing, but I could not realise a significant difference.*

*Candy (SW): The course could not very much help me close the gap due to a mismatch of my current work and the content of the master's programme... The course content was about HRM, which I did not need so much in carrying out my duties in my current post.*

Second, the knowledge and skills acquired were *outdated*:

*Bobby (IT): I did not feel too much in raising my job competency... I did realise a little difference in work performance. The knowledge taught in school actually lagged behind the market.*

Third, *no new knowledge and skills* could be learned from the course:

*Trista (F&A): No, I did not realise any changes in my work performance after the master's course... what I acquired from the master's programme was not very related to my work... Only little in terms of knowledge increases... In terms of knowledge deficiency, the master's programme helped me little.*

The courses' inability to close their ability gaps and the subsequent insignificant difference in their job performance before and after the courses were reported. Some of

them said that even though there were changes, those changes might be due to accumulation of work experience instead of the courses per se. Alan said:

*Alan (Bank): I really could not distinguish the difference. Maybe...it was because I had accumulated a certain experience that was more than sufficient by my focusing on learning by doing for so many years in this particular field.*

In contrast, some reported that the master's programme alleviated the deficiency and they noticed improvements in their work performance. They became more *knowledgeable and skilful*:

*Peter (Med): Yes, I felt that I was more competent to perform my job after the master's programme. I gained knowledge covering more aspects through study that, in turn, allows me to make clinical decisions more easily. I realised that the time to respond has become shorter or zero.*

*John (Arch): Certainly, I could feel that I was more competent to perform my job after the master's study. I was more able to defend my thoughts; and my communication and presentation ability was raised as well. I spent a lot of time in reading and thinking so that I could think and act in a more generic manner in this industry.*

*William (Bank): I became familiar and more knowledgeable with the use of appreciation and specific terms and in the field of IT. Therefore, I feel that I was more competent. I realised the difference in my work performance after the course.*

The responses thus varied, spanning from insignificant differences to noticeable differences in working abilities after the master's programmes. Some of them claimed that their job competence increased as they became more *knowledgeable and skilful*, and improvements were noticeable. It showed that they had successfully mobilised their increased human capital in the workplace in exchange of job performance. Unless there

was a mismatch between an individual's needs and curriculum of the master's programme, he or she would benefit from it.

Besides, their greater *work confidence* can be seen. More quotes are as follows:

*Susan (SW): I became more self-confident in providing family services to my clients.*

*Nick (IT): My formal training gave me a foundation so that I would be confident in challenging others' ideas. Besides, in presenting ideas to seniors, my formal training and exposure from the master's programme helped me be confident.*

It is found that the greater their work ability is, the higher their *work confidence* is. The rise in *self-confidence* was observable when facing people, since the knowledge and skills provided them the necessary foundation. Increase in identity capital links to that in human capital.

In addition, they developed stronger professional support from larger *professional networks*:

*Petra (IT): ...one time I discussed a security issue with my client company and that I believed the solution was not secure; but according to experiences from my classmates who were working in this industry, they confirmed that solution was very secure based on their real-life applications. I conveyed this message to my colleagues, so my classmates' experience did affect my decision as well as my performance. Without such experience we would still believe what we were thinking was right.*

They could work smarter through professional support within their enlarged *professional networks*. The members in the network share valuable professional experiences that secure each other's performance.



Besides job competence, it is also interesting to find out the answers of: “to what extent did their employers (current and potential) value their abilities and new qualifications? Did their employers convey new expectations of them after obtaining the new degree?” These questions examine employers’ attitudes towards their employees’ advanced abilities and qualifications. Let us examine the attitudes of current employers first. Once again, the results varied. For example, on the positive side:

*Nick (IT): My superiors told me that they could quickly identify my outperformance over the other new colleagues without master’s qualifications... my superiors quickly assigned me difficult tasks to execute independently whereas they still monitored my colleagues.*

*Peter (Med): Yes. My boss showed appreciation for my competence in making clinical decisions and daily operations. He also conveyed new expectations to me after I obtained the new degree.*

On the negative side:

*Susan (SW): My existing employer did not say anything nor express any appreciation or new expectations of my new degree. No salary increase... I found that actually people did not value my new qualification. I thought that people would value it, but unfortunately, I was wrong.*

*Steve (IT): I don’t think my employer values the skills and qualifications I acquired from the master’s study. He didn’t say anything to express his appreciation of my new qualification. He also didn’t convey any new expectations to me after I had obtained the new degree.*

It was found that apart from careers with clear promotion hierarchies and specific qualification requirement, at each stop, like Peter’s case, no employers in the sample appreciated qualifications more than skills and abilities. John’s response is an exemplar:

*John (Arch): Yes. I think my current employer valued my skills much more than my qualification because every candidate must have already earned their master's degree...*

Some respondents reported that their degrees and improved work performance were valued and appreciated and that they were put to higher expectations to work. Both Nick and Peter could realise the increase in job competence and they both got job promotion then. In contrast, some reported that their current employers ignored their new degrees; they did not appreciate or convey positive expectations. It was as if nothing had happened. Both Susan and Steve found little increase in perceived job abilities (Table 6); however, by the date of interview, Susan remained stagnant in her position but Steve had got job promotion.

In assessing how they viewed their qualifications in the workplace, it was found unexpectedly that many respondents actively amended the definition of 'credential gap' – "how closely matched are the educational attainments of job holders with credentials required for entry into their current jobs" (Livingstone, 1998: 72) – to the difference between the educational attainments of job holders and the credentials widely accepted for entry into their current jobs. They no longer believe that the specified job requirements were the 'true' entry requirements; instead, they tend to accept a widely accepted norm as the 'true' reality. For instance:

*Alan (Bank): Nowadays, it is fashionable for young adults to obtain their master's degrees just after graduation. It is a very common phenomenon now, at least in this field... If you want to be a senior, a master's qualification is a must. This is not specified in black and white, but I know that many top managers in many companies will consider promotions to senior positions based on whether an applicant possesses a master's qualification or not.*

*Bobby (IT): Most adults over 30 already have a master's qualification nowadays. A master's qualification has become a basic requirement for getting better jobs.*

I found that they defined the credential requirements for a particular post based on *competence requirements* for the job and *comparisons* with current or prospective colleagues. For the former:

*Nick (IT): My position requires competent people; the people required should be able to find out new solutions and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses using research techniques and data. These skills align with my training. Without research training at the master's level, I think one would find difficulty in performing the job.*

*David (Engg): My work requires strong technical skills. I am relatively weak in them, but the management skills I acquired from the master's programme can compensate for it.*

For the latter:

*Alan (Bank): My post does not require a master's degree as an entry qualification; so far, I have never found a job that specifies a master's degree as an entry requirement... but I think that a master's qualification is preferable... In my department, many colleagues have master's degrees. Even juniors have their master's degrees.*

*Kenny (Tech): Compared with colleagues in my unit, my academic qualification is the lowest; they all have doctorate degrees...*

Nick, David, Alan and Kenny claimed that they were appropriately qualified for their current post. What is more, Michael's (SW) case is interesting. After his master's graduation, he was employed as a social work assistant (SWA) that required only a higher diploma qualification; however, he considered himself appropriately qualified for this post.

*Appropriately qualified. Nowadays, there are many post-graduates with master's degrees in the market. Even though my subordinates are studying for their master's degrees, if I do not have a master's qualification, I feel I can hardly lead the team... I was entitled to be a SWA after my master's studies, but an SWA only requires a higher diploma qualification.*

Similarly, Mark's nursing post requires a higher diploma or a bachelor's degree (more common). With his master's degree, he also regarded himself as appropriately qualified. He got his first degree in chemical technology in 2008 and worked as a chemist trainee in laboratory work from 2008 to 2010. He went back to school for full-time study from 2010 to 2013. After the re-training, he was immediately employed as a registered nurse (RN) in a public hospital. Now, Mark is an RN at another public hospital. He said:

*Appropriately qualified. I have been in this field since 2013. So far, my experience is not enough, so I regard myself as junior. In nursing, there are numerous specialties, and I have only a little experience in general medicine, orthopaedics and respiratory and sleep disorders. I think I still lack professional knowledge and experience in nursing.*

Dave's (F&A) post did not require a master's degree as well; however, he regarded himself as overqualified as a result of making comparisons with others:

*My post does not require a master's degree. I think I am overqualified. My colleagues do not have master's degrees, so as a dual master's holder, I have the highest academic qualifications.*

The data reveal that they tend to define the credential requirements for a particular post by *comparing* their academic qualifications with others in the workplace. Therefore, it is evident that young HK graduate workers define credential requirements by relying on observation and experience rather than believing the job recruitment advertisement conventionally. It was reported that many of their juniors and

counterparts already had master's qualifications; they believed that a master's qualification is fashionable. Some reported that their current jobs actually just required a bachelor's or even higher diploma qualification; notwithstanding, they considered the master's qualification to be advantageous over those who were without. Some denied their over-qualification in spite of the fact that their jobs did not require nor specify a master's qualification. A reason for this is that they explain credential gaps based on perception. Whether their jobs titles were appropriately qualified or overqualified was merely a subjective response. They conceptualise the very notion of credential requirements on the basis of knowledge and skills – *competence requirements* for the job – and perception based on *comparisons* with their colleagues or prospective counterparts' qualifications.

With this emerging concept of credential gap, to what extent did they believe that their prospective employers value their master's qualification? Candy (SW) regarded herself to be overqualified, but she was frustrated in finding a matching job. She could only find short-term contracts. She found that the master's course was nearly useless in helping her redirect her career. She said:

*...frankly speaking, I applied for many posts but the number of offers was rare.*

Susan (SW), in similar situation, was also frustrated. She said:

*I found that actually people did not value my new qualification. I thought that people would value it, but unfortunately, I was wrong.*

However, she still believed that her prospective employers would value her master's qualification:

*I think my potential employers will value the new knowledge and skills I acquired from the master's course.*

Petra (IT) echoed them:

*My employer did not show any appreciation towards my new degree, and I don't think my current employer values my new degree. But I believe my potential employer, if any, will value my master qualification.*

Besides, other respondents shared the belief that their master's studies could bring them attention from prospective employers in terms of skills, personality and qualifications:

*Paul (Others): I think that my potential employers would value my master's degree. The interviewers may have a good impression of me since the degree can prove that I am a proactive and ambitious person. To think differently, I had many opportunities to recruit people through job interviews. I understand that part-time study is harsh, so interviewees with second degrees should be regarded as tough, self-demanding and proactive with good time management and self-discipline abilities.*

*William (Bank): I think that my potential employers value qualifications because without observing my work performance, they can only focus on my qualifications.*

In this sense, qualifications are viewed as a signal that sends messages to people it may concern who have little information about a candidate's work performance, personal qualities and personality. Furthermore, school one graduated from also matters. Judy (Tech) said:

*Somehow, the course helped me be recognised by potential employers since ABC University has good reputation for its MBA... I think potential employers in the market would value my degree,*

*owing to the good brand of the school (ABC). In addition, if I studied in another school, I would be uncertain if my degree would be valued.*

Some reported that, according to their real experiences, they attributed their successes in job switching to their master's degrees. For instance:

*Trista (F&A): I think my new qualification helped me jump to GHI<sup>11</sup> from DEF during my CV review and job interview.*

*David (Engg): My boss at that moment didn't say or do anything to appreciate my new qualification, but my new boss (2012-13) in the same company did.*

In terms of qualification requirements specified by job posts, almost all participants in the dataset are overqualified; however, with the emergent concept of credential requirement, more respondents claimed that they are appropriately qualified. No matter whether their current employers' attitudes, as they perceived, were positive or indifferent, almost all of them believed (and some of them could prove this with their real experiences) that their prospective employers would value their new skills and qualifications such that their master's qualification would be an advantage to earn 'tickets' for job interviews. It was also found that a certificate together with a university's name printed on it is a political means for transmitting positive information to prospective employers about how knowledgeable, skilful, capable, proactive, ambitious and tough the applicant is during sorting and job interviews. In this regard, it signals to prospective employers not only their innate productivity (Mohamad Yunus, 2017) but also some acquired personal qualities. The expectation associated with the qualification enhances opportunities to switch jobs.

Last but not least, in this section, I present data to understand their post-graduation career experiences. The experiences are important data for exploring career mobility. "What was your experience when you brought your new qualification to the job market? What did you do? Did you apply for or change jobs? Were these efforts successful?

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<sup>11</sup> Another 'Big-Four' accounting firm in HK.

Why or why not?” It was found that the interviewees’ experiences varied from (1) *getting promoted*; (2) *changing jobs or job status* – getting desirable job offers in other industries, including successfully registering for professional posts; and (3) *no change*.

For instance, after graduation William and David got *promoted*:

*William (Bank): I got an opportunity for an internal promotion to compliance supervisor. I think the promotion related to the master’s programme to a certain extent because I grasped more knowledge in IT and could master more tasks assigned by my boss. Due to better work performance, I gained an opportunity for promotion.*

*David (Engg): I did not apply for the new job. I got an internal promotion every two years, namely 2012, 2014 and 2016. But I want to emphasise that these did not relate to my MBA qualification but solely on my work performance.*

It was found that no matter whether they attributed their successes in job *promotion* to the master’s degrees, most agreed that their successes were related to their *work performance*. Therefore, based on their experiences, good *work performance* is a factor for *promotion*.

Besides *promotion*, some respondents got desirable job offers and were happy with their success in *changing jobs* after graduation. Alan (Bank), said:

*The first thing I did was to change my job. The change was intentional and deliberate. I successfully made a change after graduation. The reason...I think was due to my experience and qualifications. I think my master’s qualification made a significant difference... My current post does not specify a requirement for a master’s degree, but I think that it should be preferable.*



Dave (F&A, who took a master's degree without a bachelor's degree) told us how the qualification increased his chance to *change jobs*:

*I think that my success was due to my qualifications (i.e. MBA). A good qualification resulted in greater opportunity of job interview. The success of employment I think was also due to my qualification because they trusted that I possess certain knowledge favourable to the work... Besides, my chance of being shortlisted for interviews is higher than before I had MBA. I felt that it was easier for me to find a job with the MBA... before that it was hard for me to find a job even though I am CPA-qualified.<sup>12</sup> In the eyes of employers, hiring me is a value-adding decision because I am not only good at accounting, but I can also offer help and give advice towards improving other departments with my MBA degree.*

Dave was successfully employed in the other company. He believed that his MBA qualification indicated that other than merely accounting skills he possessed more knowledge and skills that were favourable to the development of the company. I also found that with the master's qualification, respondents had more opportunities to be shortlisted for job interviews; furthermore, their improved job abilities from re-training were not only reflected in the workplace but also during recruitment assessments, such as aptitude tests and job interviews:

*Nick (IT): I think that the reason for my success should be my good interview performance. My presentation was clear, and the content I expressed was concrete... Before the job interview, I had taken an aptitude test where I think my performance was very good. Besides, frankly speaking, I think my master's qualification could help the interviewers differentiate me from other candidates. So, I believe that my master's qualification could help me be shortlisted for the aptitude test and final job interview.*

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<sup>12</sup> CPA stands for Certified Public Accountant.

*Mavis (Logt): This success was also due to my MBA. With this qualification, I was believed to be able to solve difficult problems based on my performance in the interview. I know I had been shortlisted to attend the interview due to my MBA qualification, although it was not specified in the requirements; I was a candidate they looked for to help the company solve its problems.*

Based on their experiences, qualifications appear to be political means for transmitting attractive information to prospective employers such as capabilities, skilfulness, confidence, experience and so forth.

Among those who could change jobs, some could complete the registration, obtain the licences necessary and take on professional posts. For instance, Peter became a senior pharmacist, Michael became an ASWO, John became an architect and Mark became a registered nurse.

Unfortunately, some reported that they had *no change* in their job and position and were stuck on their original posts. For instance, Candy (SW) applied for many jobs, but offers were rare due to inferior competitive edge with in-house trainers; Sarah (Others) failed to switch to another translation post though she was invited to attend some interviews; Paul (Others) wished to change fields, but the salary was not attractive. Susan (SW) also failed to advance her job position; she found that “people with particular skills and ability that match with the developmental direction of the organisation” would get promotion easier. It implies that despite an increase of one’s human capital, his or her job position cannot be advanced unless the increased human capital can be mobilised appropriately.

