

A Survey Report on Employment Prospect and Job Quality of Recent Immigrants from Hong Kong to the UK

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An investigation on job quality of recent immigrants from Hong Kong to the UK

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24 October 2023

1. Introduction

The British National (Overseas) (BNO) visa scheme, which allows BNO passport holders residing in Hong Kong and their dependents to live, work and study in the UK for 5 years, opened for application on 31 January 2021. According to Home Office statistics, 123,800 individuals have entered the UK with a BNO visa as of August 2023 (Home Office, 2023).

A questionnaire survey was conducted in August 2021 by Hongkongers in Britain and me to understand the intention to seek employment and experience in navigating the UK job market among recent Hong Kong immigrants in the UK. It was also to look at the extent to which labour shortage in various industries, which was widely reported against the post-COVID and post-Brexit background, would create employment opportunities for these immigrants, especially those with relatively high education attainment and skill levels. It showed that although not necessarily economic migrants (Kan, Richards and Walsh, 2021), a sizeable amount of them intend to access employment in the UK, yet these immigrants have also faced obstacles in entering the job market due to institutional and cultural barriers in various degrees (Hongkongers in Britain, 2021).

When the survey was conducted, it was understood that recent arrivals might prioritise settling in the new environment regarding securing accommodation and accessing education for their children over seeking employment. Now that the BNO visa scheme has come into effect for two years, the number of arrivals seems to have plateaued. On the one hand, earlier arrivals might have accumulated more first-hand knowledge about the UK labour market and job-seeking experience. On the other hand, a growth in employment support services targeting recent Hong Kong immigrants provided by community and diaspora groups primarily with funding from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities via the Hong Kong Welcome Hub as well as other charities has been observed.

Due to the lack of relevant statistics related to employment activities of these new arrivals from official sources besides surveys conducted by academics and diaspora groups on various aspects of settlement of this group of migrants (e.g. Sutton Hongkongers Research Team, 2022; Yue, 2023), how much of the new arrivals are more prepared to access employment as well as the quality of work that they manage to access so far have yet to be investigated. Therefore, in collaboration with West Midlands Hongkonger Support CIC, a questionnaire survey aiming at investigating the employment trajectories of recent arrivals from Hong Kong has been conducted in 2023. Not only are we interested in opportunities and challenges in navigating the job market and applying for jobs, but also in the quality of jobs that these immigrants hold, which would have practical implications for future directions of intervention for employment support service providers.

2. Understanding job quality

In this research, we understand that landing a job is not the end goal for migrants, but the quality of work which enables them to settle and be assimilated into the new environment. Besides economic benefits, the extent to which a job fosters the psychological and physical well-being of employees (Holman, 2013), as well as the room it provides for employees to take control over their working life and utilise their full potential in terms of skill (Iskander and Lowe, 2013) also contribute to current measurement and advocacy of good work. As proposed by Irvine, White and Diffley (2018), we understand that job quality could be evaluated in the following dimensions:

- 1) Terms of employment, as in job security, guarantee of minimum working hours and the occurrence of underemployment;
- 2) Pay and benefits, including both the remuneration package and employees' satisfaction towards pay;
- 3) Health, safety and psychosocial well-being, including risk levels of physical injury and employees' mental health in the workplace;
- 4) Job design and nature of work, as in the utilisation of skill, managerial control, opportunities for career progression and the extent to which the job gives employees a sense of purpose;
- 5) Work-life balance, in terms of the extent to which employees are required to work overtime, paid or unpaid;
- 6) Social support and cohesion, which focus on social support that employees have at work and their relationship with line management;
- 7) Voice and representation, as reflected in trade union membership, the existence of effective voice and involvement mechanisms, as well as information transparency for employees.

3. Research method

Between May and July 2023, a questionnaire survey written in Chinese was open to individuals who self-identify as above 18 and have moved to the UK from Hong Kong within the past 36 months. The questionnaire was circulated by West Midlands Hongkonger Support CIC within its network of volunteers and diaspora groups in the UK, either online or during in-person events held in Birmingham, such as public seminars and pop-up markets targeting the Hong Kong community. The questionnaire contains 77 questions, covering respondents' residential status, working conditions, difficulties and challenges at work, job-seeking experiences and personal characteristics.

