



Measures to promote employment of mature persons in selected places

IN13/17-18

1. Introduction

1.1 In Hong Kong, there has been increasing public concerns to promote employment of mature persons aged 50 and above,¹ in anticipation of an imminent shrinkage of labour force amidst the ageing trend by around 2022.² It is generally believed that increased participation of mature persons in the job market can help sustain economic growth, support their livelihood and alleviate the burden of healthcare and welfare systems. Although the overall labour force participation rate ("LFPR")³ of mature persons in Hong Kong has risen noticeably from 37% to 43% during 2007-2017, older people especially the elderly⁴ still find it challenging to re-enter into the job market due to negative views of some employers about their skill level or productivity. As an illustration, LFPR for the elderly was only 11.0% in Hong Kong in 2017. This was less than half of the corresponding figure of 23.5% in Japan and 26.8% in Singapore, as the active ageing policies at workplace taken in these two places are considered to be effective in lifting employment of older workers.

1.2 At the request of Hon WONG Kwok-kin, the Research Office has undertaken a study on policy measures taken to boost employment of mature persons in particular the elderly in selected places.⁵ Japan and Singapore are selected for further study because (a) they are facing acute ageing pressure as

¹ For presentation convenience, the term "mature persons" stands for those people aged 50 and above throughout this paper.

² According to the latest labour force projection (excluding foreign domestic helpers), local labour force will reach a peak of 3.68 million in 2021, before a prolonged downtrend afterwards. For the next two decades during 2021-2041, the local labour force is expected to shrink by a total of 204 000 persons or 6%. For details, see Census and Statistics Department (2017a).

³ LFPR refers to the proportion of population in specific age groups who participate in the labour market, either being employed or unemployed but seeking a job.

⁴ Throughout this paper, the term "elderly" refers to those people aged 65 and above.

⁵ The request was made under a pilot scheme of a new initiative to strengthen research support to individual Members of the Sixth Legislative Council.

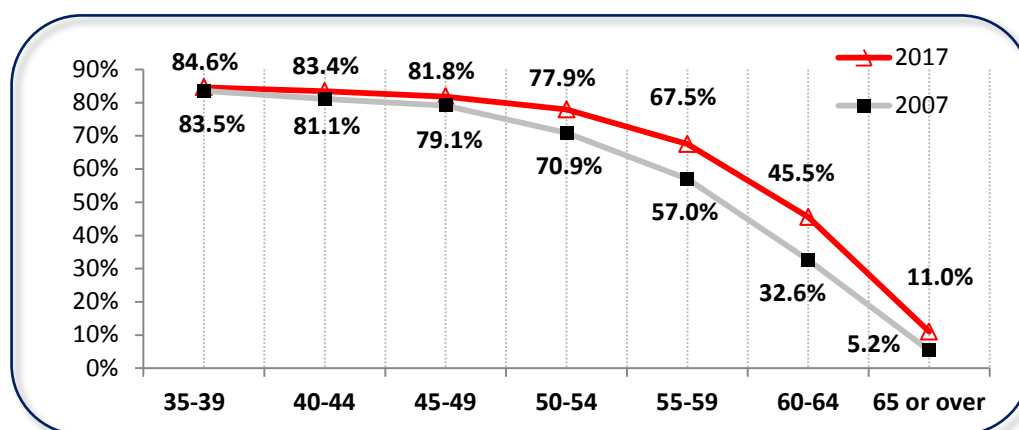
their life expectancy at birth is amongst the longest in the world⁶ and (b) the two governments have introduced a host of measures to promote employment of mature persons over the years.

1.3 This information note begins with a trend review of employment of mature persons in Hong Kong, followed by a discussion of challenges faced by these workers at the workplace and relevant support measures introduced by the Government in recent years. It then highlights the salient policy measures introduced in Japan and Singapore to boost employment of mature persons, along with two summary tables (**Appendices I-II**).