To sum up, it was found that the participants' post-graduation careers experiences varied. What each respondent perceived in regard to changes in their job capability, career mobility, employers’ attitudes and credential gaps is summarised in Table 6. Some were upset career stagnation or under-employment, whereas some were satisfied with the mobility the new degrees brought. For those who successfully climbed upward, they were either promoted or obtained better job offers from other companies. For the

former group, it was found that they attributed their successes mainly to the improvements in work performance that had been generated through the mobilisation of their increased human capital, whereas the latter group tended to attribute success to new qualifications that can be exchanged to generate opportunities. Most respondents reported that no matter whether their new employers had appeared or not, they still believed that their new master's qualification as well as the reputation of the university they attended in the form of increased social capital could attract prospective employers' attention by indicating not only their innate productivity but also acquired personal qualities.

## 4.7. Mobility

This section ends this chapter with an analysis of participants' interpretations of career mobility to address the research question "to what extent and under what mechanism did they get more mobile?" I first understand their expectations of their new qualifications with regard to career advancement. Second, I analyse their interpretations of the marginal effect of master's studies on advancing their position and/or income after graduation. This relates to their short-term upward mobility. Third, I explore the factors of successful job promotion or switching based on their experiences. Last, I analyse their comments about the long-term effect of the master's degree on mobility.

As previously found, qualification is the dominant motivating force towards master's studies in the eyes of young HK graduate workers. After graduation, they all received the certificates they aspired. I therefore explore "how did you expect your master's qualification to affect your career advancement?" The data helped me understand how they made use of their newly obtained qualifications to increase their mobility. Analysing the data, I found that respondents' expectation of the qualification's effect on their careers were that (1) they gained *recognition* from society and/or *respect* from colleagues, (2) they could *change fields* of (i.e. horizontal mobility) and (3) *career advancement* (i.e. vertical mobility).

Some respondents expressed their expectations to be *recognised* in the infrastructure of society and be *respected* (as specialists) in the workplace:

*Peter (Med): I expected more respect from colleagues.*

*Michael (SW): I expected to be recognised as a registered social worker, entitling me as an ASWO and fair pay.*

*Bobby (IT): I expected my boss would discuss some other job opportunities I could try.*

Echoing the hierarchy of study needs (Figure 7), respondents expected their new qualifications could help them get better jobs. Bobby (IT)<sup>13</sup> wished to *change fields*:

*If I changed jobs, I think it could help because my qualification has been advanced.*

Besides, Paul (Others) also had the similar thought:

*What I wanted was to change the field of work by the new qualification.*

It must be pointed out here that ‘horizontal’ movers believed they had better career prospects:

*Mark (Med): I wanted to be a nurse before taking this master’s programme because nursing provides better and clearer career prospects.*

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<sup>13</sup> Bobby chose to stay, as he foresaw a promotion opportunity ahead.

*Susan (SW): I wanted to apply for jobs in government settings or relating to family services in non-government settings. I could enjoy better long-term benefits in a government setting...*

Some expected internal promotions for *career advancement* (i.e. position and salary):

*Bobby (IT): Just after graduation, I expected the qualification could bring me some career advancement. I expected my boss would discuss some other job opportunities I could try.*

*David (Engg): I expected promotion into management after obtaining my master's qualification.*

*Career advancement* also refers to a promotion to a higher rank in another company:

*Candy (SW): I learned more about recruitment, training and development in an organisation. I think this knowledge may have a positive effect if I am employed as a supervisor.*

*Kenny (Tech): After several switches, I was employed as a chemist in the government laboratory. The benefits the government offer are much better than those in the private sector are... Both my position and salary increased with each switch.*

Steve's (IT) thought is an exemplar for those who looked for parallel (both internal and external) opportunities:

*I expected that the master's qualification would have some positive effects on my career. Externally, I looked for career advancement. I did expect that when I applied for other posts, potential employers would value my master's qualification; as a result, the switching*

*process would be facilitated and become easier. Internally, I also expected my master's degree could help me get internal promotions easier and faster.*

In a nutshell, respondents expected that their master's qualification could help them be recognised in the job world by colleagues, bosses and the government, move horizontally to change fields and/or vertically to internal and external senior posts. It was found that even though they were conceptually identified to have moved 'horizontally' that conventionally refers to the transition from one social group to another on the same level (Sorokin, 1964), this movement offered them better prospects. It is believed that "jobs at a certain level need persons at a certain level to fill them", Alan (Bank) said. "High qualification is for mobility among senior posts; low qualification is for mobility among junior posts".

Here, a negative case must be reported. Unlike the others, Mavis (Logt) attributed her past failure in job seeking to her MBA degree:

*I applied for job vacancies, but it was not easy to get a job. Very often in job interviews, I would be regarded as an aggressive candidate due to my MBA, which would be a threat to my interviewers' positions, so this was the reason why I failed.*

However, this might be due to her established mindset and assumptions about Chinese:

*Superiors would not teach me in depth because Chinese are afraid of their inferiors climbing higher than they do one day, so they would not teach me something really important.*

Very quickly, she attributed her success in job switching to her MBA:

*This success was also due to my MBA. With this qualification, I was seen as a hope to their company to solve some difficult problem,*

*which they saw from my performance during the interview. I know I had been sorted to attend the interview due to my MBA qualification, although it was not specified in the requirement. I was the candidate they were looking for to help the company in problem solving.*

It reveals that, based on her experience, the explanation of ‘risk society’ in her life is more ‘extraordinarily’ uncertain than the others; even obtaining a superior qualification is just a bet on a career whether it be better or poorer.

The question “to what extent did the course help you advance your position and/or income in these years after graduation?” explored the extent to which the master’s courses contributed to careers mobility. The themes in their responses were found to be *stagnant* and *upwardly mobile*.

Some interviewees reported that, after graduation, they did not experience any change in position and income. Some were even upset with their current positions. They found the master’s degrees useless in upward mobility. Susan offered three reasons for this: (1) little increase in human capital; (2) valueless new knowledge and skills acquired; and (3) qualification inflation.

*(1) This programme does not consist of practicum. I learned through theory and demonstration. It was better than nothing that I could not realise significant difference [in filling the deficiency gap].*

*(2) People with particular skills and ability that match with the developmental direction of the organisation [can easily get promotion]*

*(3) I found that actually people did not value my new qualification. I thought that people would value it, but unfortunately, I was wrong... The master’s course failed to help me advance my position and/or income after graduation.*

Regarding ‘worthless’ knowledge and skills acquired, despite her career stagnation, Candy was proactive:

*I think my equipment with this knowledge may have positive effect if once I get an employment of a supervisor.*

Therefore the notions of ‘worthless’ or ‘valueless’ can be viewed as relative terms and they are career-specific.

On the contrary, some reported that they could move up the career ladder within a few years after graduation in terms of both position and salary through internal promotion and position switching because of their improved qualifications, knowledge, skills and experience:

*Petra (IT): Yes, I think that the master’s study indirectly helped me get a promotion.*

*Bobby (IT): I think the master’s course could indirectly benefit me to get promotion. I could improve my soft skills, such as presentation and thinking skills. In addition, this might improve my sales volume and relationships with people and my feedback from clients.*

*Mavis (Logt): The course helped me advance my position and income after graduation to a large extent. The advancement was because of my greater abilities, such as good analysis skills and the ability to make changes based on data.*

*Mark (Med): Master’s qualifications are preferable for promotions, as nowadays there are many graduates.*

Some of the respondents indicated that they did not experience any short-term upward mobility, whereas some did. For those who were underemployed and stayed *stagnant*, they felt upset with the investment in their master’s degrees. For those who were more *upwardly mobile*, they experienced more confidence in their work



performance. They tended to attribute their successes to *job competence* and *qualifications*.

Next, I explore income mobility. “In reality, was there any immediate economic return on or effect of the qualification? If yes, what were they?” Dave and Mark enjoyed monetary benefits when entering professional careers with licences as an entry requirement:

*Dave (F&A): Yes, the course helped me advance my income after graduation. After the first master’s, my salary increased by 5%. After my second master’s (MBA), [it increased by] 40%.*

*Mark (Med): Yes, there was an immediate economic return when I successfully switched to nursing. The RN salary is higher than that of a chemical trainee because the jobs are different. If I had not studied the master’s, I think I would not have enjoyed such benefits.*

However, almost all other respondents experienced no immediate returns:

*Nick (IT): No tangible income and position benefit from the master’s qualification was seen in the first two to three years.*

*Peter (Med): Immediate economic returns have not yet come, but I think they will come later.*

Mavis (Logt) experienced immediate income mobility, but the increase was not as satisfactory as she expected:

*Though the current salary is higher than that of the past, I am not satisfied with the increase.*

In this regard, a master's degree might not lead to immediate economic returns unless *promotions* or *job switches* occur. Judy (Tech) related her promotion and salary increase to her work performance:

*I did not immediately see a salary increase because of the new qualification, but maybe due to my knowledge, my performance was better and I got the increase indirectly from my degree... The promotion entirely depended on work performance and soft skills. Leadership is also an important factor. Qualification advancement does not guarantee a promotion.*

In contrast, as mentioned before Kenny directly benefited from the master's qualification through employment in a government-funded laboratory with better remuneration after several switches.

“What if you had not studied for your master's degree?” This question was asked to validate if the master's studies made any difference in their careers paths.

On the one hand, some interviewees cited *no differences* at all:

*Candy (SW): If I had not studied for the master's, I think everything would have been the same because my current job only requires a social work bachelor's degree.*

*Petra (IT): If I had not studied for the master's, I think I would definitely still have got promotion. My promotion did not relate to my new qualifications.*

*Sarah (Others): If I had not studied for the master's, I think I still could have got a job offer in 2013 and this post in 2014.*

The above interviewees believed that if they had not taken the courses, they still would have kept their jobs, got promotions or changed their jobs (except for professions

requiring licences). Petra was confident in her constantly good work performance to which she attributed her success in internal promotion:

*I think I have been performing my job constantly well... I knew I would have promotion independent of whether I studied MBA or not, but I wanted to make the promotion more confirmed. Provided that I have an MBA, I will not regard myself to have deficiency in business knowledge.*

The master course failed to further improve her job ability: when she was asked if the course could help her perform her job more competently, she answered, “a little bit, but not very great”. She implicitly considered the qualification not necessary for the promotion.

On the other hand, some said that their master’s degrees made a difference in their career paths, especially those who entered licenced professions, such as social workers, pharmacists, chemists... The responses below, for example, describe another sphere:

*Peter (Med): If I had not studied for the master’s, theoretically, I would have had to wait another two years to sit for the board of promotion. However, to the best of my knowledge, in practice no people have gone to the board without a master’s degree.*

*William (Bank): If I had not studied for the master’s programme, I would have not improved my communication and work performance. I don’t believe that I would have been promoted.*

*Mavis (Logt): If I had not studied for the master’s, I would definitely have had no such offer.*

*Dave (F&A): If I had not had the MBA, I could have hardly found a good job as long, as I am getting old. Nowadays, there are too many CPAs in the market, so a CPA plus a master’s degree is better than only a CPA. A CPA is not enough. To outperform, I need more qualifications than others.*

It was found that some respondents could enjoy better benefits from aspiring jobs, especially those who successfully entered licenced positions. Through their master's studies, they got *upgraded skills* and *qualifications* that in turn helped them gain recognition and legitimacy (e.g. Michael) and outperform others (e.g. Nick), leading to *job promotion* and *job switches*. In addition, it was found that a master's degree would offer a candidate (e.g. Alan) more career opportunities and shorten the time to a promotion or job change:

*Michael (SW): I would have never been a recognised social worker, and the opportunities would have been largely limited if I had not engaged in the master's study.*

*Nick (IT): Actually, in UVW bank, there were two kinds of posts for graduates – one is more operational and routine and the other is more problem solving based. If I had not had an MPhil, I would have most likely entered the routine one, and my career would have been operational based. Now, I can challenge myself more in my work.*

*Alan (Bank): If I had not studied the master's, I think I would have made the change successfully, but maybe... I would have spent more time on the switch.*

In summary, respondents generally expressed that the marginal effect of the master's studies could not bring them immediate economic benefits, and some even regarded the degrees as useless in raising their status. However, those who were more upwardly mobile said the master's education helped them improve their job competence and qualifications, which brought them superior abilities and qualifications that led to internal *promotions* and successful *job switches*, including licenced professional works. Some agreed that with a master's degree, their opportunities were wider and the time required to make advancement was shorter, as the degrees signal added values, as Mark (Med) said, "I think that the master's degree is higher in rank and more advanced than a bachelor's degree for some of its added values".

In the previous findings, I learn that a master's qualification together with the title of the degree and the name of university are factors for selecting candidates for job interviews, where applicants are double-checked on their knowledge, skills and experience. Vertical mobility also involves internal promotion. The question "what do you think a promotion depends upon?" allows us to generate ideas of what young HK graduate workers should equip themselves with to climb upward. Following this, I try to identify from respondents' experiences what they acquired from their master's courses and what did not. In analysing their responses, four themes emerged from the data: (1) *abilities and performance*, (2) *qualification*, (3) *inter-personal skills* and (4) *seniority*.

In the dictionary, *ability* refers to the capacity or power to do something physical or mental, and *performance* describes how well or badly one does something. It was found that the former involves knowledge, skills and leadership while the latter is associated with outcomes like sales. *Abilities and performance* were agreed upon as a factor for internal promotion:

*William (Bank): I found that those who got promotions did so due to their performance and knowledge increase from their master's programmes.*

*Bobby (IT): I think the master's course could indirectly benefit me to get a promotion. I could improve my soft skills, such as presentation and thinking skills. This might in turn improve my sales volume, relationships with people and client feedback.*

*Judy (Tech): The promotion entirely depended on work performance and soft skills. Leadership is also an important factor.*

*Paul (Others): In review of my promotions, I only got promotions after I helped the group achieve something.*

A remark should be made here. Susan (SW) emphasised that "particular skills and abilities that match with the developmental direction of the organisation" are important for promotions. Therefore, the notion of matched abilities instead of general abilities in reference to the organisation's needs emerges as a link between school and the

workplace. These matched abilities give rise to favourable performance that is somehow reflected in desirable outcomes.

As a teacher, I believe that *qualification* is a factor for promotion, so I always ask my students to equip themselves with credentials for brighter career prospects.

*Alan (Bank): Promotions depend on qualifications and work experience. Work performance is a concept under work experience.*

*Mark (Med): Besides PRCC,<sup>14</sup> master's qualifications, work performance and experience are all factors for promotions.*

However, except for Alan and Mark, no respondents regarded qualifications as a factor for promotions:

*Judy (Tech): Qualification advancement does not guarantee promotion.*

*Bobby (IT): Qualification is irrelevant in terms of promotion.*

*William (Bank): I think my promotion was due to my competency rather than my qualification.*

*Petra (IT): I don't think that my promotion depended on my new qualification.*

*Steve (IT): No, I don't think my promotion should be attributed to my master's qualification. It should depend on my work performance. I learned that through the appraisal interview – my boss told me so.*

Mavis (Logt) offered 'qualification inflation' as a reason for this:

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<sup>14</sup> A necessary training programme for job promotion.

*Not too many colleagues are MBA holders. I know that my superior has an MBA. However, I don't think that the MBA qualification could help me advance my position and salary.*

Instead, some respondents regarded master's *qualifications* as 'admission tickets' to certain high-ranking posts and professional qualifications, such as a CPA, as 'thresholds' for promotions:

*Kenny (Tech): I think promotions depend on problem-solving ability and work performance. The master's qualification was just an admission ticket to my current post.*

*Trista (F&A): Promotions are based solely on my performance review by each of my supervisors rather than an academic master's qualification. Instead of a master's degree, a CPA is the threshold for promotion.*

*John (Arch): Everyone who wants to be a registered architect must work with a firm for one year and go back to school to pursue a master's.*

*Michael (SW): A master's qualification only helped me step across the threshold of the profession.*

However, in John, Michael and Kenny's cases, promotion did not occur. John and Michael obtained master's degrees to register as an architect and social worker respectively, while Kenny changed jobs and after several switches got a job requiring a master's degree in the government. Therefore, internal job promotion was nearly independent from *qualifications*.