449 complete responses have been collected. Since we did not differentiate respondents by visa status, these respondents might have entered the UK via different immigration pathways, including BNO visa (or as dependents), student visa, Youth Mobility Scheme visa, as well as 'leave outside the rules' (LOTR) for BNO passport holders, which was in effect before January 2021.

4. Findings

4.1. Demographics

The 449 respondents show a roughly even gender split, with slightly more women than men. 70% of them are between 35 and 44 years old (Figure 1). 68% of them are educated at the university level or above (Figure 2). Around half of the respondents are based in the West Midlands, 20% in Greater London or Greater Manchester, with the rest in other regions except Northern Ireland. More than half of the respondents have been residing in the UK for more than a year.

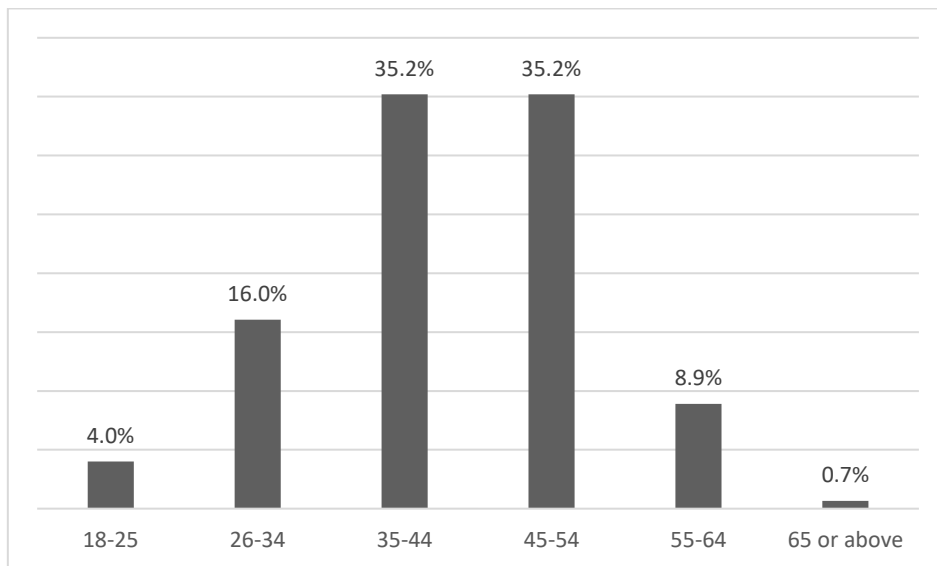


Figure 1: Age distribution of respondents

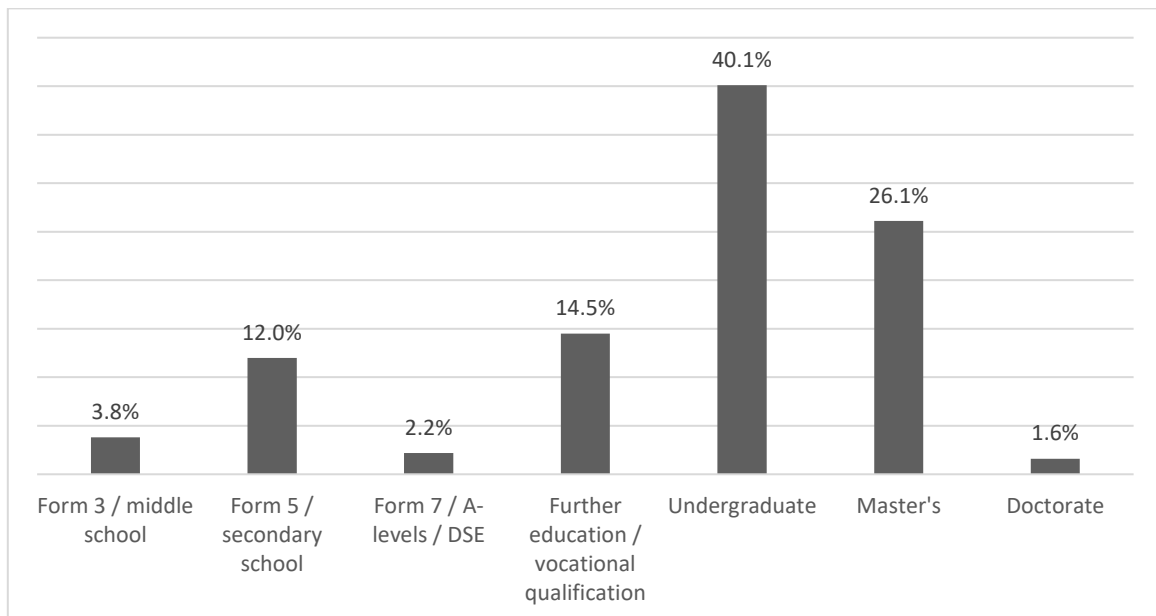


Figure 2: Education level of respondents

In terms of their financial circumstances, 68.6% of the respondents claim that they came to the UK with funds which could support themselves and their family for at least a year, which aligns with the requirement for BNO visa applicants to be economically self-sufficient for 6 months and the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' condition of the visa. Those who believe that they have and have not sufficient funds to buy a property in the UK are of roughly equal proportions (43.48% and 42.63% respectively).