2. Recent employment trends of mature persons in Hong Kong

2.1 By and large, local workers begin to face pressure in employment when they turn 50 due to a host of factors (to be discussed in the next section), and they tend to exit the labour market progressively afterwards. According to the Census and Statistics Department, LFPR slides with the age of the labour force. In 2017, LFPR for persons younger than the age of 50 stood at above 80%, but it fell to 78% for the age group 50-54. LFPR then further dropped to 68% for the age group 55-59, 46% for 60-64, and only 11% for 65 and above. In other words, workplace challenges faced by middle-aged and elderly persons are broadly similar in nature, though the impacts tend to magnify with age (**Figure 1**).

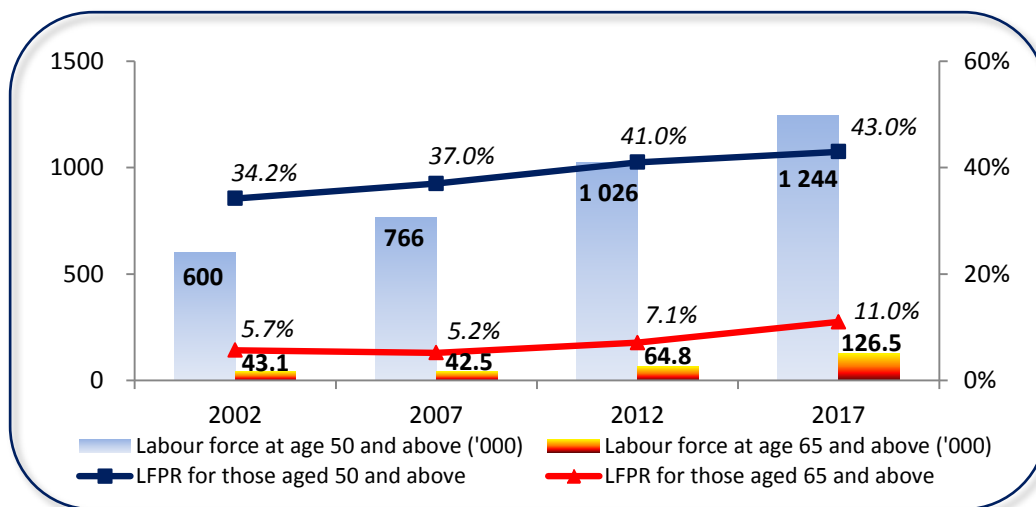
Figure 1 – LFPR by major age group in Hong Kong, 2007-2017



⁶ According to the World Health Organization, the life expectancy at birth was 84.2 years in Singapore and 82.9 years in Japan in 2016, amongst the top six positions in the global league. Hong Kong has a life expectancy of 81.3 years for men and 87.3 years for women in 2016, but is not included in this ranking exercise.

2.2 On the number of mature persons in labour force, it has surged by 62% within a decade to 1.24 million in 2017, mainly due to more people falling into this age groups amidst the ageing trend. As the total labour force has grown at a much slower pace of just 7% during 2007-2017, the proportion of mature workers has leaped from 22% to 34%. Coupled with a rise in their LFPR from 37% to 43%, this indicates the growing importance of employment of mature workers in the local economy (**Appendix I** and **Figure 2**).

Figure 2 – Labour force and LFPR of mature persons in Hong Kong, 2002-2017



2.3 More specifically on the **elderly workers**, the number of elderly persons in the labour force has shown even a bigger increase of 198% over the past decade to 126 500 in 2017, along with a doubling of the respective LFPR from 5.2% to 11.0%. However, the proportion of elderly persons in total labour force was still small in 2017, at about 3.5%.