It was found that *inter-personal skills* such as self-confidence and good relationships with superiors affects one's chances for promotion, but *seniority* matters as well:

*Peter (Med): As all candidates will satisfy the threshold requirements, the key to success is work performance and personality leading to perception of seniors.*

*John (Arch): The self-confidence and presentation are essential.*

*Candy (SW): I think that promotions depend on ability and relationships with top management.*

*Bobby (IT): I find that promotions should depend on work performance, relationships with people, sales volume, not making problems, seniority, contributions to the company, relationships with superiors, feedback and comments from clients.*

*David (Engg): Frankly speaking, promotion depends on one's relationship with the boss, and also technical skills and leadership.*

*Michael (SW): Promotions depend on seniority and experience.*

*Petra (IT): I got the promotion because of seniority.*

*Abilities and performance, inter-personal skills and seniority were factors for promotion, whereas qualifications were not. Among them, which qualities were acquired from their master's studies? Nick, Bobby and Dave for example considered that the master's study could make a difference in their abilities and performance (experience embedded) and inter-personal skills, which they found important in terms of promotions.*

*Nick (IT): ...the master's trained me in problem solving and presentation.*

*Bobby (IT): I think the master's course could indirectly benefit me to get promotion. I could improve my soft skills, such as presentation and thinking skills. This might in turn improve my sales volume, relationships with people and client feedback.*

*Dave (F&A): I showed improvement in inter-personal skills, and I participated in more social gatherings. I treasure teamwork more*



*than before. I communicated more with my superiors. As a result, I became more cooperative with my colleagues. I can see the importance of good relationships among colleagues and superiors... Yes, I could see the difference in my working attitude. I think the difference comes from my MBA, through which my personality has changed to more active.*

Participants agreed that *abilities and performance, inter-personal skills and seniority* were factors for job promotion, whereas *qualification* was not. However, *abilities, performance and some inter-personal qualities* were considered direct or indirect benefits from the master's studies, whereas *seniority* was not:

*Petra (IT): I got the promotion because of seniority. I don't think it related to the master's degree... I think my promotion depends on experience. Yes. I think the master's programme could raise my level of experience.*

*Qualification* has been rejected as a reason for job promotion. Nevertheless, will it affect one's long-term mobility? Now, I examine data concerning the long-term effect of the *qualification* on career mobility through the question "to what extent do you expect the master's course to help you advance your position and/or income in the future (i.e. more mobile), say in another five years?" The meaning of 'long-term' reveals that it might not happen; in this regard, the data are therefore considered projections based on experiences. It was found that some respondents claimed that their master's degrees will no longer have a significant effect in their careers paths, but some believe they will.

For those who were disappointed by their master's degree in raising their short-term career mobility, they had no hope in raising their mobility in the long term with their master's degrees. Candy (SW), for example, said:

*I don't think that my master's degree will help me advance my position and income in the future.*

Some respondents said that their further career advancement would depend on work performance and experience but no longer on qualifications:

*Michael (SW): No more. It offered me the licence only.*

*David (Engg): Declining effect or no effect at all.*

*John (Arch): No more. Further career advancement should depend on my work performance. The master's study has completed its mission by helping me equip and integrate hard and soft skills; I need enrichment in experiences to get further promotions. In any job interview for the next position (registered architect), the interviewers will no longer assess my master's thesis or something like that, but will likely assess my practical experience.*

*Nick (IT): When I was green, I believed that a master's qualification seemed important and that I valued it. But as I was becoming a senior, my master's qualification was no longer as important as before. What is important now is the ability I can demonstrate, which is independent of my background... The qualification cannot help anymore. It has finished its historical mission. No other value can be extracted from this qualification.*

Even Kenny (Tech), who was working in a government sector, said:

*No. I cannot see that my master's qualification can help me get further promotions from my current post.*

They generally regarded their master qualification as the 'threshold' of the new job; their master's degrees had completed their historical mission, especially for those who

were licenced to work.

Nonetheless, some respondents still believed that their master's degrees would help them advance their careers. They considered that the social network they had built and the knowledge and soft skills they had acquired from the course could help them further be promoted to higher internal posts, while qualifications could help them seek higher posts in other companies.

*Nick (IT): The social network I built during the master's study can help.*

*Bobby (IT): Possibly the master's course would help me advance my position and/or income in the future, say in another five years' time. However, I think the paper qualification actually helps little. It will be due to my improved soft skills. I think the master's qualification will help only when tied with skills and experience.*

*Dave (F&A): My master's could help me advance my position and income in future only if I switch jobs. For internal promotions, I think job performance is more important.*

*Mark (Med): I expect that my master's will help me advance my position and salary in the future. Internal promotions in the future, say in five to ten years' time, will requires a master's qualification in practice.*

*William (Bank): Small effect for internal promotion. However, for switching companies, I think I will have a competitive edge because anyone who has a master's degree will be expected to be more knowledgeable than those who only have a bachelor's degree.*

*Alan (Bank): Yes. The master's qualification is for my future job changes and promotions. If you want to be a senior, a master's qualification is a must... High qualifications are for mobility among senior posts. Low qualifications are for mobility among junior posts.*

Apart from those who were in some occupations that require the master qualification as a threshold and further career advancement depends on work performance and experience, I found that many respondents believed their master's degrees could still signal themselves to prospective employers as better candidates over their counterparts who were without a master's degree. It reveals that the respondents believe in *qualification* as a signalling device has a long-term mobility effect. Besides, well-internalised job *abilities* and well-established *professional networks* also help.

## 4.8. Main Findings

In this chapter, I comprehended the mindset and culture of my target group – young HK graduate workers – a group of reflexive learners in this (global) risk society. I did so by carefully examining the common language emerging from the interviews under the identity-agency-structure theoretical framework (Ecclestone, 2007) and looking at their values and beliefs towards master's studies in the first two sections. I have found that in terms of identity, they advocate competence and performance and do the best they can to represent themselves as recognised and qualified professionals in specific types of work. In terms of agency, they are keen on improving their knowledge, skills and qualifications to increase their capacity for autonomous and empowered actions, such as job switches and internal promotions in pursuit of salary and benefits advancements. Structurally, they realise they live in a competitive world that requires them to make *internal* and *external* changes to have wider chances and brighter prospects. *Internal changes* refer to increase/update in their knowledge and skills, while *external changes* refer to upgrading in their academic or professional qualifications, which bring advantages when communicating with the social world. Despite the uncertainty of the expected returns, they still hoped that the investment in master's studies would bring them positive career opportunities mediated by the *internal* and *external* changes.

The third and the fourth sections are about their experiences prior to and during the master's studies. I started with their experiences in workplace deficiencies and examined their learning needs and goals. I then validated this by examining their

learning experiences. The results reveal a coherent study story. A hierarchy is proposed to summarise their learning needs. Responding to learning needs, they aimed to become more competent in their knowledge and skills and to achieve higher academic status so as to prove themselves on both a personal and social level and to gain power to satisfy their highest needs for autonomy and mobility. In examining their alternative ways to make up for their deficiencies with the help of expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), I found that young HK graduate workers treasure credentials more than knowledge and skills.

The last two sections concern post-graduation career experiences and mobility. It was found that though graduates expected their master's degrees to help them be recognised in the professional world, their bosses' attitudes towards their qualifications varied. But no matter to what extent their degrees were appreciated, most still believed that their prospective employers would value their upgraded skills and qualifications so that their master's qualifications would be an advantage in competing for desirable posts in the labour market. It is consistent with the findings that those who successfully got promotions attributed their success mainly to improvements in work performance, whereas those who got better job offers from other companies tended to attribute their success to the new qualifications. In addition, some agreed that with master's degrees, their career opportunities were wider and the time to advance was shorter, as the degrees hold some value to society. For those who were underemployed and stayed stagnant, it was found that they might either have little increase in human capital from the master course or be impotent to mobilise it in workplace, or their credentials depreciated. In contrast, abilities and performance, inter-personal skills and seniority were factors for job promotions, whereas qualifications were not. Nevertheless, based on some participants' beliefs, qualifications have a long-term effect as a signalling device.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Introduction

This research aimed to explore the role of master's studies in the career mobility of young graduate employees in HK. With the key themes in the literature, I unpacked the research questions by developing specific research and data collection questions (Figure 5). Based on the findings, I first understand how the culture of society was inducted into the participants to form their 'somebody' (Ball et al., 2000) in this particular era in section 5.2. I then discuss why they returned to school to pursue a master's education as well as their pre- and post-graduation experiences in terms of the relationship between their studies and careers, importantly focusing on education as a mechanism for career mobility in sections 5.3–5.5. This chapter ends with the practice-based implications in section 5.6.

I argue that when negotiating the risk society, young HK graduate workers, as members of Generation Y, are keen on improving themselves to be recognised as professionals and to increase their capacity for autonomous and empowered action, such as job promotions or switches. They believe that a master's education may bring *internal* and *external changes*. Being optimistic and opportunistic, they view education as a vehicle for *investment* in their human and social capitals to reap upward career mobility one day. The three-level hierarchy of their study needs and goals in section 5.3 illustrates how the investment satisfies their biographic learning needs and goals. Making use of motivation theories, the locus of control in their motivation to take on master's studies is discussed. Guided by the human capital theory and signalling and screening theory, I create the notion of *object of recognition* to identify the roots of different forms of career advancement in section 5.4 and the metaphors of the *human engine* and *social engine* to explain the mechanism of upward career mobility in HK in section 5.5. The last section concludes with practice-based tips for prospective master's students.

## 5.2. The Context

Beck (1992) views modern world as ‘risk society’. For Giddens (1998), a risk society is “a society increasingly pre-occupied with the future, which generates the notion of risk” (p.27-28). Due to global impact, the notion of a “global risk society” (Giddens and Beck, 2017) has emerged suggesting that security threats and uncertainties of living can no longer be controlled nationally or by the state (p.37). This generation, as ‘drivers of cars’ instead of ‘passengers on trains’ in previous generations (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), must continuously negotiate uncertainty and risk continuously throughout their life-courses. Even young people from privileged social backgrounds and with excellent academic credentials worry about failure and about the uncertainty of the future (Lucey, 1996), especially in HK where an increasing number of students have been participating in tertiary education as a result of the massification of HE (Lee, 2016).

People involved in this research are graduates ranging from 25 to 35 year of age, falling into Generation Y (Howe and Strauss, 2003; Sutherland and Thompson, 2001). This generation is characterised as directionless (Kwok, 2012), individualistic, self-oriented and having a strong job entitlement beliefs, giving rise to high motivation and expectations to achieve and succeed (Twenge, 2006). Under strong job-entitlement beliefs in the high correlation of academic qualifications with career prospects, these young adults are advocates of open competition for jobs and they endeavour to climb the social ladder by continuously advancing their education and professional knowledge (Kwok, 2012). In this research, it is found that many participants uphold the value of ‘making improvements’. Even though some were not very sure of the positive career outcomes bought by the master’s degree, they were still willing to engage in study. This finding is consistent with the value of ‘making improvements’ as well as their opportunistic and pragmatic views on qualifications in the competitive job market, as reflected by the idea of ‘no losses’. Despite the uncertainty of career advancement, they proactively regard their studies as contributing to their job preparedness.

Echoing the literature (e.g. Shimizu and Higuchi, 2009; Lin, 2001), it is found that young working adults with bachelor degrees advocate two beliefs in relation to their

master's studies and careers: they regard their studies as re-training programmes that bring them changes in personal qualities, and they believe the programmes can improve their personal presentation to others in a career context. Built on capital theory (Lin, 2001), the former refers to *internal changes* in increasing/updating the knowledge and skills associated with human capital, while the latter refer to *external changes* in upgrading their academic (or with superior universities) or professional qualifications that bring them advantages when communicating with the social world in relation to social capital (Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi, 2015).

In this regard, as responsible learners (Webb and Warren, 2009) who invest in their own development to further increase the capacity of their human and social capital, they endeavour to undergo transitions of becoming or unbecoming 'somebody' (Ecclestone, 2009) and create their educational and self-actualisation biographies to produce their labour situations. In the age of high modernity, educational and self-actualisation biographies, rather than careers, are better descriptions of life-courses (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Singer and Bruhns (1991) point out that students generally believe that qualifications or credentials enhance an individual's future employment prospects. In addition, their strong job-entitlement belief is reflected in their greater reliance on academic qualifications as a valid predictor of job performance in selection decisions, in contrast to work experience by professional managers as reported by Barr and Hitt (1986) and Singer and Bruhns (1991). This may be due to the momentum of the paradigm they carry about the definition of success in connection with academic achievement in order to distinguish themselves from others (Lindley and Machin, 2012) when they were students.

In short, based on Ecclestone (2007) theoretical framework, it was found that, with reference to identity, they advocate competence, work performance and job promotions to prove themselves. They like to present themselves as recognised and qualified professionals. In terms of agency, they are keen on improving their knowledge, skills and qualifications to increase their capacity for autonomous and empowered actions such as job promotions or switches mediated by the internal and external changes in pursuit of salary and benefit advancement under their strong belief in earnings difference. Structurally, they realise they live in a competitive world that requires them



to make changes, and those changes allow them to have greater chances of better career prospects.

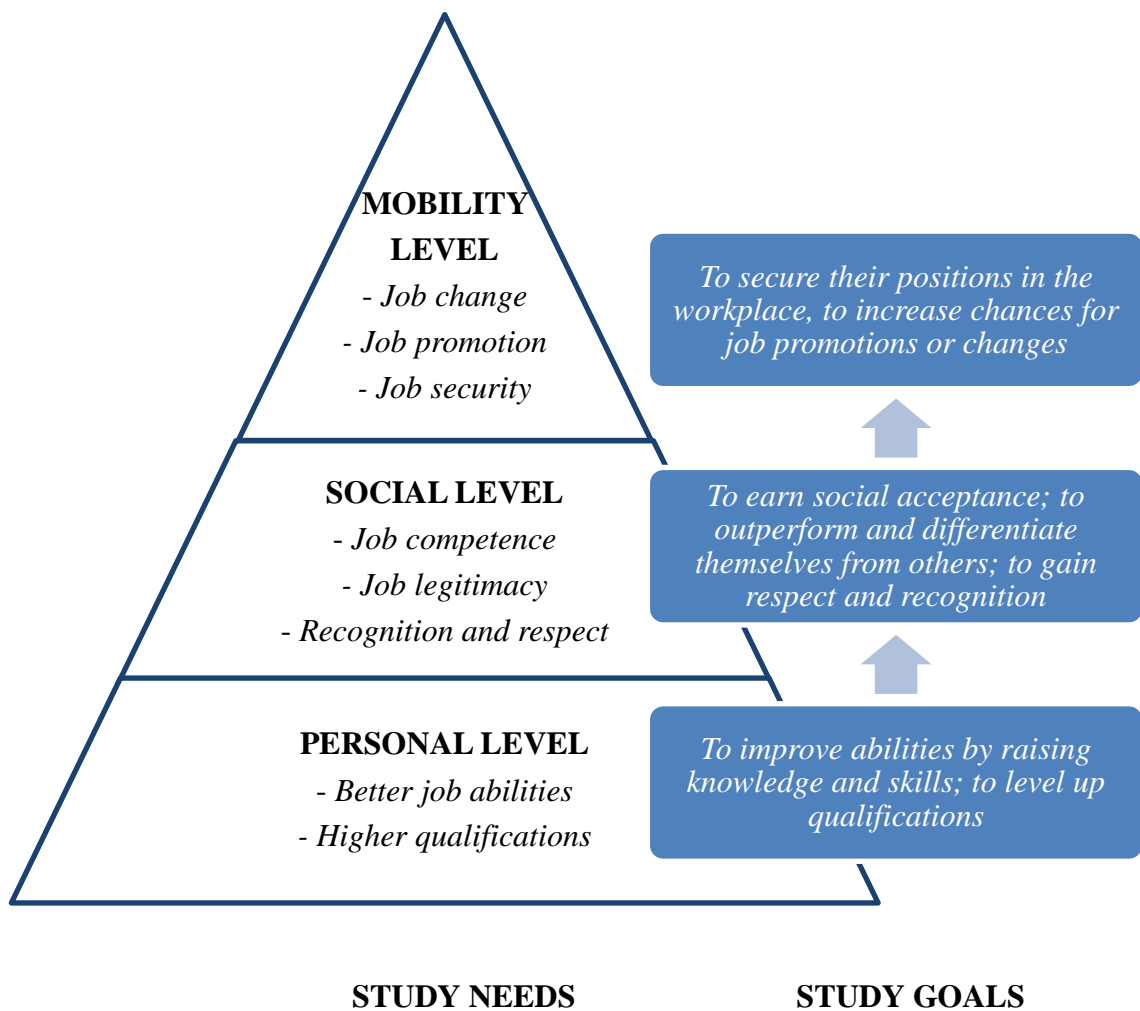
### 5.3. Why Go Back to School?

