

MASTER'S THESIS

Fixed-term employment and individual mobility: a study of teaching assistants in the aided secondary schools of Hong Kong

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Fixed-term Employment and Individual Mobility:
A Study of Teaching Assistants in the Aided Secondary Schools of
Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the intra- and inter-organizational mobility of teaching assistants, a group of fixed-term workers in the secondary education sector of Hong Kong, by unraveling the inter-dependent relationship between institutions and the opportunity structure of the labor market. Fixed-term employment is a common form of “nonstandard” employment arrangement which has been widely adopted in various societies since the late 20th century as a response to increasing economic uncertainties. However, there is no consensus about the effect of fixed-term employment on individual job mobility. Research suggests that the institutional arrangements of the labor market affect how structural positions are organized. The effect of fixed-term employment on individual mobility may subject to the labor market structure and the opportunities embedded therein. The current study adopts the institutional approach to examine the use and impacts of fixed-term employment on young workers in the secondary education sector of Hong Kong. In-depth interviews were carried out with seven respondents from the school management level of aided secondary schools and seven teaching assistants, also from secondary schools. The findings show that the increase of fixed-term employment is a result of a series of interrelated institutional changes in the secondary education sector, including the education reforms, and policy shifts in regard to central funding allocation and school management. Fixed-term employment is considered by schools to be a feasible and desirable flexible staffing arrangement to cope with workload fluctuations caused by education reforms and the unstable financial input from the government. There are variations in the duties of teaching assistant in schools. Further, fixed-term employment has lead to a division of the labor market into two different sectors: a relatively stable sector with dual-career tracks (Graduate Masters/Mistresses and Certificated Masters/Mistresses) and a “secondary” one with no clear career ladder. The job mobility experiences of the respondents reveal low permeability between boundaries of primary labor market and “secondary” sector. In contrast, their mobility is concentrated within the “secondary” labor market with three possible career patterns at the horizontal, vertical and cyclical levels.

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