2.4 The **major socioeconomic characteristics of the mature workforce** are briefly summarized below:

- (a) **Lower education attainment:** Mature persons in the labour force generally have lower education attainment. Only 21% of such mature persons have received tertiary education as at 2017, just half of that of 42% in total labour force. The respective proportion for the elderly was even lower, at 14%;
- (b) **Engagement in lower-skills occupations:** Some 56% of the mature workforce and 67% of the elderly workforce were

engaged in jobs requiring lower skills (i.e. service and sales workers, craft workers, machine operators and elementary occupations) in 2017, higher than that of 42% in total workforce;

- (c) **Shorter working hours:** About 23% of the mature workforce and 35% of the elderly workforce worked fewer than 35 hours per week in 2017, compared with that of 20% of the overall workforce. This could be partly attributable to the preference of the elderly people for more flexible, part-time or freelance jobs;
- (d) **Lower employment earnings:** Against the above backdrop, the median monthly employment earnings of the mature workforce were HK\$15,000 in 2017, 12% below the territory-wide figure. For the elderly workforce, their respective monthly earnings were much lower, at only HK\$10,200; and
- (e) **Lower unemployment rate:** In 2017, the unemployment rate was 2.7% for mature persons and 1.9% for the elderly workers, both visibly lower than the overall unemployment rate of 3.4% in Hong Kong. This could be attributable to the fact that many mature persons might simply leave the labour market if they could not find a job after a certain period.

3. Policy measures to promote local employment of mature persons

3.1 There are many socioeconomic factors precipitating the exit of mature workers from the job market. While some are voluntary opt-outs, others are related to institutional factors or workplace challenges. Below are some of the commonly cited factors affecting LFPR of mature persons:

- (a) **Retirement age at the workplace:** Unlike Japan and Singapore, there is no statutory retirement age in Hong Kong. At present, the retirement age of the civil service is around 55-65, depending on the year they joined the Government. As many firms in the private sector also set their retirement age within this age band, LFPR shows an obvious decline as from the age of 55 onwards;⁷

⁷ There were a total of 1.16 million retirees in 2016, a major source of economically inactive population. See Census and Statistics Department (2017c).

- (b) **Early leavers from the job market:** Some mature workers may choose to leave the job market before the retirement age, for reasons like poor health, doing housework and taking care of family members. The magnitude of early retirement can be indirectly reflected in the statistics compiled by the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Authority ("MPFA"). In 2016-2017, the MPF funds drawn out for early retirement amounted to HK\$2.1 billion, representing about two-fifths of those reaching the normal retirement age of 65;⁸
- (c) **Obsolete skills:** While many mature persons in good health may wish to stay economically active, they may not be able to do so due to skill mismatch. Moreover, some employers hold the views that mature workers could not meet the higher skill requirements in a knowledge-based economy. According to a study report published by the Equal Opportunities Commission ("EOC") in 2016, 56% of surveyed employers felt that mature workers were "resistant to change in work pattern" and 54% thought that hiring mature workers could result in a "drop in productivity";⁹
- (d) **Alleged age-discrimination at the workplace:** There are also claims that some employers are holding negative views on mature workers, including (i) higher wage level relative to their productivity; and (ii) more costly employees' compensation insurance and medical insurance for older workers.¹⁰ Based on the aforementioned EOC study, 67% of the respondents felt that people aged 50-59 were prone to age discrimination at workplace, and the corresponding figure for persons aged 60 and above was higher at 78%;¹¹ and

⁸ The MPF system allows earlier retirement and withdrawal of MPF savings for employees reaching the age of 60, five years earlier than the statutory age of 65. In 2016-2017, a total of HK\$5.5 billion was withdrawn for normal retirement.

⁹ See Equal Opportunities Commission (2016).

¹⁰ Reportedly, the premium paid by employers to fulfil the requirements of the Employees' Compensation Ordinance varies with the age of employees. However, there is very limited information on the level of such premium in the public domain.

¹¹ According to the EOC survey, age discrimination against mature persons aged 50 or above could appear in the form of denial of job promotion (23% of the respondents), receiving lower salary than other workers for the same position (24%), and being targeted for redundancy in organizational restructuring (20%). See Equal Opportunities Commission (2016).