A majority of the respondents have some kind of caring responsibility for their dependents. Half of the respondents have at least one child whom they financially support. 35.2% of the respondents have at least one financial dependent aged 18-64, and 16.7% support at least one elderly (above 65) person financially. 40.7% of the respondents say they spend more than 3 hours a day to care for their minor dependents, while there are substantially fewer respondents who do so for other adults and the elderly.

Respondents include people who are currently employed by a UK-based employer or overseas-based employer and are unemployed (Figure 3). The unemployed respondents include active job seekers, voluntary workers, full-time homemakers, and retirees.

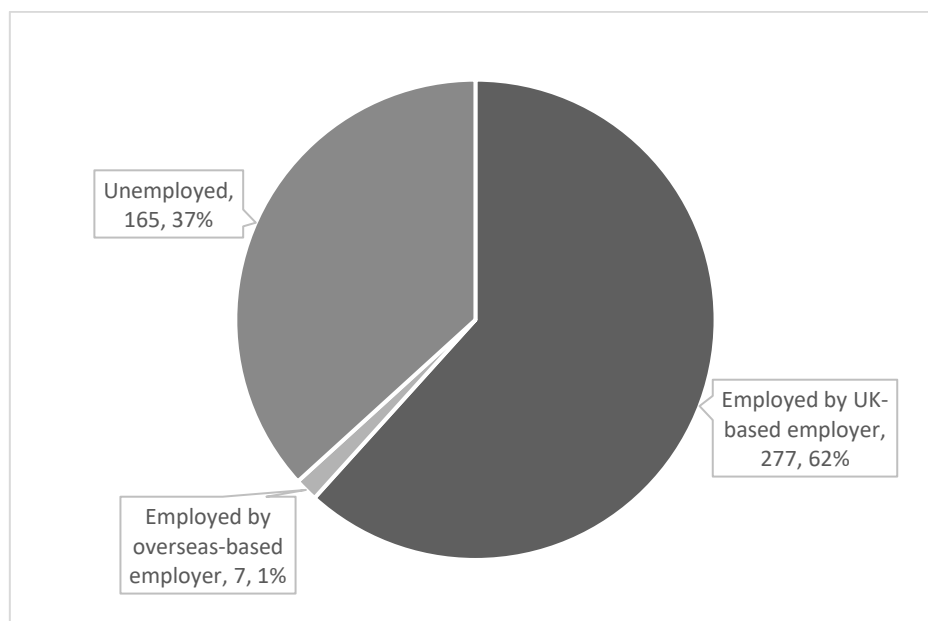


Figure 3: Employment status of respondents

Respondents worked in a range of industries before moving to the UK, including education, social service, IT, finance and banking and so on (Figure 4). More than one-third of the respondents say that their job in Hong Kong was professionally certified. 310 respondents (69%) have been in paid employment since arrival. Almost half of them (47.7%) have taken up roles unrelated to their job in Hong Kong, while 16.8% said that they have taken up a role of similar nature in a different industry in the UK. Among the 277 respondents who are currently employed by a UK-based employer work in a number of industries, such as education and childcare, administrative and clerical work, healthcare, warehouse and logistics, hospitality, manufacturing, construction and others (Figure 5)