This world characterised by risk and uncertainty suggests the concept of a ‘liquid life’ – every social routine, relation and practice is fluid and open to change (Bauman, 2000). In this era, people face new challenges and experience frequent changes in the world, creating the very notion of ‘life-as-transition’ (Ecclestone, 2009: 13). Learning to be or not be in transition is therefore an everyday process. Furthermore, owing to risk and uncertainty, work is no longer once-for-all. In this regard, it is not difficult to understand why this generation advocates biographical learning, for it not only creates life meaning and generates personal identity (Alheit, 2005) but it is also more individual, private and easy to capitalise upon. The gains in human and social capital through investment in education therefore could be lifelong. Comparing with work, educational and self-actualisation biographies are better descriptions of life-courses (Evans and Furlong, 1997).

In terms of values and beliefs, all cases in this research reflected a pragmatic value in the form of better career chances, which emerged as a dominant value of master’s studies from the dataset. It is rather coincident with the aim of master’s education as extending the acquired knowledge of students to the labour market (Ginevičius and Ginevičienė, 2009), especially in top-tier jobs. For instance, some re-entered schooling for master’s studies for re-training since their bachelor studies could not provide sufficient support for their jobs, leading to a knowledge and skills gap, as predicted by Staff and Mortimer (2003). In this regard, a mismatched degree generates the need for master’s studies, and this is not uncommon in this generation; they are generally directionless – unable to develop any plans to realise the goals or undefined goals (Kwok, 2012) especially before the admission to their undergraduate programmes. It is also found that the pragmatic value relates to monetary rewards, as in the last decade they have seen their predecessors experience further upward earnings mobility with

master's degrees, even though they were already in the top tier of earnings. So, the strong belief that HE, including undergraduate and postgraduate education, can 'probably' make a difference in earnings is prevalent in HK despite students' disappointment with the function of education on career mobility. A master's education, as a vehicle for *investment*, opens an opportunity for them – the opportunists, to satisfy their needs, including climbing upwards. *Investment* means that one can gain or lose from the investment. The cost is the time, effort, money and so forth required for the master's degree.

Figure 8. Hierarchy of study needs and goals



The discussion outlines a fertile landscape for continuing education. Building a biography with pragmatic values and beliefs through improving one's qualifications is found to be the key motive for pursuing master's programmes. Informed by their deficiency as experienced in real settings, I categorise their study needs in three levels – *personal*, *social* and *mobility*. Needs at the lower levels are reached to satisfy the needs in the higher levels. For example, one needs qualifications (*personal*) to be respected to be a competent professional (*social*) in order to prove oneself as a suitable candidate for promotion (*mobility*). Coherently, their study goals are consistent with their study needs for job competence, social recognition, outperformance and the power to be more autonomous in occupational mobility, as illustrated in Figure 8. Moreover, the three levels (from bottom to top) correspond to the characteristics of Generation Y – self-improving, keen on being recognised, willing to prove themselves and proactive. In my model, needs at three levels may exist to be satisfied simultaneously. For example, one gains credentials from master's studies in order to be recognised by colleagues and to meet requirements or raise competitive edge for job promotion. This model appears to explain a basket of their motives for further studying behaviour in terms of culture, needs and goals.

Regarding motivation, I argue that master's studies are driven by a composite force of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Self-determination theory (SDT) states that humans are optimally motivated and experience well-being when their basic psychological innate needs (i.e. autonomy, competence and relatedness) are satisfied (Ryan and Deci, 2000b). Most of the respondents claimed that they were 'self-initiated' to engage in master's studies, while some identified their competitors, superiors, friends and mates as their motivators. However, the word 'self-initiated' is not equivalent to fully autonomous and psychologically free (ibid.), and it cannot be conceived of as intrinsic motivation. Based on expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), I found that obtaining the qualification rather than acquiring the knowledge and skills was the dominant motivating force towards master's studies. Under their pragmatic values and earning difference beliefs, they may passively act due to the impact of extrinsic incentives rather than because they really enjoyed it. Nevertheless, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are no longer viewed as antagonistic, and very often, the latter may enhance the former (Luyten and Lens, 1981). In this case, according to Vansteenkiste et al. (2006), when people identify the value of the pursuit of credentials and appreciate its importance, they

would engage in master's education quite volitionally. Identification characterised by an internal perceived locus of causality thus occurs. It could be regarded as a fuller form of internalisation. However, if one takes the master's course in pursuit of improved knowledge and skills, White (1959) suggests that such a need for competence underlines intrinsic motivation, as the student is experiencing a sense of competence and effectance in the studying process. Therefore, the locus of causality is hard to differentiate; it depends on whether one is chasing competence or qualification as well as degrees of relative autonomy.

To work on the very notion of 'competence' with clearer language, achievement goal theory (AGT) offers a dichotomous theoretical framework using intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Achievement goals are identified as mastery goal oriented or performance goal oriented. The former is characterised by developing one's ability through learning or task mastery to gain competence, whereas the latter implies demonstrating one's competence and superiority or achieving success with little effort (Elliot and Dweck, 2005; Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002; Xiang et al., 2003). Mastery goals are more often associated with intrinsic motivation, autonomy, effort and positive attitudes towards learning and well-being (Elliot, 1999; Jagacinski, 2000; Johnson and Sinatra, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2002). Performance goals, on the contrary, focus more on self-worth rather than the task to be learned (Linnenbrink and Pintrich, 2002), leading to negative outcomes such as extrinsically regulated motivation in that the extrinsic nature of evaluation is highlighted (Kristiansen et al., 2012). Therefore, if an individual pursues a master's degree to add value to his/her human capital through ability development by gaining knowledge and skills to cater to the needs in operational level, this mastery goal is often associated with intrinsic motivation. However, if his/her engagement in master's studies is to signal his/her competence (using credentials/qualifications) or to outperform others, this performance goal refers to extrinsically regulated motivation. In my findings, young HK graduate workers treasure credentials more than knowledge and skills and believe that the credentials they earn can bring them to their desired career destinations. Thus it can be concluded that majority of them go back to school due to extrinsic motivation.

In this section, I have explained why this generation is characterised by biographical learning. Informed by the literature and the research, we understand young

graduate workers' study needs and goals in the three-level hierarchy I have proposed. The suggested model reflects the characteristics of this generation. In terms of their motivation to re-enter school while full-time working, they are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, while their weightings depend on their relative autonomy and tendency to develop themselves by acquiring knowledge and skills or by demonstrating and signalling their competence to others. In this sense, the characteristics of the Generation Y suggest that they tend to be extrinsically motivated.

## 5.4. Studying and Post-Graduation Experiences

Participants' learning experiences were collected and assessed against their pre-set study goals. Some described their learning experiences as fruitful, but others did not. It is found that it depends on how much new and useful knowledge and skills they have gained in their master's study. Put differently, the perceived success of a master's programme is associated with how much value had been added to their human capital that they could, in turn, mobilise in the workplace. Likewise, through their use of language such as 'promotion' and 'job switching', respondents' post-graduation career experiences vary in terms of mobility. Some were satisfied with the mobility brought by their new degrees, whereas some were still upset with career stagnation or underemployment (see table 6).

What they experienced echoes what they want to achieve: upgrades in knowledge and skills and enlarged professional networks. Many reported that they benefited from the studies and thus regarded the master's programmes as useful and the experience as fruitful. Some complained of an unsatisfying volume of new useful knowledge and skills acquired from the master's programmes and consequently criticised them. Whether it is new or useful is relative and depends prior expertise as well as how much the exposure to 'new' knowledge and skills overlaps with the professional area in which they are or will be working. Thus, the title of the master's degree, the name of the programme and its specified curriculum matter, and participants should take them into consideration when making decisions. The educated decision minimises the risk of mismatched value being added to their human capital. If the knowledge and skills

acquired in the master's courses have been already learned, then the value vanishes; if the knowledge and skills are not useful at the moment, the value cannot be seen as zero but can be regarded as *locked*, meaning that the value cannot be used at the moment but may be used elsewhere in the future. For those graduates who feel upset with their learning experience, the value added to their human capital is either little or *locked*.

For simplicity's sake, their post-graduation experience was found to be three-fold. Those who got promotions within their companies attributed their success mainly to improved work performance. The implication is that their bosses already know their knowledge, skills, experience, personality and the degree to which they match with their jobs or prospective jobs. Their performance becomes the dominant *object of recognition*. *Object of recognition* is defined as the aspect of an individual from which people can obtain information to appreciate and respect. The second group comprises some graduates who could get better job offers from other companies and change jobs accordingly. The positions, salaries and nature of the work naturally should be superior to their previous ones; otherwise, incentive would be too little for them to move. These workers tend to attribute their successes to their new qualifications, which signal to prospective employers that they possess favourable personalities and personal qualities that would be useful. I also found that qualification including the title of the degrees and the brand name of the universities is a micro-political means of transmitting favourable information about one's personal qualities, capabilities, skilfulness, confidence, experiences and so forth to prospective employers during the recruitment process. As prospective bosses are unable to get sufficient information about the work performance of their candidates, they rely on credentials to differentiate them. In this sense, the *object of recognition* is the credential, which serves as symbolic social communication and political negotiation mediator.

Besides human capital and social capital, Schuller and Watson (2009) suggest identity capital, referring to the ability to maintain healthy self-esteem and a sense of meaning and purpose to form a framework in thinking about the value and purpose of further education, and argue that they work interdependently. Their argument highlights the importance of self-esteem in learning and applying that learning. In this study I also found that some respondents from these two groups possessed added value in their

identity capital. For instance, William (IT) was upset with his poor IT skills that he called a “burden” to his colleagues, but after the master course he felt he was more “knowledgeable” and were “more competent” in the workplace so he could “master more tasks assigned by his boss” leading to internal promotion. The change of his self-image from a “burden” to a “more knowledgeable and competent worker” before and after the master’s study reflects his increase in identity capital. Besides, Nick (IT) who also got internal promotion said that his master’s training enabled him to present his ideas to superiors and challenge others’ more confidently. The rise in their self-esteem in both cases is associated with improvement in work abilities. David (Engg) also got job promotion and he was very proud of his MBA degree in his workplace: “Because colleagues with MBA were rare around my company, so I was treasured in the company”. Besides, Dave (F&A) who could change job successfully was happy with his MBA degree that signalled his good abilities to the social world: “I felt that it was easier for me to find a job with the MBA... In the eyes of employers, hiring me is a value-adding decision...” David’s and Dave’s cases imply that self-esteem not only relates with work abilities but also qualifications. Therefore based on these data I argue that identity capital can be seen as a component of human capital and social capital and is embedded within them, as self-esteem is reflected in one’s abilities and vice versa, while qualifications bring respect and recognition.

The third group comprises those graduates who are upset with career stagnation or underemployment. If further training cannot increase one’s human capital, recognition from one’s company would be low. Even though some found that the master’s training could increase their human capital, the ‘increase’ would be useless if it could not be properly mobilised in the labour market. For instance, Paul (Others) took the Master in Finance programme to enable himself to change the field; however, due to the poor economic environment in his graduation year 2008, he decided to stay rather than to change: “I think this master programme would have been useful to help me change the field if such the poor financial environment did not exist... so now the programme is rather useless to me”. In this case the values added into his human capital and social capital, in my notion, are both *locked*.

In addition, if too many contestants in the labour market have master’s qualifications, credential inflation devaluates newly obtained credentials such that the

recipient would retain his/her original position or even be bumped down in the labour market and move into lower level occupations as a result of social congestion. This creates an opportunity trap. Susan (SW) is an example of this: “I found that actually people did not value my new qualification. I thought that people would value it, but unfortunately, I was wrong”. In this research, a mediator between social congestion and upward mobility among young HK graduate workers has been found. The literature tells us that “if everyone stands on tiptoe, nobody gets a better view...” (Mok and Wu, 2016: 91); in other words, credential inflation induces social congestion and limits career mobility. In this sense, should the credential gap be big, an increasing number of master’s graduates would find themselves over-educated. Nevertheless, I found that some participants denied being over-educated for their jobs. In terms of qualification requirements specified by their posts, almost all interviewees in my dataset are overqualified; however, with the emergent concept of credential requirements, more respondents claim that they are appropriately qualified than overqualified. This is because they explain credential gap through perception. They conceptualise the very notion of credential requirements on the basis of knowledge and skills required for the jobs and create a relative perception or judgement based on comparisons with the qualification held by their colleagues or prospective counterparts. The new definition of credential gap shifts from a standard reference to a collective one. Most people are happy to raise the hurdle by devaluating their credentials, which mediate the phenomenon of social congestion and stagnant mobility.

Many graduate workers experience uncertainty, including opportunity traps, in HK. It is inevitable and none can avoid it, unless one can escape from this (global) risk society. In some government posts or professionally licenced careers with clear qualifications required at each station, people face less ‘risks’ as the transitions along the road are more one-step and predictable, meaning that civil servants and people with professional licences are directed away from the risk society and are brought back to a “trajectory” or even “pathway” sphere (Evans and Furlong, 1997).

In terms of career mobility, it is not evident to see the increases in capitals and the way to mobilise them relate to gender and ethnicity. It is also an offence of law<sup>15</sup> in HK

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<sup>15</sup> <Sex Discrimination Ordinance>, <Family Status Discrimination Ordinance>, <Race Discrimination Ordinance>



if any employer, based on gender and ethnic considerations, does not offer equal opportunities to his/her employees upon promotion or to candidates during job recruitment. Besides, the data set offers a rather homogeneous careers landscape that participants with university degrees, generally in middle class, climbed up by making use of their self-financed added education rather than relying on cultural capital that refers to one's heritage through a reproduction process, that parents from society's dominant class imposes the salience of the dominant culture in the next generation. As a matter of fact, cultural capital relates to inter-generational mobility rather than intra-generational mobility this research focuses, as the process does not involve a worker's free will and self-interest in their lifespan (Bourdieu, 1989).

In a nutshell, master degrees represent a form of capital that has immediate or delayed activation under different conditions. Engagement in a master's education is an attempt to add value to one's human and social capital (that in turn increase one's identity capital as well). I have created the term *object of recognition* to identify the roots of career mobility. For those respondents who successfully mobilised their added capital to earn careers mobility after graduation, they generally relate internal job promotions and successful job switches with work performance and qualification upgrades respectively. The unfortunate case is that if the master's education cannot increase one's human capital or his/her capital increase is *locked*, and the corresponding market is heavily congested, he/she may suffer from the opportunity trap despite an upgrade of qualification (e.g. Paul). To escape from this system, one should consider licenced professional careers that offer relatively predictable trajectories for their participants.

In a society full of uncertainties and challenges, people in their liquid lives (Bauman, 2000) advocate biographical learning (Alheit and Dausien, 2000) and are keen on being responsible learners (Webb and Warren, 2009) who increase their human and social capital in their life-courses. It forms the content of a risk society (Beck, 1992) or a global risk society (Giddens and Beck, 2017) in which people ought to equip themselves with something with which to navigate the 'car journey' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). In the coming section, that 'something' is proposed in terms of capital theory (Lin, 2001). Within this model, the theory would be an extension of capital

theory in explaining how we can mobilise added human and social capital in the labour market.

## 5.5. Mechanisms to Earn Mobility

In this section, I suggest that metaphorically HK young graduate workers equip themselves with *human engines* and *social engines* from their master's courses in order to achieve career (sum of occupational and earnings) mobility. These two engines drive them along their career ladders. The metaphors originate from human capital and social capital and help us understand by analogy the mechanism of upward career mobility in HK.

Culturally and contextually, HK graduate workers favour showing their good abilities, thus they have a tendency to continuously improve themselves to satisfy their need for competence – a basic psychological need conceptualised by SDT as innate and essential to ongoing psychological growth, internalisation and well-being. This psychological growth is typically manifested through intrinsic motivation or engagement in activities that individuals find inherently interesting (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2000a). Besides, Howard (1986) shows that previous academic experience has a primary impact on an individual's cognitive abilities, motivation and general effectiveness. Therefore, an appropriate master's course can help participants increase their capabilities through *internal changes*, and good work performance will follow. In the workplace, workers experience challenges or potential challenges that are followed by a sense of deficiency. They set goals to develop their abilities through learning or task mastery in order to gain competence. The process reflects the mastery goal orientation associated with intrinsic motivation. Operationally, by adding value into their human capital, they mobilise it after their investment, leading to improvements in work performance. They gain career mobility with what I term the *human engine*. Their upward mobility usually exhibits itself in the form of internal job promotions.