- (e) **Rigid work arrangement at the workplace:** For many mature persons especially the retirees, they may need more flexible work arrangements (e.g. part-time, flexible work hours) to re-enter the job market.¹² However, not many employers are able to offer such flexible work arrangements at present.

3.2 In the population policy document published in 2013, the Government has stated that one of its objectives is to encourage "more people to work and to work longer".¹³ Conceivably, promotion of employment of mature workers can bring a host of socioeconomic benefits. **First**, in anticipation of the expected reduction of the labour force by about 200 000 in the next two decades up to 2041, it is important to "unleash the potential of existing population" for continued economic growth. **Secondly**, as many retirees in Hong Kong are still in good health, prolonged work in a healthy work environment can maintain the physical and mental health of the elderly. **Thirdly**, the employment income can help support the livelihood of retirees, as the average benefits per MPF member was about HK\$275,000 at end-2017, which may be too little for post-retirement life which could last for more than a decade.¹⁴ **Fourthly**, the employment income helps reduce poverty. Taking elderly people as an illustration, the poverty rate of the working elderly was only 8.2% in 2016, much lower than the respective figure of 34.1% for the non-working elderly.¹⁵ **Lastly**, the availability of employment income also reduces the need for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance ("CSSA"), alleviating the Government's overall welfare expenditure.

3.3 The Government claims that it has launched the following "multi-pronged strategy" to promote employment of mature persons:

- (a) **Extending the retirement age of civil service:** Since June 2015, the Government is taking the lead to extend the retirement age of civil servants from 55-60 to 60-65, depending on the grade and year of entry.¹⁶ So far, the retirement age of some 23 000 of

¹² In the EOC survey, 36% of the mature persons stated their preference for part time or freelance jobs.

¹³ See Chief Secretary for Administration's Office (2013 and 2015).

¹⁴ The figure was derived from the total net asset value of the MPF funds divided by the number of participating members of MPF.

¹⁵ The poverty rate takes into account recurrent cash benefits of the Government. See Commission on Poverty (2017).

¹⁶ Since June 2015, the retirement age of new recruits for the civil service has been lifted from 60 to 65, and those for disciplinary forces from 55 to 60. For existing employees and officers of the disciplinary forces joining the civil service between June 2000 and May 2015, they can choose to retire at 65 and 60 respectively. See Chief Secretary for Administration (2018).

new recruits is lengthened accordingly, taking up about 15% of overall civil servants. For employers in the private sector, there are very few reports on similar extension of retirement age, however;

- (b) **Subsidy to employers for hiring mature persons:** The Labour Department ("LD") launched the Employment Programme for the Middle-aged ("EPM") in 2001 to promote the employment of persons aged 40 and above by offering monthly training allowance to employers who provide job placement to eligible persons. As from 2013, the level of allowance is HK\$3,000 for placement of persons for a period of up to six months.¹⁷ During 2013-2017, an average 1 420 placements were offered each year to those persons aged 50 and above.¹⁸

In the 2018-2019 Budget, the Government has announced that it will enhance EPM by targeting at persons aged 60 and above who have left the workforce or unemployed. Under the enhanced EPM, the on-the-job training allowance will be raised to HK\$4,000 per month for "employers engaging people aged 60 and above", while the maximum entitlement period will be lengthened from 6 to 12 months;¹⁹

- (c) **Training programmes for mature workers:** At present, the Employees Retraining Board ("ERB") provides training for all people irrespective of age groups, straddling 28 industry categories. After the completion of a dedicated study on the training needs of mature persons in 2016, ERB launched some tailor-made courses for mature workers. These include "workplace re-entry courses", aiming to (i) restore self-confidence; (ii) enhance communications skills; and (iii) boost knowledge on computer applications and vocational English of trainees to prepare them to re-enter the labour market;²⁰

¹⁷ The monthly allowance under EPM has been progressively lifted from HK\$1,500 in 2003 to HK\$3,000 in 2013. Its job coverage also extended from full-time to part time placements in September 2015. In the four financial years up to 2014-2015, a total of HK\$13 million allowance was paid under EPM.