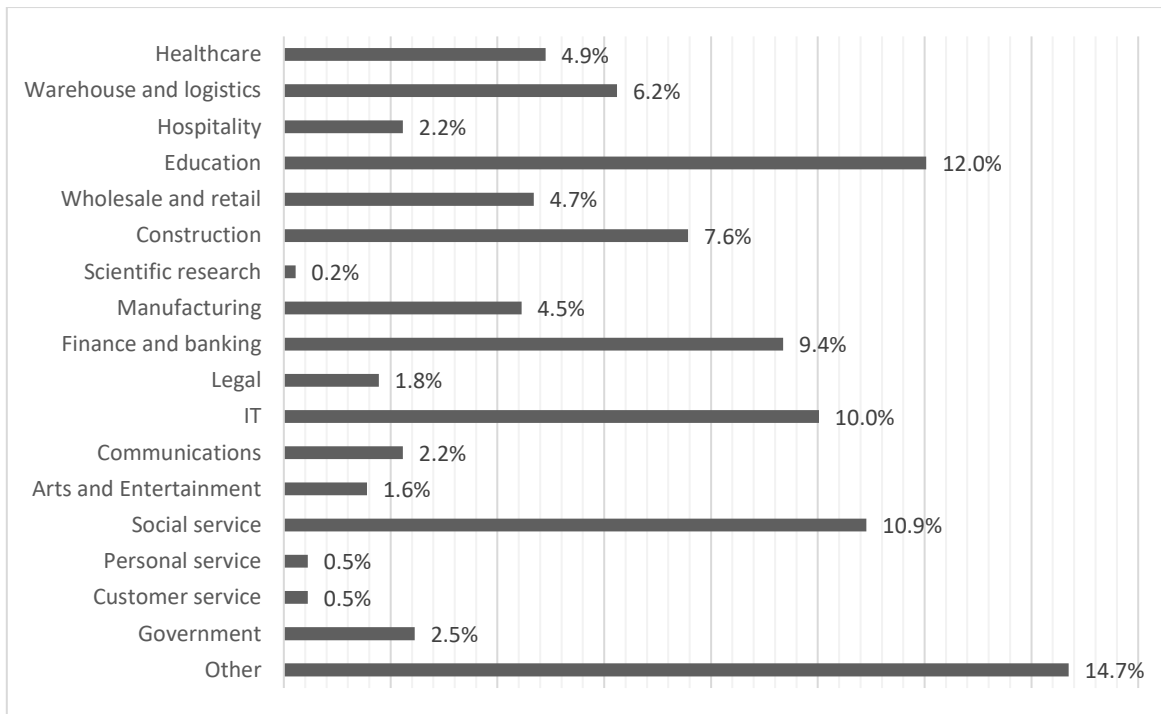


Figure 4: Industries which respondents worked in before moving to the UK

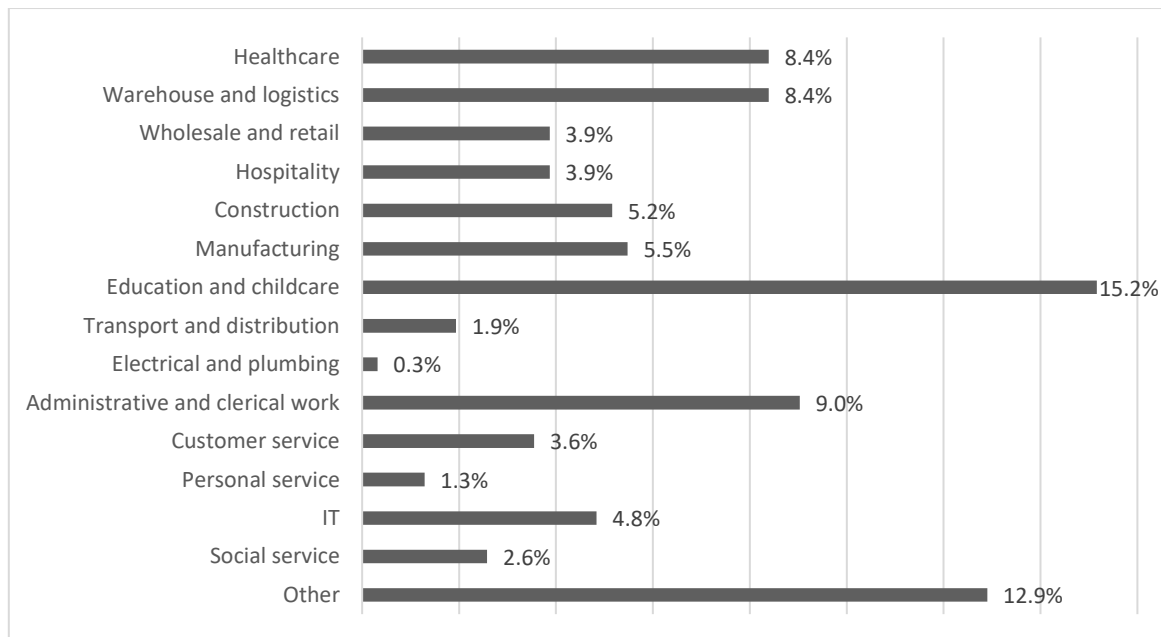


Figure 5: Industries in which respondents currently work in the UK

4.2. Job-seeking behaviour and patterns

It is shown that respondents have prioritised job searching upon arrival in varying degrees. There are just lower than 40% of respondents who started job searching actively within and after 3 months of arrival respectively. One-third of those who are not in any UK-based paid employment at the moment said that they have not started active job searching yet.

Most respondents are confident in their level of English, while remaining concerned about specific areas such as vocabulary, understanding of the local context, day-to-day interaction and verbal presentation skills. About one-fifth of the respondents claim that they are not confident in their level of English, and are particularly concerned about their verbal and listening skills.