Simultaneously, the *social engine* works to push them upwards. Under a strong belief in the high correlation between academic qualification and career success, these young adults can hardly stop advancing their education. They advocate biographical learning and are used to creating their own educational and self-actualisation biographies to produce their labour situations as their life-courses (Evans and Furlong, 1997). In my view, an educational investment in human capital differs from one in social capital in that the former suffers from the risks that no ‘new’ knowledge and skills will be learned or that what has been learned may disappoint participants for mismatched outcomes with what the workplace requires, referring to the cases in which education is of no value or *locked* value respectively. In contrast, all respondents claimed that they were quite certain they could graduate and obtain the credentials successfully. It helps to explain our finding that they actually look forward to obtaining credentials more than knowledge and skills from their master’s education. The signalling and screening hypothesis was confirmed by research relating to sheepskin effects (Habermalz, 2003) in different countries (e.g. Hungerford and Solon (1987) for the US; Bauer et al. (2005) for Japan; Xiu and Gunderson (2013) for developing countries such as Libya, Colombia, Guatemala and the Philippines). It reveals that education serves to signal both workers and employers in the labour market something about the worker’s characteristics associated with their innate productivity (Popov, 2014; Mohamad Yunus, 2017), implying *external changes*. On the one hand, workers signal their innate favourable abilities to prospective employers through credentials. In this research, it is further found that besides qualifications, the name of the university issuing the certificate as well as the name of the programme are signalling devices as a micro-political means for transmitting positive information including not only innate characteristics but also acquired personal qualities such as how knowledgeable, skilful, capable, proactive, ambitious and tough the applicant is during sorting and job interviews in the recruitment process. On the other hand, since employers lack the information to distinguish between productive and less productive workers in the labour market, qualifications can serve as a signal that can highlight workers of different quality. ‘Putting in a word’ (Lin, 2001) – looking at their given level of educational attainment and inferring their innate abilities and acquired qualities – becomes an informative and simple way in the sorting process. Moreover, master’s holders are believed to have more access to resources through social networks and relations. All such expectations associated with the matching qualification enhance opportunities for

switching jobs. Most respondents reported that even though their new employers had not yet appeared, they still believed that their new master's qualification could attract prospective employers' attention. Some even believe that their master's degrees will still work in signalling themselves to prospective employers as better candidates over their counterparts who do not have graduate degrees. Listening to their voices, we see that the signalling function of credentials is strong among the target group in HK.

Young HK graduate workers can be metaphorically viewed as twin-engine aircrafts. The mechanism of their career mobility through education can be thought of as consisting of two engines – the *human engine* and the *social engine*. The former pushes them upwards by increasing their competence, resulting in good work performance and leading to internal promotions. The latter uses credentials/qualifications as means for micro-political negotiation, drives them upwards by signalling good innate and acquired characteristics to prospective employers, who have less information on their work performance, so as to increase their career opportunities. If both *engines* operate, it maximises careers chances, but it still works if only one operates, such as when the *human engine* stops but the *social engine* works.

In this regard, my research findings bring the two well-known theories – human capital theory and signalling and screening theory together out of the long-lasting debate surrounding the economic role of education in earnings and mobility. They are both effective in explaining the process of advancing career mobility through master's education for young graduate workers in HK. Built upon them, my emergent *engine theory* is 'fuelled' to explain how graduate workers gain upward mobility from their added tertiary education.

## 5.6. Implications

This section offers practice-based implications to prospective master students and career practitioners based on the aforementioned discussion.

With a view towards being an upwardly mobile graduate worker through master's education, one should identify the knowledge, skills and credentials needed; find a matching master's programme and a good university; get the target knowledge and skills and meet more people; meet all the requirements of examiners to obtain the credential; and seek career-advancing opportunities.

Very often, career fields do not match with those of one's undergraduate studies especially in this generation characterised by directionless in careers planning (Kwok, 2012). Trista took an undergraduate degree in English but entered the accounting field after graduation, for instance. These circumstances are not uncommon in HK, especially for those who have worked towards non-career oriented degrees, such as English (e.g. Trista) and Maths (e.g. Paul). Even though one enters a professional field, he/she sometimes still wants to make a change. Mark's switch from a chemist to a registered nurse is an example. In either case, individuals need new knowledge and skills to convert from one field to another. Besides re-training, some prospective learners need advanced knowledge and skills to perform managerial or more complicated work within their field due to societal changes or company production evolutions. Responsible learners first have to identify the knowledge and skills needed for catering these changes. This echoes the aim of master's education as a transfer and extension of the acquired knowledge to prepare students for the labour market (Ginevičius and Ginevičiene, 2009), so it can be viewed as "the next stage of economic and social selection after the first degree" (Duke, 1997: 87). Such knowledge and skills are not only what to be equipped but also what to signal. Aspiring master's participants are advised to carefully select what knowledge and skills they will be equipping themselves with in order to signal what they possess after graduation. It is essential to prevent the added value in human capital and/or social capital from being *locked*. Mavis (Logt)'s case is an illustrative example for this: she selected an MBA rather than a master's in supply chain management with a view to signalling that her acquired abilities from the master education matched with the positions she aspired:

*Actually I could participate in a master's in supply chain management, but I thought that what I would learn would not benefit me for a long time, ... maybe ... very soon I would think a new deficiency would come*

*up, so I want to take the MBA to learn more. In the supply chain management courses, I would learn how to make optimal shipments or operations; but in the MBA, I would learn more about analysing data to make decisions, which is more advanced and can last long.*

Furthermore, the need for professional recognition, if any, should be identified as well. Some professional positions only require a recognised licence. So, the link between professional recognition upon graduation and licences should be highlighted.

Having identified their intended knowledge and skills, an individual can start searching for a right master's programme in a good university. Applicants are advised to peruse the specified curriculum, its objectives and its structure of delivery. They have to seek advice from graduates and discuss the decision with their bosses before making the decision to apply for and take the course. This procedure helps them make sure that the knowledge and skills match with what they will need in the workplace. Put differently, it prevents the value added to their human capital from vanishing or being *locked*. Besides, the name of the master's degree and the university and even the names of modules to appear on their transcripts matter, as they serve as signalling devices to tell what they will become and what abilities they have. The selection of master programme to study can be thought of as being in some way analogous to shopping: a smart consumer shops and selects the best clothing to represent himself or herself. Regarding the qualification, if one aims at licenced jobs, it is important to check if the qualification upon graduation will lead to the target award, professional recognition or necessary licence.

During their studies, participants should endeavour to get the target knowledge and skills to increase their human capital for being mobilised one day. This includes broadening one's scope through participating in eye-opening courses and programmes. In this regard, they have to balance the depth and breadth of what is to be acquired. Besides, meeting people helps them widen their social and professional networks, which offer support, and a long-lasting network is mutually beneficial to its members.

While acquiring the target knowledge and skills and meeting new people, they should bear in mind they have to meet the requirements of all examiners to successfully earn the qualifications. The qualifications will signal current bosses and prospective employers that the graduate is more advantageous than those who are without a degree in terms of their innate abilities and acquired qualities. Respondents reported that it is not difficult, but anyone involved in it should be aware of and calculate whether their time and effort are able to meet the course requirements.

Upon graduation, individuals should be expected to install their *human* and *social engines*. They can seek career opportunities requiring matching knowledge, skills and qualifications with superior terms and benefits based on these. According to the findings of this research, it is the *human engines* that mostly drive them to higher positions within the company, and *social engines* mostly bring them to aspiring positions in other companies. If an individual is smart and capable, he/she can aim at internal promotions or a new job to be upwardly mobile using his/her twin *engines*. Among career opportunities that appear, the best can be chosen to maximise upward mobility, and this serves the optimal strategy. However, if he/she is a mediocre worker and his/her work performance has not been so outstanding, the master's course has failed to strengthen his/her *human engine* and it will probably result in stagnation, as superiors should have obtained sufficient information about his/her work performance related to productivity and potentially in sitting in a higher position. His/her credentials will become useless, as bosses are more concerned with productivity, as reported in this research. Therefore, seeking career opportunities in other companies becomes the only way out in order to climb upwards. Employers in other companies generally believe that education is correlated with productivity and screen workers according to their education level during hiring decisions and are willing to pay more for those with higher education levels. However, they are unable to have a complete picture concerning his/her productivity; they will tend to rely on credentials/qualifications to make any judgments. In other words, the *social engine* increases the chance to be shortlisted for job interviews. Certainly in most cases, one will be successfully hired only if he/she must behave well throughout the recruitment process in which his/her personal qualities that his/her credentials claim and signal are validated through aptitude tests, job interviews and so forth.

The above-mentioned ‘tips’ offer a whole strategy for graduate workers to climb upwards by making use of a master’s education. These tips are suggested based on strengthening and making use of our *human engines* and *social engines* during the process of further education from the moment the idea of study. Based on the theoretical framework informed by this research study, these ‘tips’ provide a holistic, practical strategy for young HK graduate workers to follow in order to increase their career opportunities and gain upward career mobility through master’s education.

In careers guidance, practitioners should gather information about job competence and credential gap of their prospective master students in workplace, and then identify their study needs and goals. After analysing the information collected, they are able to give professional advice on the strategies of constructing their biographies to enhance their early careers outcomes. The proposals should include the ways to fuel their *human engines* and *social engines* with well-identified aspiring knowledge, skills and qualifications appropriately and meanwhile to avoid obtaining rather mismatched study outcomes. Special attention should be paid to minimise the chance that their added values from education/re-training might be *locked* especially for those who have low-level job competence and/or limited careers chances in their companies. Careers practitioners should also remind prospective master students that added education can be viewed as a vehicle for *investment* in their human capital and social capital that sometimes has delayed activation of mobilisation under different conditions to gain upward mobility. It implies that in this risk society they should possess rational hope to seek appropriate workplaces to mobilise their earned capitals even though the worse situation disappoints them.



## 6. Conclusion

The role of HE as a direct vehicle of upward mobility has been a traditional Chinese faith in HK according to Confucian values; however, it has been facing a challenge. Despite the massification of HE, Legco (2015) alarmed HK people by describing a downward trend in career mobility in 2015 as HK degree holders aged 15–29 were increasingly driven to clerical and service/sales jobs from 2001–2011 (p.7). The declining role of education in upward mobility as well as the uncertainty in this risk society (Beck, 1992) or even global risk society (Giddens and Beck, 2017) set the context for this research. The very notion of career mobility is a multi-dimensional concept that is measured in terms of changes in earnings, education and occupation (Legco, 2015; OECD, 2010b), and in this research I look at how participants' master education benefits their career mobility.

Based on Trista and Bobby's stories that I have mentioned in the beginning, I am curious about: Why did they return to school and what were their 'strong' needs? What value has been added through their master's degrees and how could they achieve the mobility they wanted from the further education? These are the main research questions in this study.

The long-lasting debate over the causes of the positive correlation between schooling and earnings is represented by human capital theory as well as signalling and screening theory. Based on human capital theory, human capital is created by changes that bring about skills and capabilities that in turn improve productivity (Coleman, 1988) and result in higher earnings (Mincer and Polachek, 1974; Mohamad Yunus, 2017). Another view of the positive correlation between education and earnings is that to indicate the innate productivity of workers (Mohamad Yunus, 2017) employers are willing to pay more for those with higher education levels, as this suggests they have better intrinsic characteristics such as a strong work ethic and good performance (Weiss, 1995). Therefore, workers may use this correlation as a means to signal their abilities and productivity via their credentials. The signalling and screening theory has been confirmed by the huge amount of evidence (e.g. see Hungerford and Solon, 1987) on sheepskin effects (Habermalz, 2003) as well as my research data.

In my research, to learn why people returned to school while working and how they achieved career mobility from this, I see that an analysis of words rather than numbers is more appropriate to explain the 'role' and to understand the phenomenon. Thus, I used a qualitative inquiry approach designed under interpretivism as the philosophical framework grounded in the perspective of social constructivism as the ontological and epistemological position. In this research, I used theoretically informed methods to mine primary research data through interviews, developed key themes and generated theories through a hybrid of deductive and inductive approaches (Wallace, 1971) for the inquiry. I selected a group of people with first degrees working in various industries and explored the effect of their master's degrees on their mobility by examining their experiences. I followed the framework and advice on quality criteria Guba and Lincoln (1994) offer to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretation. In terms of ethics, I reported how I conducted this research in an appropriate manner in assuring and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

Central to the research is a three-part finding centred on understanding this generation, their needs and goals for a master's education and their post-graduation career experiences with mobility. First, by age group they fall into Generation Y (e.g. Howe and Strauss, 2003; Sutherland and Thompson, 2001) characterised by individualism (Twenge, 2006). They advocate biographical learning and are committed to creating their own educational and self-actualisation biographies to produce their labour situations. They are keen on rewards and recognition, goal-oriented, ambitious, optimistic, opportunistic, welcome competition; and endeavour to climb the social ladder by continuing their education (Howe and Strauss, 2003; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999; Kwok, 2012; Hui, 2010). In terms of the identity-agency-structure theoretical framework (Ecclestone, 2007), they pursue recognition as competent professionals. They are keen on improving their knowledge, skills and qualifications to increase their capacity for autonomy and career empowerment; and they make *internal* and *external changes* referring to increase/update their knowledge and skills as well as their academic or professional qualifications to bring themselves advantages when communicating with the social world respectively. They look for dual *changes* rather than enhancing their innate capacity, as the human capital theory proposes (Becker, 1962; Schultz, 1961). Despite the uncertainty of their expected returns, they possess

optimistic and opportunistic views that their investment in master's studies will bring them positive career opportunities mediated by the *internal* and *external changes* they create. Second, having assessed and validated their learning needs and validated them with their goals of studies, I have found that the results are coherent and the hierarchy of study needs (Figure 7) have emerged from the data. It summarises their learning needs at the *personal*, *social* and *mobility* levels for securing existing jobs, looking for promotions and changing jobs. The model, together with their beliefs, explains the incentives of going back to school, and it matches with their pre-set learning goals. With the help of motivation theories, it can be concluded that most of them engaged in master's education were due to extrinsic motivation. I have also found that young HK graduate workers actually treasure credentials more than knowledge and skills. Last, for those graduates who are frustrated with their experiences, the value added to their human capital and/or social capital is either little or *locked*, whereas for those who have successfully climbed upwards after graduation, either they have got an internal promotion or better job offers from other companies. It is found that they attribute promotions mainly to improvements in their work performance but attributed better job offers to their new qualifications. Most respondents report that no matter what attitudes their bosses have, they still believe that their new master's qualification is always an advantage in competing for desirable posts in the labour market.

Based on my findings, a new 'role' of education in career mobility has emerged. Young graduate workers in HK, as members of Generation Y, no longer view education as a direct vehicle of upward mobility (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2013); instead, they see it as a vehicle for *investment* in their human and social capital, representing immediate or delayed activation in exchange of superior opportunities to earn upward mobility under different conditions. With the belief that postgraduate education could make a difference in earnings, and that through this added training they could improve themselves by acquiring *internal* and *external changes* to increase their autonomy and empowerment, they were motivated (mostly extrinsically) to participate in it so as to satisfy their needs despite their disappointment with the function of education on career mobility. Being motivated, achieving, ambitious, optimistic and opportunistic, young HK graduate workers generate study needs and subsequent goals that are articulated in Figure 8, which outlines the landscape of responsible learners (Webb and Warren, 2009),

like Trista and Bobby, and the landscape of biographic learning (Alheit and Dausien, 2000) when negotiating uncertainty (Beck, 1992) in HK.

From listening to participants' lived stories, I bring to the academia enriched knowledge and theories in mobility mechanisms. I enriched mobility language in explaining career advancement from education by theming their language throughout the data analysis process. Guided by human capital theory and signalling and screening theory, I suggest *object of recognition* to identify the roots of different forms of careers advancement and the metaphors – *human engine* and *social engine* to explain the mechanisms of upward career mobility resulting from further education. Successful post-graduation experiences have been found to include either internal promotions or external job offers. As respondents tend to attribute their promotions to work performance and job changes to qualifications, it creates the concept of the *object of recognition* – the aspect of an individual that people can obtain information about to develop appreciate and respect. It acknowledges the effort of one's investment in their human and social capital to increase their work performance and qualifications respectively. An individual is said to gain upward mobility with the *human engine* if he/she exhibits an *internal change* through improved performance due to enhanced capabilities developed through a master's education, as based on human capital theory. This investment in human capital usually results in job promotion. Likewise, the *social engine* refers to the effort one has made in investing in his/her social capital by raising his/her qualifications through credentials as a signal of his/her innate and acquired abilities and qualities, such as agility and persistence, to improve his/her chances of job offers from other companies. The invention of this mobility language helps us understand one aspect of this social reality. My theory is an evolution from human capital theory and signalling and screening theory and thus can be viewed as their corollary.