¹⁸ See Labour and Welfare Bureau (2018).

¹⁹ As the Government is yet to announce the implementation details of the enhanced EPM, it is not clear at this juncture whether the enhanced benefits will also be applicable to persons aged 40-59.

²⁰ In 2008, 32% of those received retraining were aged 50 and above (6% for 65 and above). In 2017, it increased to 55% (24% for 65 and above). See Employees Retraining Board (2018).

- (d) **Job fairs for mature workers:** LD organizes job fairs for mature and elderly persons occasionally. For instance, a job fair organized in July 2017 offered up to 2 500 jobs mainly from retail, catering, and property management sectors to middle-aged and elderly workers. Some 58% of the vacancies were full-time jobs, whereas the rest of 42% were part-time jobs. However, there was no further report on successful placements;²¹ and
- (e) **Public education for an age-friendly workplace:** In spite of the survey findings that some 70% of the respondents supported the suggestion of enactment of anti-age discrimination law in Hong Kong, the Government maintains the view that there is no need for such legislation.²² Instead, it has been taking a voluntary approach, including the publication of the "Practical Guidelines for Employers on Eliminating Age Discrimination in Employment" since 1997 and the "Friendly Employment Practices for Mature Persons and Families" in 2015, showcasing the good practices of selected organizations.

3.4 Most of the above measures are either general measures applicable to all age groups or just voluntary guidelines for employers.²³ EPM seems to be the only employment measure tailor-made for mature persons in Hong Kong. That said, there were only 1 463 successful placements for mature persons under EPM in 2017. This is deemed to be small when compared with the size of the mature labour force of 1.2 million in the same year.

4. Measures to promote employment of mature workers in Japan

4.1 Japan has the oldest population in the world, upon decades of falling fertility and rising life longevity. Reflecting the severity of the ageing

²¹ See GovHK (2017).

²² See Equal Opportunities Commission (2016).

²³ Other employment assistance schemes for applicable age groups include the Work Trial Scheme ("WTC") introduced in 2005, providing one-off subsidy of HK\$7,600 to job seekers irrespective of age participating in one-month training in selected organizations to enhance their employability.

problem, the proportion of elderly population in Japan has already risen to 27.3% in 2017, far above the average figure of 16.6% for all of the 35 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ("OECD").²⁴ During 2000-2016, the size of labour force in Japan has already been reduced by some 930 000 or 1.4%. This results in several macroeconomic consequences such as (a) dampening economic growth; (b) nearly tripling of the elderly dependency ratio²⁵ from 17.3 to 45.3 during 1990-2016; and (c) draining of public finance due to a smaller tax base.²⁶ According to the policy advice of the National Council on Social Security System Reform, letting people work longer is the best way out of the woods.²⁷

4.2 This apart, the employment of mature workers is taken as a policy option to support elderly livelihood in Japan. With stagnant economic growth for two decades after the 1990s, the average monthly employment income of regular employees in Japan has fallen by a total of 13% during 1995-2016. Moreover, the monthly pension of retired persons in Japan was equivalent to just around 40% of pre-retirement income on average in 2016, far lower than the average proportion of 63% in OECD. With inadequate pension income, the elderly poverty rate in Japan was 19% in 2014, far above the average figure of 12.5% in OECD.²⁸ Many elderly people in Japan have to continue working for supplementary income to sustain their livelihood.

4.3 As regards the policy measures to promote employment of mature workers, the Japanese government had taken early action to assist mature workers back in the 1970s, though some of them were subsequently abolished and replaced by other active ageing policies.²⁹ The following is a summary of the more recent measures introduced after the 1990s (**Appendix II**):

²⁴ Hong Kong is expected to reach this magnitude of ageing only by 2031. See Census and Statistics Department (2017c).

²⁵ Elderly dependency ratio is defined as the number of individuals aged 65 and above per 100 people of working age of 20-64. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017).

²⁶ See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004).