It is the most common for respondents to search for jobs online. They considered recruitment websites, family and friends, as well as recruitment agencies to be the most useful channels for job search, whether it be familiarising with the job market, preparing for job applications or learning about work opportunities. Social media is selected as one of the most commonly used channels for job search, but a relatively low proportion of respondents call it one of the top 3 most useful channels.

Almost half of the respondents consider job searching in the UK difficult or very difficult. When asked about factors leading to the difficulties, the 3 most selected options include the lack of language ability, transport arrangements and the lack of job searching experience (including CV and interview preparation) (Figure 6).

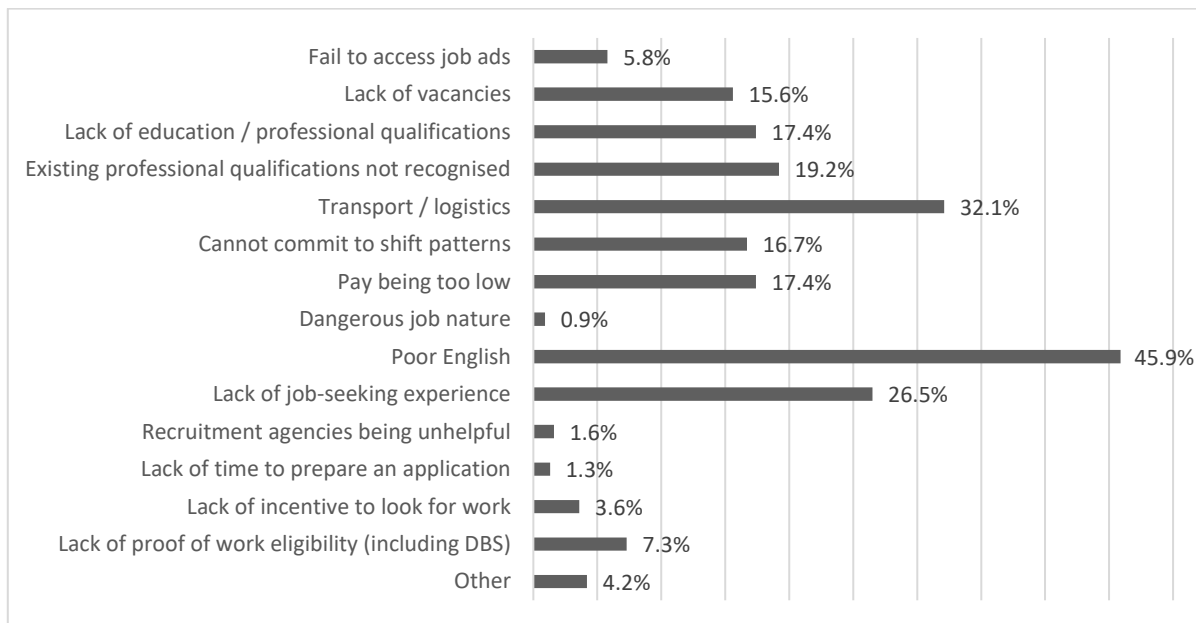


Figure 6: Factors leading to difficulties in job searching in the UK according to respondents (multiple selection allowed)

4.3. Job quality

In the following section, various dimensions of job quality of the 277 out of all respondents (61.7%) who are in paid employment with a UK-based employer will be illustrated, as they are exclusive to answering questions related to job quality in the questionnaire survey.