My discussion ended with some practice-based tips for prospective master's students and careers practitioners based on my research findings. The former offers theoretically and practically informed strategies for young HK graduate workers to follow in order to increase their career opportunities and gain upward mobility through a master's education. The tips include how to strengthen and make use of their *human* and *social engines* throughout the process of obtaining their master's degrees. The latter

advises career practitioners to get prospective master students aware how to minimise the risk of their added values from the master education being *locked*. Career practitioners now have theoretical ground to encourage those master graduates who are suffering from disappointing career situations for the time being to always possess rational hopes as added education actually can be viewed as added capital that sometimes has delayed activation to gain upward mobility.

## Appendix I – Tables

Table 1. Number of graduates of UGC-funded programmes by level of study, 00/01 to 15/16

<b>Level of Study</b>	<b>00/01</b>	<b>01/02</b>	<b>02/03</b>	<b>03/04</b>	<b>04/05</b>	<b>05/06</b>	<b>06/07</b>	<b>07/08</b>
Sub-degree	8,944 (24.2%)	7,731 (21.1%)	6,032 (16.3%)	6,641 (17.3%)	6,979 (19.8%)	5,741 (17.9%)	5,372 (17.9%)	3,495 (12.2%)
Under-graduate	14,290 (38.6%)	14,433 (39.3%)	14,427 (39.0%)	14,914 (38.9%)	15,143 (43.0%)	15,719 (49.0%)	15,813 (52.8%)	15,934 (55.7%)
Post-graduate	6,870 (18.6%)	7,272 (19.8%)	8,249 (22.3%)	8,386 (21.9%)	6,534 (18.6%)	5,298 (16.5%)	4,377 (14.6%)	4,582 (16.0%)
-Taught	5,384	5,705	6,687	6,648	4,853	3,553	2,510	2,657
-Research	1,486	1,567	1,562	1,738	1,681	1,745	1,867	1,925
Total	36,974	36,708	36,957	38,327	35,190	32,056	29,939	28,593

<b>Level of Study</b>	<b>08/09</b>	<b>09/10</b>	<b>10/11</b>	<b>11/12</b>	<b>12/13</b>	<b>13/14</b>	<b>14/15</b>	<b>15/16</b>
Sub-degree	3,381 (11.8%)	3,182 (11.2%)	3,339 (11.4%)	3,252 (11.2%)	3,175 (10.7%)	3,252 (10.8%)	3,020 (9.7%)	3,071 (10.8%)
Under-graduate	16,478 (57.4%)	17,144 (60.4%)	17,599 (60.3%)	17,630 (60.7%)	17,908 (60.3%)	18,459 (61.4%)	19,602 (62.9%)	21,034 (73.9%)
Post-graduate	4,413 (15.4%)	4,024 (14.2%)	4,134 (14.2%)	4,089 (14.1%)	4,305 (14.5%)	4,184 (13.9%)	4,269 (13.7%)	4,368 (15.3%)
-Taught	2,459	2,093	2,083	1,978	2,234	1,992	1,960	2,054
-Research	1,954	1,931	2,051	2,111	2,071	2,192	2,309	2,314
Total	28,685	28,374	29,206	29,060	29,693	30,079	31,160	28,473

Source: UGC (2017)

**Table 2. Number of records by cohort and degree level (Hong Kong)**

	Sub-degree or below (but above secondary education)			First Degree			Postgraduate		
	Self-financing	Publicly-funded	Total	Self-financing	Publicly-funded	Total	Self-financing	Publicly-funded	Total
<b>2001/02 Cohort</b>	279	7 432	7 711	n/a	7 935	7 935	n/a	336	336
<b>2006/07 Cohort</b>	4 239	6 025	10 264	253	7 220	7 473	n/a	219	219
<b>2011/12 Cohort</b>	8 914	5 174	14 088	2366	6 426	8 792	n/a	131	131

Note: The student headcount were obtained by linking information on students receiving means-tested assistance for post-secondary students from the Student Finance Office with subsequent employer returns from the Inland Revenue Department.

Source: HKSAR (2016: A8)

**Table 3. Student enrolment of UGC-funded programmes by year**

Level of study	1998/99	2001/02	2005/06	2009/10	2012/13	2013/14
<b>Sub-degree</b>	14 848 (21.2%)	12 201 (17.8%)	9 070 (13.4%)	5 275 (7.6%)	5 457 (6.1%)	5 098 (5.6%)
<b>Undergraduate</b>	45 523 (65.0%)	46 148 (67.3%)	50 009 (73.9%)	55 514 (80.1%)	75 267 (83.7%)	77 199 (84.3%)
<b>Postgraduate</b>	9 669 (13.8%)	10 197 (14.9%)	8 636 (12.8%)	8 550 (12.3%)	9 199 (10.2%)	9 255 (10.1%)
<b>Total</b>	70 040 (100.0%)	68 546 (100.0%)	67 715 (100.0%)	69 340 (100.0%)	89 923 (100.0%)	91 553 (100.0%)

Note: Figures in brackets denote percentage shares of student enrolment of the level of study in total student enrolment.

Source: Census (2014: 5)

Table 4. Median Annual Starting Salaries by Cohort and Degree Level (in constant 2014 HK\$)

	Publicly-funded Sub-degree or below (a)	Publicly-funded Bachelor Degree (b)	Publicly-funded Postgraduate Degree (c)	(b) – (a)	(c) – (b)
<b>2001/02 Cohort</b>	\$114,083	\$154,167	\$276,385	\$40,084	\$122,218
<b>2006/07 Cohort</b>	\$115,877	\$199,085	\$299,785	\$83,208	\$100,700
<b>2011/12 Cohort</b>	\$114,208	\$174,003	\$174,003	\$59,795	\$123,301

Source: HKSAR (2016)

Table 5(a). Cohort earnings mobility table for publicly-funded 2001/02 first degree graduates

Income Decile	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14
<b>Top 10%</b>	2%	3%	4%	5%	8%	10%	12%	15%	18%	21%	25%
<b>9<sup>th</sup> 10%</b>	2%	2%	6%	12%	20%	30%	33%	<b>36%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>37%</b>
<b>8<sup>th</sup> 10%</b>	6%	14%	20%	27%	<b>29%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>26%</b>	23%	21%	19%	18%
<b>7<sup>th</sup> 10%</b>	8%	16%	<b>24%</b>	<b>27%</b>	23%	17%	14%	13%	11%	10%	9%
<b>6<sup>th</sup> 10%</b>	20%	<b>22%</b>	22%	14%	10%	7%	6%	5%	4%	4%	4%
<b>5<sup>th</sup> 10%</b>	<b>24%</b>	20%	11%	7%	4%	3%	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%
<b>4<sup>th</sup> 10%</b>	16%	9%	5%	3%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> 10%</b>	9%	5%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> 10%</b>	7%	5%	3%	2%	2%	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%
<b>Lowest 10%</b>	6%	3%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Table D4 (HKSAR, 2016)



Table 5(b). Cohort earnings mobility table for publicly-funded 2006/07 first degree graduates

Income Decile	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14
Top 10%	1%	2%	3%	5%	7%	10%
9 <sup>th</sup> 10%	4%	7%	16%	21%	25%	31%
8 <sup>th</sup> 10%	14%	19%	23%	26%	28%	24%
7 <sup>th</sup> 10%	19%	24%	24%	22%	18%	15%
6 <sup>th</sup> 10%	29%	23%	17%	13%	10%	9%
5 <sup>th</sup> 10%	15%	11%	8%	5%	5%	4%
4 <sup>th</sup> 10%	6%	5%	3%	2%	2%	2%
3 <sup>rd</sup> 10%	5%	3%	3%	2%	2%	1%
2 <sup>nd</sup> 10%	4%	4%	3%	2%	2%	2%
Lowest 10%	3%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Table G4 (HKSAR, 2016)

Table 5(c). Cohort earnings mobility table for publicly-funded 2001/02 postgraduates

Income Quantile	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14
Top 20%	4%	7%	11%	20%	53%	68%	75%	79%	81%	81%	80%
4 <sup>th</sup> 20%	67%	65%	68%	67%	35%	23%	17%	13%	13%	12%	13%
3 <sup>rd</sup> 20%	17%	18%	15%	10%	7%	4%	3%	4%	2%	1%	3%
2 <sup>nd</sup> 20%	9%	5%	5%	1%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Lowest 20%	3%	4%	1%	2%	2%	3%	2%	3%	2%	3%	2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Table D1 (HKSAR, 2016)

Table 5(d). Cohort earnings mobility table for publicly-funded 2006/07 postgraduates

Income Quantile	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14
Top 20%	30%	38%	49%	56%	59%	70%
4 <sup>th</sup> 20%	49%	46%	37%	33%	29%	19%
3 <sup>rd</sup> 20%	13%	11%	12%	6%	7%	5%
2 <sup>nd</sup> 20%	5%	4%	2%	2%	2%	3%
Lowest 20%	2%	2%	1%	2%	3%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Table G1 (HKSAR, 2016)

Table 6. Summary of post-graduation experience by individual

Name	Perceived job ability		Occupation mobility			Employers' attitude		Credential gap		
	Increase	Little change	Promotion	Change job	No job change	Positive	Rather indifferent	Over-qualified	Appropriately qualified	Under-qualified
Susan		✓			✓		✓	✓		
Peter	✓		✓			✓			✓	
Michael		✓		✓		✓			✓	
Dave	✓			✓		✓		✓		
John	✓			✓		✓		✓		
Candy		✓			✓		✓	✓		
William	✓		✓			✓			✓	
Nick	✓		✓			✓			✓	
Bobby		✓	✓				✓	✓		
Petra	✓		✓				✓		✓	
Sarah		✓			✓		✓	✓		
Mark	✓			✓			✓		✓	
Kenny		✓		✓		✓			✓	
Paul	✓				✓*	✓		✓		
Mavis	✓			✓		✓		✓		
Alan		✓		✓			✓		✓	
Judy		✓	✓				✓			
Trista		✓		✓			✓		✓	
David		✓	✓			✓			✓	
Steve		✓	✓				✓		✓	

\* Paul retained in his original position for a long time but finally was promoted around the moment of interview.

## Appendix II – Data collection and Analysis

### A. Profile of Interview Participants

No.	Name	Gender	First Degree	Master Degree	Work position before Master studies	Work position at the moment of interview
1	Judy	F	Science	MBA	Junior post	Manager of a medical technology company
2	Bobby	M	Computer Science	Technology Management	Senior solution specialist	Product manager of an I.T. and communication company
3	Trista	F	English	Professional Accountancy	Tax consultant	CPA tax manager
4	Peter	M	Pharmacy	Clinical Pharmacy	Pharmacist intern at a public hospital	Registered resident pharmacist at a public hospital
5	Susan	F	Social Work	Social Work	Assistant social work officer	Assistant social work officer
6	David	M	Mechanical Engineering	MBA	Assistant engineer in a telecom company	Senior engineer
7	William	M	Business Administration in Information System	Business Information System	Compliance officer	Compliance officer (Company upgraded)
8	Sarah	F	Chinese Language and Translation	Translation	Project coordinator	Project coordinator
9	Michael	M	Sociology	Social Work	HR officer	Registered Social worker
10	John	M	Architecture	Architecture	Architectural assistant	Architectural assistant
11	Petra	F	Computer Science	I.T. Management	Senior system engineer	Project manager
12	Paul	M	Mathematics	Finance	Senior operations executive	Operations manager

<b>13</b>	Candy	F	Social Work	Human Resources Management	Social work assistant	Social work assistant
<b>14</b>	Mavis	F	Business	MBA	Supervisor	Inventory control officer
<b>15</b>	Alan	M	Business	Risk Management	Business manager	Back Credit approver
<b>16</b>	Dave	M	Account and Finance(*)	MBA	Accountant assistant	Accountant officer
<b>17</b>	Mark	M	Chemical technology	Nursing	Chemist trainee	Registered nurse (RN) in a public hospital
<b>18</b>	Steve	M	System engineering	Computer Science	Analyst programmer	Senior associate
<b>19</b>	Kenny	M	Chemistry	M.Phil.	Chemist trainee in a private sector	Chemist in a government sector
<b>20</b>	Nick	M	Information engineering	M.Phil.	--- (#)	Senior associate

(\*) Dave did not have any Bachelor degree; but was admitted to a Master programme (Master of Account and Finance) in BUHK by his qualification of Certified Public Account (CPA) and professional membership of Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accounts (HKICPA).

(#) Nick(IT) pursued his study in M.Phil. in information engineering after obtaining his first degree in information engineering at XYZ University in 2002. Put differently, he did not have prior working experience before taking his Master studies. However, Nick(IT)'s data is useful to triangulate the validity of data from other respondents in our target group.

## B. Interview Guide

Title: An exploratory study on the role of master-level studies in the career mobility of young graduate workers in Hong Kong

Time: Around 45 minutes

### **Section A (General experience)**

1. Would you please to describe your work? What is your title now?
2. Where did you do your master's degree, and how long did you spend with your degree?
3. Regarding your master's programme, what was your general experience with it? Do you like it? Why?
4. What did you acquire and benefit from your master's course?

### **Section B (Personal needs)**

5. What is the major of your first degree?
6. In terms of your present schooling and qualification, do you feel you are overqualified, appropriately qualified, or underqualified for your current job? Why?
7. Before taking the master's course, relating to your job, what was your deficiency in performing your jobs well? Had you ever experienced it? What did you think of your deficiency in performing an advanced job or position that you aspired?
8. How could you improve yourself to make up for the deficiency? (*Why a course? Any other ways?*)
9. Why did you think the master's programme you engaged so important?

### **Section C (Values)**

10. What did you expect the course and the qualification to contribute to your career preparedness relating to the job world? How?
11. Were you sure the captioned would contribute to the well-beings of your careers?
12. Among those aspects you mentioned, which was the most important to you? (*Knowledge? Or other elements relating to professional development?*)
13. In a word, what was your expected return when you decided to pay the money for the course?

#### **Section D (Motivation to study)**

14. Who or what inspired you to apply for the master's programme?
15. What did you want to get from the programme? (*Hard and soft skills? Paper qualification?*)
16. How probable did you think you would succeed in getting them? (*Ten-point scale*)

#### **Section E (Post-graduation experiences)**

17. Did you feel you were more competent (*efficacy increased*) in your job after completing the programme? If yes, in what aspects? If no, why?
18. Did you realise any difference in work performance? What do you think the difference relating to the formal learning or informal learning?
19. For what you had identified to be deficient, did the course help you close the gap? To what extent you learned in master's study was more than you need to close the gap?
20. What was your experience when you brought your new qualification to the job market? What did you do? Did you apply for or change jobs? Were these efforts successful? Why or why not? Did the new post/job require a master's degree?
21. Did you think that your employer or potential employer(s) would value your abilities and new qualifications? Did he/she say or do anything to express his/her appreciation to your new qualifications?
22. Did your employers convey a new expectation of you after obtaining your new degree?
23. To what extent did the course help you advance your position and/or income in these years after graduation? How?
24. What do you think a promotion depends upon? Could your master's study give you so?
25. In what aspect did potential employers, as you think, value your master's degree?

#### **Section F (Returns)**

26. How did you expect your master's qualification to affect your career advancement?
27. In reality, was there any immediate economic return on or effect of the qualification? If yes, what were they? What if you had not studied for your master's degree? If no, what do you think the reason(s)?
28. To what extent do you expect the master's course to help you advance your position and/or income in future (i.e. more mobile), say in another five years? How?

*Remark: Italic – prompt whenever necessary*

### C. A sample of interview transcript

Date: 26 Oct 2016

Time: 18:15 – 19:00 (HK Time)

Interviewee: David

Background information: David, aged around 32, was employed as an assistant engineer in IJK Telecom Company – a Telecom and Communication company after obtaining his first degree in Mechanical Engineering. He pursued his study in MBA and now he is a senior engineer in the same firm.