²⁷ See Matsuura (2009). Lately, the government's policy objective is to create an "ageless society" in which people can work according to their motivation and ability to work and regardless of their age.

²⁸ See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017).

²⁹ For instance, the Japanese government required 6% of the workforce of business firms to be older persons aged 60-65 in 1976, but this non-binding target was abolished in 1986. It also enacted a law in 1990 to offer subsidy to employers with more than 4% of their workforce aged 60-64, but this subsidy scheme was also abolished in 2007.

- (a) **Raising statutory minimum retirement age to 60:** Unlike Hong Kong, there is statutory retirement age in Japan. After the amendment of the Law Concerning Stabilization of Employment of Older Persons ("LCSEOP") effective as from April 1998, the minimum retirement age for the country has been fixed at the age of 60, up from earlier usual business practice of age ranging between 55-60. Postponing retirement age had a direct effect to lengthen the work life of older workers;
- (b) **Raising the pensionable age to 65:** In Japan, employed persons used to be eligible for a flat rate pension at the age of 60. To encourage older workers to stay in workforce, the pensionable age has been progressively raised to 62 in 2004, 63 in 2007, 64 in 2010 and 65 in 2013. For the old age basic pensioners, they can choose to receive deferred payment at age 70 or beyond, with a monthly bonus of 42% added to the standard amount;³⁰
- (c) **Mandatory requirement for employers to provide jobs for older workers till aged 65:** In June 2004, the Japanese government made another amendment to the LCSEOP, requiring employers to take one of the three measures to secure jobs for workers above the minimum retirement age of 60, with effect from April 2006. These three measures include (i) abolishing the retirement age; (ii) raising the retirement age to at least 65; or (iii) introducing a continued employment system if the retirement age is below 65.

For the last option, it can take the form of either extending the employment of older workers in the same company,³¹ re-employment of the older worker on agreed terms such as wages or benefits,³² or recruitment of older workers by affiliated or subsidiary companies. As non-compliant employers are subject to a penalty, this measure ensured that most of the workers aged 60-65 and in good health could stay in employment;

³⁰ For those pensioners choosing to receive pension earlier at the age of 60, their monthly pension is reduced by 30% relative to the standard rate.

³¹ Even prior to the law, some companies already re-hired employees reaching the retirement age, but most of the employees were given salary much lower than previous levels.

³² Under the employment insurance law, those workers aged 60 and put under continued employment can receive a benefit of 0.44% to 15% of their wage at 60 if their wage level is reduced more than 25%. Moreover, as a support to the re-employment policy, the coverage of the contributory employment insurance has been extended to elderly workers aged at 65 and above since January 2017.

(d) **Subsidies to employers for retaining their older workers:** The Japanese government offers a variety of grants and subsidies to employers to promote the employment of older persons. *First*, one-off grants ranging from ¥100,000 (HK\$6,950) to ¥1.5 million (HK\$104,250) will be offered if the retirement age is lifted to 65. The maximum grant will increase by 7% if the age is lifted further to 66 or beyond, or the age limit is simply abolished. There are also one-off grants of up to ¥1 million (HK\$69,500) for providing continued employment to those 66 and above. In 2017, the Japanese government earmarked ¥1.9 billion (HK\$132 million) for the above grants.

Secondly, there are one-off grants to employers for improving the work environment for older workers, aiming to cover 45%-60% of the cost of installing or improving mechanical equipment, work method and environment to meet the needs of older workers, or ¥285,000 (HK\$19,807) per worker aged 60 or above employed for over a year, whichever is lower. The ceiling of the grant is set at ¥10 million (HK\$695,000) per business establishment. In 2017, the total subsidy budget was ¥631 million (HK\$43 million).