4.3.1. Terms of employment

Among those who are in paid employment with a UK-based employer, 62.9% of them describe themselves as being in full-time employment. Other self-identified modes of employment include part-time (16.1%), zero-hour contract (5.8%) and self-employed (2.9%). A majority (87%) of them have

signed their employment contracts with the employing organisation directly, while 7.6% have a contract with a recruitment agency instead.

A small portion of respondents (8.7%) have been made redundant by a UK-based employer. Commonly identified reasons include overstaffing, unsatisfactory performance, difficulty in fulfilling assigned job duties etc.

4.3.2. Pay and benefits

In the survey, respondents are asked about their hourly, weekly and annual pay levels. There are around one-third of respondents whose hourly rate is between £10.6 and £11.99, and above £15 respectively (Figure 7). A quarter (26.7%) of them have an annual salary below £22,000 (Figure 8). Their pay package is primarily constituted by time rate, while only a small fraction of respondents mentioned other pay components such as overtime pay, commission and bonus, subsidies for transport, cost of living and training etc. 45.8% of the respondents report receiving a mostly fixed monthly pay, while 9.4% of them mention having relatively variable pay per month. Regarding benefits, a majority of respondents report being entitled to paid annual leave (73.3%), holiday pay (64.3%), pension (66.4%), sick pay (57%) and so on.