Transcription of the interview dialogue:

I	Would you please to describe your work? What is your title now?
D	<i>I am responsible for technical support of the internet service provided by my company. In case clients cannot access to internet, my team will be the one who fix the problem. I am also responsible to upgrade the routers regularly in order to ensure we can provide a secure and stable network for HK people. I am currently a senior engineer.</i>
I	Where did you do your master's degree, and how long did you spend with your degree?
D	<i>MBA degree at the JKL University in 2 years' part-time mode from 2010-2012.</i>
I	Regarding your master's programme, what was your general experience with it?
D	<i>The benefit was under my expectation. But I could learn how to manage people. People management is important as my team consists of 16 teammates with different personalities. Through the course I understood how to manage different people.</i>
I	Besides people management skills, what did you acquire from the course?
D	<i>As that MBA programme was too general rather than specific, I think that apart from people management skills, I found that other learning could not help me much.</i>
I	Do you like it? Why?
D	<i>Fair. Because I formerly expected that the programme would have covered more and deeper than that; the programme was not specific and deep so I could not take too much from that.</i>
I	What is the major of your first degree?

D	<i>Mechanical Engineering.</i>
I	In terms of your present schooling and qualification, do you feel you are overqualified, appropriately qualified, or underqualified for your current job? Why?
D	<i>Adequately qualified. My work requires strong technical skills. I am relatively weak in it, but the management skills I acquired from the master's programme can compensate for it.</i>
I	Before doing your master, can you describe your job?
D	<i>I worked in the same firm with a position title – assistant engineer. What I was doing was only a part of what I am doing here and now.</i>
I	Before taking the master's course, relating to your job, what was your deficiency in performing your jobs well? Had you ever experienced it? What did you think of your deficiency in performing an advanced job or position that you aspired?
D	<i>I experienced deficiency in communication with my colleagues. I was also deficient in technical skills. For promotion, I thought that my weakness in technical skills was a barrier.</i>
I	How could you improve yourself to make up for the deficiency?
D	<i>Be humble to ask seniors.</i>
I	Why did you think the master's programme you engaged so important?
D	<i>I wanted to manage people upon promotion, so I needed to be equipped with this knowledge as soon as possible. Besides, there were a few colleagues who had already had an MBA, so I thought that having such a degree was definitely an advantage. My engagement in the MBA programme was actually for the purpose of promotion.</i>
I	What did you expect the course and the qualification to contribute to your career preparedness relating to the job world? How?
D	<i>I expected my boss would value and treasure me more because of the degree so that I would have a brighter career prospect. And I could learn more through the programme to improve my work performance.</i>
I	Were you sure the captioned would contribute to the well-beings of your careers?
D	<i>Not sure. But at that moment, I believed that in this world only a bachelor degree was not enough, what I needed should be a master degree, which was an 'admission ticket' to a promotion consideration. Therefore I did not choose other programmes relating to technical knowledge, but I chose the MBA to learn how to manage people as a requirement for promotion.</i>
I	Among the technical skills and soft skills you mentioned, which was the most



	important to you?
D	<i>Both. But my boss understood that I was weak in technical skills, and could be compensated by improving management skills.</i>
I	In a word, what was your expected return when you had decided to pay the money for the course?
D	<i>Fast to be promoted. Enjoy a considerable increase of salary.</i>
I	Who or what inspired you to apply for the master's programme?
D	<i>No. Self-initiated to advance qualification.</i>
I	What did you want to get from the programme?
D	<i>Number one I wanted to get was the certificate. Number two was some soft skills.</i>
I	How probable did you think you would succeed in getting them?
D	<i>Definitely for the certificate, and 70% for the soft skills.</i>
I	Did you feel you were more competent ( <i>efficacy increased</i> ) in your job after completing the programme? If yes, in what aspects? If no, why?
D	<i>Some improvement in personnel management; but others ..... same as before. No help.</i>
I	Did you realise any difference in work performance? Can you tell me some scenario?
D	<i>Different people require different needs to satisfy, e.g. recognition, encouragement, respect, monetary reward etc. Before the master's programme, I was not aware of this, but after that, I realised that I had to motivate them with different strategies.</i>
I	For those knowledge and skills you had identified to be deficient, did the course help you fill the gap?
D	<i>A little bit, but not very helpful in closing the gap.</i>
I	What was your experience when you brought your new qualification to the job market? What did you do? Did you apply for or change jobs? Were these efforts successful? If successful, do you think if it attributed to your new degree?
D	<i>I did not apply for the new job. I got an internal promotion every two years, namely 2012, 2014 and 2016. But I want to emphasise that these did not relate to my MBA qualification but solely on my work performance.</i>
I	Did you think that your employer or potential employer(s) would value your abilities and new qualifications?

D	<i>It helped a little for internal promotion but definitely an advantage for switching to other posts in other companies.</i>
I	Did he/she say or do anything to express his/her appreciation to your new qualification?
D	<i>My boss at that moment didn't say or do anything to appreciate my new qualification, but my new boss (2012-13) in the same company did.</i>
I	Did your employers convey a new expectation of you after obtaining your new degree?
D	<i>My new boss understood that my technical skills were not strong but as I possessed an MBA, he expected me to manage the team well and I could show him my ability.</i>
I	To what extent did the course help you advance your position and/or income in these years after graduation? How?
D	<i>Half and half. Because colleagues with MBA were rare around my company, so I was treasured in the company.</i>
I	What do you think a promotion depends upon?
D	<i>Frankly speaking, promotion depends on one's relationship with the boss, and also technical skills and leadership.</i>
I	Do you think if your master's programme could give you so?
D	<i>Yes, in the aspect of management skills. I learned some soft skills from the programme that helped me manage my team better than my predecessor.</i>
I	Did you think your potential employers would value your Master degree?
D	<i>Yes.</i>
I	How did you expect your master's qualification to affect your career advancement?
D	<i>Yes. I expected promotion into management after obtaining my master's qualification.</i>
I	In reality, was there any immediate economic return on or effect of the qualification? If yes, what were they?
D	<i>No, there wasn't any an immediate economic return or effect of my qualification. It required time for me to showcase my performance for promotion.</i>
I	What if you had not studied for your master's degree? If no, what do you think the reason(s)?

D	<i>I think I still could have been promoted but not as fast as I did with the degree. I was not strong in technical skills; if I had not shown my strength in management, my boss would have ignored me.</i>
I	To what extent do you expect the master's course to help you advance your position and/or income in future (i.e. more mobile), say in another five years? How?
D	<i>Declining effect or no effect at all. If I want to climb up through studying, I think I should take an EMBA or a doctoral degree.</i>

I: Interviewer

D: David

## D. Memos

Nodes	Descriptions	Memos
A. Learning experience		When interviewees were asked their learning experiences in the Master studies, data of their lived experienced were to be retrieved. It contained general experiences which was open to answer. Feedback was to be classified to be fruitful and fruitless. Most reported their experiences were fruitful. To measure how fruitful it was, I explored what they acquired from the Master courses, and I found that the benefits could be grouped thematically into 5 themes, i.e. exposure, new knowledge and technical skills, qualification, self-awareness and personal development, social network, and soft skills.
A1. General Experience	What is the general experience with the Master programme? Do you like it? Why?	General experiences of the Master studies are found to be classified simply as fruitful or fruitless. Fruitful experiences are those learning experiences that could later be found to be useful for works. Fruitless experiences are those learning experiences that could not be transformed into any increase in working capabilities. Whether the interviewees liked or disliked, enjoyed or felt busy with the programme is not a matter of concern here.
Fruitful	= Useful	Many interviewees reported that they liked the Master programme as the study provided them new knowledge, necessary skills (hard and soft) for current jobs and aspiring careers, and qualification recognised by the social world to switch the job or get promotion. Besides, the studies were eye-openers widening their exposure and through learning they could meet new friends and understand more about themselves.
Fruitless	= Not very useful	Some interviewees reported that the Master learning was not so fruitful as expected because the curricula were not specific enough but too broad and general where only a small portion of it could be useful. Some criticised that the knowledge offered by the school was either known before or lagged behind what's happening in the real world. Some were disappointed with the programmes because the content was mismatched with their working areas.
A2. Benefits of study	What have you acquired from the course?	Interviewees reported that main benefits of studies were (1) they could learn and upgrade their existing knowledge and skills so that they could be more adaptable to work especially for those with first degree not very much relating to the area they were working; (2) they acquired some soft skills which could be transferrable to their workplace; (3) they could gain necessary qualification recognised by the social world to get themselves move forward across thresholds of their professions or to get promotion; (4) they could widen their scope of view through learning and seeing something new, visits and exchanges; (5) they met new people ,of those some continued to keep contact, and their enlarged social networks help them work smarter in a certain extent;

		and (6) they understood more about themselves including ethical issues and personal styles for personal development.
Exposure		They found that the programmes were eye-openers through the studies they could widen their scope of view and broaden their perspective of thought through learning and seeing something new such as operations in other departments, visits and exchanges. Such experiences enriched their understanding about the others especially beneficial to outreaching jobs such as marketing representatives.
New knowledge and technical skills		To be more professional, they found that they could refresh, upgrade their existing knowledge and learn new specific knowledge and up-to-date technical skills so that they could be more adaptable to work especially for those with first degree not very much relating to the area they were working and those who want to go deeper in sub-fields or promote to a high-ranking post, or switch to work in other fields.
Qualification		Interviewees found that one of the great benefit of the studies was the qualification. Via a certificate they would be recognised by the social world in order to move forward across thresholds of their professions (i.e. to be registered) to be a beginner professional or to climb up along a social ladder (i.e. get promotion) by a good presentation in personal portfolio or CV.
Self-awareness and personal development		Interviewees reported that they understood more through reflection about themselves in careers ethics and personal styles for personal and career development.
Social network		One way of making up their deficiencies is to seek advice from their social network. Here, the social network excludes those in the workplace because interaction among colleagues should be counted in on-job training under the umbrella of 'learning by doing'.
Soft skills		Interviewees found that some soft skills acquired such as people skills, communication, presentation, collaboration, thinking and analytical skills as well as problem-solving skills, were useful when transferred to workplace.
B. Study needs		To identify study needs, interviewees were asked their deficiencies in performing the jobs just before the Master studies and anticipated deficiencies in performing advanced jobs they aspired. I also want to explore the spectrum of significance of studies they hold. Understanding their alternative way-outs to make up the deficiencies other than formal Master study is important as this can echo and triangulate how significant the Master studies they engaged was.
B1. Deficiency (the job before Master study)	Before taking the Master course, relating to your job, what was your deficiency in performing your jobs well? Had you ever experienced it?	Interviewees reported that before the Master studies they found themselves deficient in necessary professional knowledge and skills to perform their jobs well. One of the reasons was that they were ill-equipped in Bachelor level, another reason was that they entered the fields of work which were irrelevant to their training in Bachelor level especially when their first degrees were not career-oriented.
B2. Deficiency (aspiring job)	What did you think your deficiency in performing an advancing job or position that you aspired?	Interviewees reported that they commonly lack experience, professional knowledge and technical knowledge, qualification to be recognised, and some soft skills especially management skills for their aspiring higher ranking posts.
Experience		Some interviewees expressed one of their deficiencies is lacking of experience to help them move further along their career ladder.
Professional knowledge and technical skills		Relatively more interviewees regarded seniors should possess rich professional knowledge as well as technical skills and know-how of which they were lacking.
Qualification		Interviewees voiced out that in order to enter to a professional circle they must obtain certain qualification. Without a recognised qualification they would be under-paid even though they were employed. In their views, qualification is for comparison too; people with higher qualification were easily to be recognised.
Soft skills		Some interviewees said that they lacked some soft skills especially management skills for promotion. Besides, they lacked multi-perspective of thought as well to be seniors.
B3. Other ways to make up deficiency	How could you improve yourself to make up the deficiency?	Other ways to make up deficiencies included (1) learning by doing in the workplace; (2) self-reading and studying; (3) attending short courses or workshops provided by the employers or other institutes; and (4) seeking support from their social (professional) network.
Learning by doing		Doing by learning is an informal learning occurring in the workplace (i.e. on-job training). It was found that it included observations from colleagues, seeking advice from superiors, mentors, colleagues, learning through normal meetings, and attempting job challenges that require different unfamiliar skills, such as organising different functions. On-job training accumulates working experiences.
Self-reading and -		People engaged in self-reading and -studying for self-improvement in job

studying		efficacy and preparation for their aspiring jobs. It included reading books, magazines, manuals and web-surfing.
Short courses or workshops		Some interviewees attended short courses or workshops in the form either trainings directly relating to their jobs or extended enrichment.
Social network		One way of making up their deficiencies is to seek advice from their social network. Here, the social network excludes those in the workplace because interaction among colleagues should be counted in on-job training under the umbrella of 'learning by doing'.
B4. Significance of study	Why did you think the Master programme you engaged so important?	I found that the significance of their studies involved several aspects: (1) they wanted to flourish their personal portfolios through qualification, name of the university, and name of the Master degree for securing current jobs, internal promotion and job switching; (2) they studied with a view to fulfilling certain criteria of qualification to obtain professional licences of working; (3) they treasured knowledge and skills for handling existing works, related works, and more specialised works; (4) they wanted to obtain updated market information; and (5) they learn for self-fulfilment and personal growth.
Flourish of personal portfolio		Some interviewees considered the significance of studies a way to flourish their personal portfolios so that they could well-present themselves in better personal packages by qualification, name of university, and name of the Master degree. The purpose is to be recognised by others in a competitive world in order to increase chances for promotion and finding better jobs; at least, to secure the present job posts.
Internal promotion		The arena is the workplace. Interviewees reported that the upgrading personal presentation was for increasing competitive edge over colleagues. As a result, chances for promotion would be increased.
Job switching		Some interviewees reported that their intension were to change the jobs. To achieve this, they must upgrade their qualification shown in personal CV, in order to convince people that they were competent to do certain jobs and increase the chance for being short-listed to job-interviews; or get more freelance jobs.
Securing jobs		A good personal package and presentation, as reported, was a survival strategy of securing current jobs, especially in the workplace where many colleagues had possessed Master qualifications.
Fulfilling qualification requirements		One of the significance of studies is to fulfilling certain criteria of qualification to obtain professional licences of works. Common careers are registered nurse, social workers, architects and pharmacists.
Learning new knowledge		Some interviewees showed that they treasured professional knowledge for handling existing works, related works, and more specialised works in competency.
Market information update		A few of interviewees regarded studies a channel of updating market trend.
Self-fulfilment		It was found that some of them learned for self-fulfilment to satisfy their interests and curiosity, and personal growth to prevent from stagnating.
Upgrading skills		One of the significance of studies found is upgrading skills, both hard and soft, to increase working competence and/or to equip themselves some skills for jobs in higher ranks ahead.
C. Belief and value		It was found that interviewees commonly believed that engagement in Master studies could make a change in external looking and presentation and/or internal growth resulting in increasing careers chances. The values of studies could be altruistic and personal. For the latter, most of them considered Master studies pragmatic for better careers opportunities; few of them for personal pleasure.
C1. Study and career belief	What did you expect the course and the qualification contribute to your better preparedness relating to the job world? How? Were you sure the captioned would contribute to the well-beings of your careers?	It was found that interviewees advocated two beliefs in the relations between studies and careers: they wished their studies would bring them changes in personal quality (i.e. internal) and personal presentation towards others (i.e. external). Internal changes are for raising job performance while external changes bring them more job opportunities.
Confidence in making a change		Some interviewees said that they were confident that the Master studies and qualification could contribute to them better preparedness, but some are not; however, even though some were not confident on the effectiveness of the positive outcomes bought by the Master degree they still made up their mind to engage in the studies because (1) there would be no harms; (2) owing to observations and subjective feelings they found that people possessing Master degrees would be more advantageous than those who were without.
External changes		It was found that interviewees expected changes in looking and believed that

for careers opportunities		such external changes would result in better job opportunities. Such changes occur in appearance and academic title reflected in CV. The former refers to how impressive they are when expressing themselves in meeting people; the latter refers to political status well-recognised by the social world.
Appearance		Here, appearance refers to the self-expression when meeting people in face-to-face mode. Interviewees expected that they could show and express themselves in a more knowledgeable and skillful manner when meeting people; thus improve social image and become more convincing that they could be more professionally competent in the posts through studying and re-training.
Title and CV		Some interviewees expected level-up of their qualification so that they could meet a certain criteria set by the society to be recognised as a professional in certain ranks. Interviewees used 'qualification' reflected in title shown in CV to communicate with the world that they were competent to do something and proactive in character. One of the pragmatic outcomes is to increase chances for job interviews.
Internal changes for performance		Most interviewees expected changes in their knowledge both in range and depth, or up-levelling in their skills, for the purposes of better job performance, and preparation for aspiring jobs or job switching.
C2. Value of study	Among those aspects you mentioned, which was the most important to you? (Knowledge? Or other elements related to professional development?) In a word, what was your expected return when you had decided to pay the money for the course?	It was found that their values of study could be altruistic or personal. Personal value refers to personal pleasure or pragmatic for better career opportunities.
Altruistic		One of the values of studies, though not many, was to build relation between self and the world.
Pleasure		One of the value of studies, though not many, was for self-fulfilment.
Pragmatic		Most interviewees possessed pragmatic value of studies. To seek current and potential employers' attention for promotion and new job opportunities in a competitive job world respectively, they acted in order to improve work performance and/or flourish personal portfolio by matching qualifications. They invested in re-training programmes to increase careers opportunities. Besides ambitious purposes, some took Master studies to earn job eligibility, e.g. licences, or secure their jobs.
Flourish personal portfolio		Some interviewees saw qualification the most significant in the Master study. It reveals that one value of study is to be recognised through flourished personal portfolio.
Improve work performance		Some interviewees saw study a means to improve their work performance through upgrading professional knowledge and skills.
Internal promotion		One of the pragmatic values of Master studies interviewees possessed is internal promotion. It comes from Herd behaviour in their workplaces or they were keen on outperforming themselves from others to increase chances for fast promotions.
Job eligibility		One of the values of interviewees towards Master studies is the qualification leading to job eligibility. Common examples are licences for registered nurse, social workers, architects and pharmacists. Others wanted to prove themselves eligible for carrying out certain tasks or at least to present themselves as more convincing and competent professionals.
Re-training		Some interviewees saw Master studies as re-training so that they could equip different or even more specialised skills to (1) seek other jobs in different fields; (2) go into more specialised branches of their professions; and (3) go up to fit managerial posts.
D. Motivation and goals		It was found that interviewees went back to school mostly due to reasons relating to careers. Motivators are competitors, superiors, friends and mates; besides, the goals of studies were mainly to become more competent in work performance in terms of knowledge and skills, to up-level themselves in academic qualification and to be shown in personal portfolio, and to enlarge their professional network. They were all certain that they would get the qualification but not sure the others from the Master studies.
D1. Social motivation	Is there anybody who has inspired you to apply for the Master programme? (If no, what has triggered you to do so?)	It was found that motivation for studying was either (1) to fulfil professional requirement; or (2) to out-perform themselves from competitors in or outside their workplaces. Superiors, friends, competitors and social norm inspired them to do the Master.