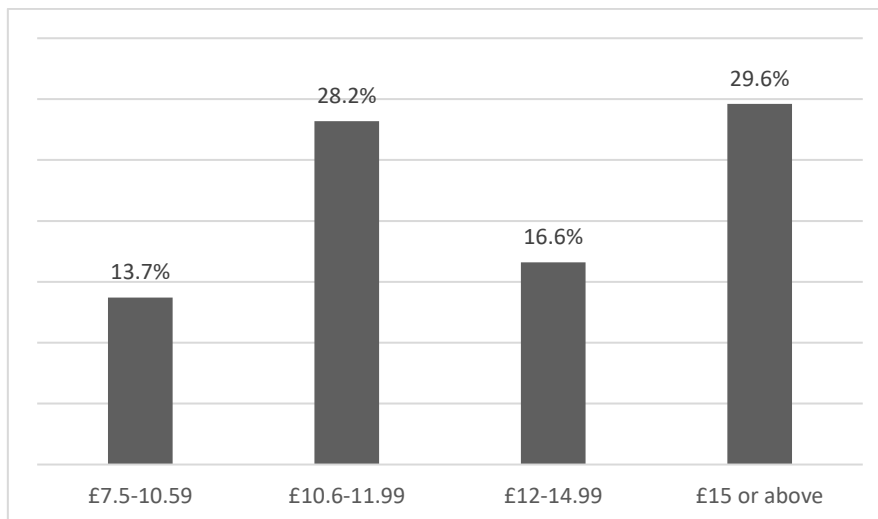


Figure 7: Hourly pay level of respondents employed by UK-based employers

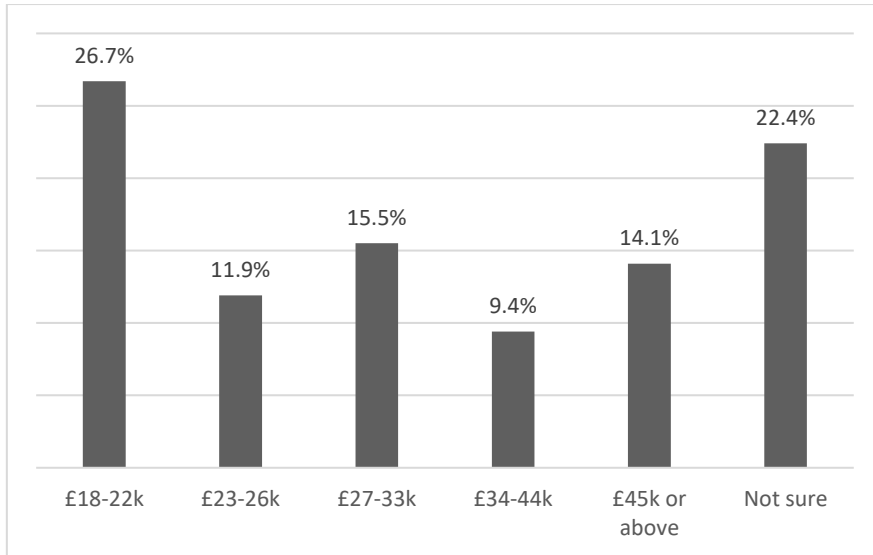


Figure 8: Annual pay level of respondents employed by UK-based employers

4.3.3. Health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing

When asked about occupational safety, close to 70% of the respondents consider their workplace safe or very safe. For those who do not feel safe at work, the risks come from labour intensity (17.6%), stress due to interpersonal interaction (12%), long working hours (7.7%), air or noise pollution (6.7%) etc.

4.3.4. Job design and nature of work

In questions concerning job design and the nature of work, respondents are asked to evaluate their sense of autonomy, competency, and purpose at work. Regarding their sense of autonomy and competency, just less than half of the respondents say that they could usually or always decide their speed of work, workflow and work targets, but 20% of them said that they have no autonomy over these areas. A vast majority of respondents (88.1%) agree that they can usually or always cope with tasks assigned to them (88.1%) and feel competent at work (82.3%), but around one-fifth of the respondents reckon that their workplace is understaffed (21.7%) and under-equipped with hardware (21.7%).

Employment seems to have served the purpose of assimilation into the new environment and developing employability from the respondents' perspective. A majority of them find their current job helpful in improving their language ability, communication skills and industry-specific knowledge. When asked about their attitude towards their current job, more than 70% of the respondents agree that they feel useful at work, as well as bring positive impacts to the organisation and society in general. 68.4% of them agree that they identify with the vision and values of the organisation that they work for. Nevertheless, less than a quarter of the respondents agree that there is room for career progression at their current job.

4.3.5. Work-life balance

Regarding working hours, around two-thirds of the respondents report that they work 31-40 hours per week on average, which is also the ideal length of working week for more than half (55.9%) of the respondents. When asked about determinants of how many hours they would like to work per week, the most commonly selected options include the level of income, caring responsibilities, time for rest, transport arrangements and socialising needs. Half of the respondents are happy with their current working hours, while around 10% feel unhappy or very unhappy about it.

Half of the respondents have no option to work remotely. Around 60% of them take less than 1 hour to commute every working day, while it takes more than 90 minutes for 10% of them. Most of them also cannot decide their work schedule. 70.1% of them say that their work schedule is negotiable with their line manager if needed, but close to one-third of them say that their work schedule is non-negotiable. More than a quarter of the respondents are informed of their work schedule less than a week in advance. Most of the respondents agree that they can usually commit to their pre-assigned work schedule. Otherwise it is usually due to caring responsibilities and health issues. Around 15% of the respondents reported incidents of their shift being cut short only on the day of work.

4.3.6. Social support and cohesion

A majority of the respondents report feeling socially supported at work. Apart from feeling respected (70.1%) and recognised (71.3%) at work, they also agree that they get along well with their colleagues (76.1%) and are supported by their line manager when needed (73.54%). Nevertheless, a slightly lower proportion of respondents agree that they are treated fairly (68.7%), their line manager takes their opinions seriously (68.4%) and provides constructive feedback for their work (62.9%).

4.3.7. Voice and representation

In the case of workplace issues and dissatisfaction, around 60% of the respondents agree that they can be handled by individual negotiations. 75% of the respondents would choose to speak to their line manager directly, while a minority would speak out during team or departmental meetings (14.8%) or communicate their views via their employer's online platforms (8.8%). 6.3% of the respondents did not select any voice channel suggested in the questionnaire. Some of them state that they would not voice out if issues arise, thinking that voicing out would not solve the problem and would put them into trouble.

Regarding collective representation, almost half (43.9%) of the respondents are not sure about whether their workplace is unionised, while one-third of them say that their workplace is non-unionised. Among the minority of respondents who say that their workplace is unionised (13.55%), most of them work in the public sector. More than a quarter (28.71%) of the respondents say that there are employee representatives who have regular meetings with management, but still a majority (39.4%) have no knowledge of it.