Competitors		Some interviewees were motivated to study because of their competitors in or outside their workplaces. Their investment in studies was to increase competitive edge over the others.
Friends and mates		Some interviewees took the course because of the advice from their friends and mates.
Self-initiated		Although some interviewees claimed that they were self-initiated, I wonder if their hidden motivation was solely intrinsic. It needs some investigations in case studies.
Social norm		Some interviewees took the Master studies with a view to satisfying certain social norms. They are either some job qualification requirement in black and white, or some commonly accepted practices in their professions or in social world.
Superiors		Some interviewees said that they were cued to take the studies by their superiors in appraisal interviews.
D2. Study goals	What did you want to get from the programme? (Hard and soft skills? Paper qualification?)	It was found that interviewees commonly took the Master studies with the goals of raising their work performance, levelling-up their qualification, and enlarging their professional network.
Professional network		It was found that a goal of study was to meet more useful friends thus to enlarge professional network.
Qualification		It was found that a goal of study was to earn the certificate for licence or flourishing personal portfolios.
Work performance		It was found that some interviewees took the Master studies with a view to improving their work performance through raising range and depth of knowledge, as well as technical and soft skills.
Knowledge		It was found that knowledge pursuit included professional knowledge - range and depth, technical know-how, professional conduct, update knowledge of market trend.
Skills		It was found that they wanted to acquire both technical and soft skills from the Master programme.
D3. Degree of certainty to achieve	How probable did you think you would succeed in getting them? (Ten-point scale)	It was found that all interviewees were sure to get the qualification, but not certain (still >50%) to enlarge professional network, and get knowledge and skills.
E. Post-graduated experience		It was found that interviewees' post-graduated experience varied. Some were still upset with their career stagnation and under-employment situation whereas some satisfied with the mobility bought by the new degree. For those who successfully climbed upward, they either got internal promotion or better job offers from other companies. For the former it was found that they attributed the successes mainly to improvement in work performance whereas for the latter they attributed to qualification. Some reported that even though their new employers had not yet appear, they still believed that their new Master qualification could still work for attracting potential employers' attention.
E1. Change in job performance	Did you feel you were more competent (efficacy increased) to perform your job after completing the programme? If yes, in what aspects? If no, why? Did you realise any difference in work performance? What do you think the difference relating to the formal learning or informal learning?	It was found that not most interviewees reported significant performance change before and after the Master studies.
Distinguishable change		Some interviewees reported that they were more confident than before in working competence. Such increase in competence could be explained by knowledge and skills increase, and stronger support from professional network developed during Master studies.
More confident in competency		Some interviewees were found to be more confident in their competence in performing their works.
More knowledgeable or skillful		It was found that such competence increase came from improvement in knowledge and skills - both hard and soft.
More support from professional		It was found that their performance change from experience sharing inside their professional network established or enlarged during Master studies.



network		
Little change		Some interviewees reported that they could hardly identify any significant change in work performance due to the courses. A reason for this was the irrelevance of the course content with jobs. Some of them said that even though there were changes, those changes were come from accumulation of working experiences or other sources but not the courses.
E2. Ability to close the gap	For those knowledge and skills you had identified to be deficient, did the course help you close the gap? To what extent you learned in Master study is more than you need to close the gap?	The ability of the Master course to close the deficiency gap was found to vary in a wide spectrum. Some reported that the course actually was impotent to help them close the gap; but some said the contrary.
Strong ability		Some interviewees reported that the ability of the Master programme to close the gap was rather strong; it included knowledge, exposure, and skills.
Weak ability		It was found that some programmes were rather impotent to close the gaps. It was mainly due to problems in the curriculum - too wide, not specific, or mismatched with the job nature.
E3. Experience after graduation	What was your experience when you brought your new qualification to the job market? What have you done? Have you applied or changed your job? Success or failure? What do you think the reason?	It was found that experience of interviewees after Master graduation varied. It included (1) getting desirable job offers in other industries, some of those successfully registered for professional jobs; (2) getting promoted; and (3) unfortunately no changes.
Entitlement to professional posts		It was found that with the qualification, they could entitle to desirable jobs requiring licences, either starting posts or higher ranked posts.
Internal promotion		Some interviewees experienced internal promotions or became candidates for higher posts. They all said that this was not due to the qualification but work performance and experience.
No changes		Some interviewees experienced no changes after graduation. Reasons for this as found are: (1) no offers; (2) offers were not attractive enough; (3) stability; and (4) internal promotion might come.
Receive desirable job offers		It was found that all interviewees getting desirable new job offers claimed that it was due to their new degree qualification though some posts did not specify Master qualification was a prerequisite requirement.
E4. Credential gap	How closely matched are the educational attainments of job holders with credentials required for entry into their current jobs? In terms of your present schooling and qualification, do you feel you are overqualified, adequately qualified, or underqualified for your current job? Why? Does the new post/job after graduation require a Master degree?	Credential gap here is defined in terms of perception. Whether the jobs entitled were appropriately qualified or overqualified was subjective response. However, it was found that even an individual claimed that he or she was appropriately qualified, the job actually did not require Master degree as the prerequisite entrance requirement.
Appropriately qualified		Some interviewees claimed that they were appropriately qualified for the positions because of the matching qualification requirement. But some deny their over-qualification in spite of the fact that the job did not specify a Master qualification indeed. Reasons for this as found were knowledge and skills focusing concern, and relative judgement among colleagues.
Knowledge and skills		Some interviewees regarded themselves as appropriately qualified for their jobs though the jobs per se did not require a Master degree. It was found that it was due to an effect of compensation and a knowledge and skills focusing mentality. The former refers to a phenomenon that they considered themselves deficit in knowledge and skills but the over-qualification compensates; while the latter refers to a mentality emphasizing advanced knowledge and skills necessary for the jobs.
Master necessary		Some interviewees considered themselves as appropriately qualified because



		the job per se simply required a Master qualification.
Master not necessary		It was found that some interviewees regarded themselves appropriately qualified for the jobs in spite of the fact that the jobs per se did not require a Master degree.
Relative judgement		It was found that some interviewees regarded themselves appropriately qualified for the jobs based on comparison with the qualification held by their colleagues. More explicitly, as their many colleagues had already been Master holders, they perceived that they are appropriately qualified despite over-qualification in terms of job entrance requirement.
Overqualified		Some interviewees regarded that they were overqualified for the job after graduation. Some of them reported that their current jobs just required Bachelor qualification or even Higher Diploma qualification. They considered a Master qualification was advantageous over those who were without. Furthermore, as many juniors as they observed had already possessed Master qualification, they believed that Master qualification was fashionable.
E5. Existing employers' attitude	Do you think that your employer valued the skills and the qualification acquired from the course? Did he/she say or do anything to express his/her appreciation to your new qualification? Did your employer convey a new expectation to you after you had obtained a new degree?	Some interviewees reported that their existing employers ignored their new degree as if nothing had happened; but some reported that their degrees were valued as they were appreciated their improved work performance and they were put higher expectation.
Ignore the degree (existing employers)		Some interviewees reported that their existing employers ignored and did not value their new degrees. They did not appreciate, convey more positive expectation, and even did not know the new degrees.
More positive attitude (existing employers)		Some interviewees reported that their existing employers appreciated their performance after the studies, and they were expected to perform the works better.
E6. Potential employers' attitude	Did your potential employer(s) value your newly obtained skills and qualification acquired from the course?	New and potential employers' responses could be either indifferent or positive.
Indifferent response		Some interviewees reported that their experience from potential employers was cold. They said that potential employers valued professional qualification such as CPA and working experiences especially those relating to organisations' development more than skills and academic qualification acquired from the Master studies.
Positive responses		Positive responses from new and potential employers were found. These could be classified into real experiences and belief held by interviewees.
Belief		It was found that no matter whether they experienced their new employers valued their new qualifications or not, they believed that their Master qualification would be an advantage to earn 'tickets' for job interviews. It was because potential employers could not know their work performance, qualification would be a political means for transmitting some positive information to them how knowledgeable, skillful, proactive, ambitious and tough the applicants were. The expectation associated with the qualification enhances opportunities for switching jobs.
From experience		It was found that Master qualification together with the names of university and Master programme were factors for new employers to select candidates for job interviews. In job interviews, applicants will be doubled checked their validity in terms of knowledge, skills and experience.
E7. Factors for promotion	What do you think on what a promotion depends? Could your Master study give you so?	It was found that factors for promotion are: (1) Abilities and performance, which covers experience, leadership, knowledge and skills, and performance and outcomes; (2) personality and relationship with superiors and others; (3) qualification; and (4) seniority.
Abilities and performance		Ability refers to a strength of an individual while performance is associated with outcomes. It was found that the former involves knowledge and skills, experience, and leadership.
Experience and exposure		Experience by definition relates to ability of making right decision by broad and specific understanding of the industry involving know-how, practice and culture. It was found that some interviewees regarded level of experience and

		exposure as one factor determining promotion.
Knowledge and skills		It was found that knowledge and skills - technical and soft, relating to working abilities, were factors for promotion.
Leadership		It was found that leadership style and ability was a factor for promotion.
Performance		Performance by definition is associated with outcomes and contribution to the organisation. It was found that work performance was a factor for promotion.
Personality and relationship		It was found that personality such as self-confidence and good relationship with superiors results in perception of seniors that in turn affects chance for promotion.
Qualification		It was found that except for some posts that requires Master qualification as threshold, promotion was independent of Master qualification as reported by most interviewees.
Seniority		Some interviewees reported that seniority was a factor for promotion.
F. Mobility		Except those who saw the studies as a means for self-fulfilment, interviewees did put some expectation on their Master qualification. It was found that interviewees' post-graduated experience varied. Unless they got licenced jobs, it was found that they could not immediately enjoy economic benefits from the degree. Some could climb up along their careers ladder by making use of the studies and believe their earned degree could continue to bring them positive effects on mobility; however, some were still upset with their career stagnation and under-employment situation.
F1. Expectation of qualification effect	What did you expect the effect of your Master qualification just obtained upon graduation in your career advancement?	It was found that interviewees' expectation on qualification to their careers were: (1) they could change the field of works (i.e. horizontal); (2) careers advancement (i.e. vertical); and (3) they could be recognised by the society and/or respected by colleagues.
Horizontal movement		It was found that some interviewees expected their new qualifications helpful for switching the field of works.
Respected and recognised		Some interviewees expressed their wishes of being recognised in the infrastructure of the society, or being respected (as specialists) in the workplace.
Vertical movement		Interviewees expressed that they expected careers advancement (i.e. position and salary) as a consequence of their qualification upgrading as jobs in certain level need persons in certain level to fill in.
F2. Short-term upward mobility	To what extent did the course help you advance your position and/or income in these few years after graduation? How?	Half the interviewees indicated that they could not experience any short-term upward movement in careers whereas another half did. For those who were under-employed, they felt upset with the investment in doing their Master degrees. For those who were more upward mobile, they felt increasingly confident in their work performance.
Stagnant		Some interviewees reported that after the Master graduation they could not experience any change in position and income. Some were even upset with their current underpaid positions that require Higher Diploma only. They found the Master degrees useless in their upward mobility.
Upward mobile		Some interviewees reported that they could move upward along their career ladder in a few years after graduation in terms of position and salary by internal promotion and position switching because of their improvement in qualification, knowledge, skills, and experience.
F3. Economic returns	In reality, was there any immediate economic returns or effects of the qualification? If yes, what are they?	It was found that except for those entered professional careers with licence as entry requirement, other Master graduates could not enjoy immediate economic returns.
F4. What if not studied	What if you had not studied the Master? If no, what do you think the reason(s)?	This is the question asking interviewees from the other way to see whether the Master studies could make any difference in their careers paths. Some interviewees said no differences whereas some said that their Master degrees could make a difference in their careers paths especially those who had got the licenced works such as social workers, pharmacists, chemists ...
Master degrees made a difference		It was found that half of the interviewees could enjoy better benefits from aspiring jobs especially for those who successfully got licenced positions through the Master degrees. At least they regards the degree could shorten the time to wait for promotions.
No differences		Half of the interviewees believed that their career paths after graduation were independent of the Master studies.
F5. Long-term upward mobility	To what extent do you expect the Master course helps you advance your position and/or income in future	It was found that some interviewees claimed that their Master degrees no longer had a significant effect in their careers paths but some still believe yes. Knowledge and soft skills acquired from the course had no effect on internal promotion; and qualification had no effect on seeking other posts in other companies.

	(i.e. more mobile), say another 5 years' time? How?
No more effect	It was found that some interviewees said that their Master degrees had completed their historical mission especially those who were licenced to work. Furthermore career advancement would depend on work performance and experience but not qualification.
Positive effect	It was found that some interviewees still believe that their Master degrees will help them advance their careers. Interviewees considered that knowledge and soft skills acquired from the course could help them promote into higher posts internally; while qualifications could help them seek higher posts in switching companies.

### E. The Most Frequent Words

<b>Words (freq.≥5)</b>	<b>Similar Words</b>
<b>qualification</b>	qualification, qualifications
<b>skill</b>	skill, skills
<b>knowledge</b>	Knowledge, knowledgeable
<b>promotion</b>	promote, promoted, promotion, promotional, promotions
<b>performance</b>	perform, performance, performed, performing
<b>experience</b>	experience, experience
<b>change</b>	change, changed, changes, changing
<b>success</b>	success, successful, successfully, succeed, succeeded
<b>better</b>	better
<b>improve</b>	improve, improved, improvement, improves, improving
<b>salary</b>	salary, salaries
<b>professional</b>	professional
<b>future</b>	future, futures
<b>competent</b>	competence, competency, competent
<b>qualified</b>	qualified, qualify
<b>appreciation</b>	appreciate, appreciated, appreciates, appreciation, appreciations
<b>colleagues</b>	colleagues
<b>switching</b>	switch, switched, switches, switching
<b>registered</b>	register, registered, registering
<b>chance</b>	chance, chances
<b>prospect</b>	prospect
<b>recognised</b>	recognised
<b>specialised</b>	specialisation, specialised
<b>competitive</b>	competitive, competitiveness

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