There is an observed interest in employment rights education among respondents employed by a UK-based employer (Figure 9). Around half of the respondents are keen on learning more about legal entitlements and regulations on pay (including pay arrears) (50.2%), skill training opportunities and

resources (49.8%) and job security (48.4%). More than one-third of the respondents would like to learn more about trade unions and collective bargaining rights (39.7%), conflict resolution procedures (36.5%), working time (36.5%) and so on. Gov.UK is the most widely used platform for such information among respondents (70%), followed by labour rights publications produced by Hong Kong diaspora groups (14.1%) and Citizens Advice (12.3%). Very few respondents mention the role of local community groups, faith groups and trade unions in this area.



Figure 9: Areas of employment rights which respondents are interested in learning more about

5. Concluding remarks

As shown in the survey findings, recent arrivals from Hong Kong in the UK have managed to access employment in a variety of industries, including those which have reported a labour shortage in the post-COVID and post-BREXIT context such as education, healthcare and hospitality. Regardless of being able to enter the labour market, their job quality varies in the following areas.

First, some recent arrivals might be in jobs which are in the lower-pay spectrum and where employees enjoy less autonomy. This is reflected in the finding that a sizeable number of respondents' pay level falls below the median hourly and annual earnings of the UK workforce, which stood at £14.77 and £33,000 respectively as of April 2022. They also have less control over working time and location, which may create difficulties for them to commit to assigned work schedules due to other responsibilities and geographical constraints.

Second, respondents generally feel competent at work and have established a good rapport with colleagues and line management. Their jobs have played a significant role in developing their soft skills at work and employability. Nevertheless, their judgement on career prospects might be affected by feeling unfairly treated and uneven occurrence of constructive feedback on their performance from line management. The latter might also determine how they manage to work towards positive performance appraisal outcomes for career progression.

In the face of dissatisfaction at work, most respondents would opt for individual voice mechanisms, such as direct communication with line management and recruitment agency. It is relatively rare for them to take a collective route. On the one hand, it relates to whether they are aware of the existence of collective representative bodies (such as trade unions) and collective voice mechanisms at the organisational or industry levels. On the other hand, their positioning as new arrivals or ethnic minorities might contribute to how they make sense of their circumstances in the workplace and the 'best way' for conflict resolution. The findings reveal a substantial demand among respondents for employment rights education, but it primarily takes the form of desktop research via online sources, subject to respondents' information literacy. There is a limit to how one-directional assimilation could enable the new arrivals to handle more complex or workplace-specific issues independently. They might also miss out on relevant support services from trade unions and community groups which are more immersed in the local context of work and employment.

Regardless of whether they have started working for UK-based employers, respondents report facing challenges in job searching in various degrees, especially in terms of language capability, caring responsibilities and logistical arrangements. For those who are relatively educated with professional credentials in Hong Kong and good English, their employability may still be negatively affected by the lack of knowledge and connection in the UK labour market, job searching experience and recognised licenses and qualifications in the UK.

6. Limitations and future plans

This survey faces a few limitations. First, respondents are sampled by snowballing due to the lack of official statistics on the demographics of the emerging Hong Kong community in the UK. Biases may occur, especially when half of the respondents are based in the West Midlands. Second, the questionnaire does not allow us to further explore the processes of job searching of respondents and their reflections on their workplace experiences.

Therefore, the questionnaire survey will pave the way for the next phase of research, during which we plan to:

- 1) Conduct individual in-depth interviews and focus groups with selected questionnaire respondents;
- 2) Conduct mapping exercises of particular industries which see an emerging workforce constituted by recent arrivals from Hong Kong, in collaboration with trade unions and voluntary organisations;
- 3) Reach out to local community organisations and Hong Kong diaspora groups which have provided employment support services to Hong Kong immigrants in the past three years, to obtain a better understanding of the community that they work with and their approach to employment;
- 4) Request for official sources on the demographics of the emerging Hong Kong community in the UK from relevant government functions, including the Home Office, Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Office for National Statistics and strategic migration partnerships;

- 5) Reach out to migrant groups and trade unions with a focus on migrant workers of other nationalities or ethnic minorities to understand their approach to supporting migrant employment and workplace inclusion.

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