Thirdly, there are grants to employers if they change the employment terms of mature workers aged 50 and above from fixed terms to permanent terms. The amount of grant depends on the number of employees and is subject to changes in contractual terms, but can be up to ¥480,000 (HK\$33,360) per eligible employee;

(e) **Subsidies to employers for new hiring of older workers:** *First*, a subsidy of up to ¥1.5 million (HK\$104,250) and ¥2 million (HK\$139,000) is provided to those new business firms owned by persons aged 40-59 and aged 60 and above respectively, if they also recruit older workers.³³ *Secondly*, a one-off subsidy of up to ¥700,000 (HK\$48,300) per eligible employee is provided to employers hiring elderly workers via employment agencies for full-time work for at least a year.³⁴ *Thirdly*, another one-off

³³ The employer has to hire at least one person aged 60 and above, or two persons aged 40-60.

³⁴ The lump-sum grants are up to ¥700,000 (HK\$48,300) for employing full time employees (over 30 hours per week) or up to ¥500,000 (HK\$34,500) for employees working between 20 and 30 hours per week.

subsidy of up to ¥600,000 (HK\$41,700) is offered to employers hiring workers aged 60-64 with problems finding work via job agencies;

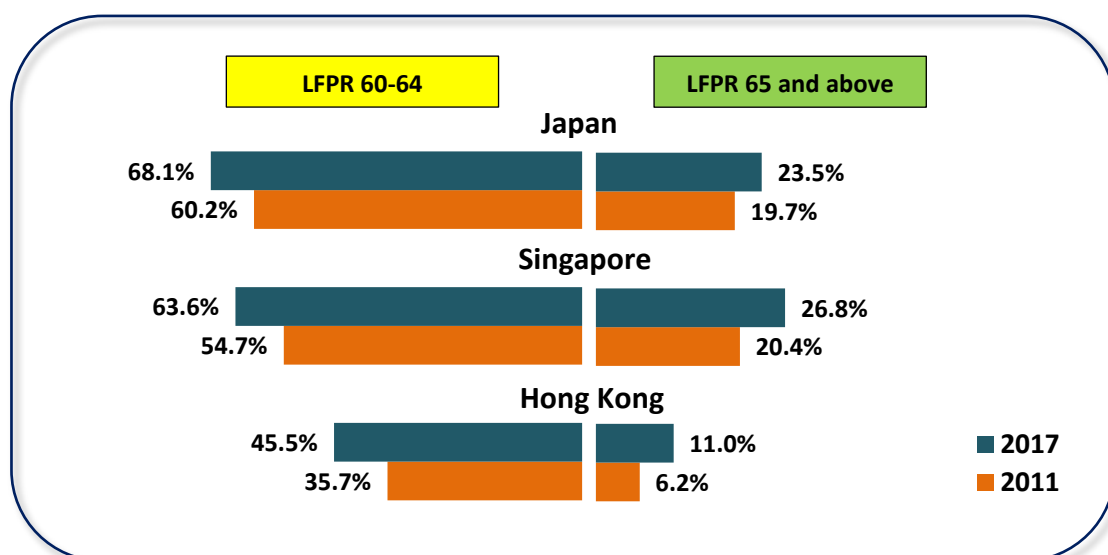
- (f) **Temporary jobs arranged by Silver Human Resources Centers ("SHRC"):** Subsidized by the national and local governments, SHRC provides community-based job opportunities for its members aged 60 and above. SHRCs first amass jobs contracted out by various sources (i.e. government, business, NGOs and individuals) and assign them to SHRC members.³⁵ These jobs are usually flexible and part-time in nature (e.g. building janitorial work or reception in an office) without any guaranteed income. By and large, each SHRC member on average could work about 10 days within a month (20 working hours or less per week), earning a monthly income of about ¥35,800 (HK\$2,470) in 2016. SHRC now has more than 1 300 local branches throughout Japan, with 720 000 members and an annual contract turnover of ¥313 billion (HK\$2.2 billion); and
- (g) **Anti-age discrimination legislation:** Following the collapse of the bubble economy in Japan in the 1990s, many middle-aged and elderly persons could not find jobs due to alleged age discrimination.³⁶ In response, the Employment Measures Act was amended in 2001, requiring employers to "endeavour to make an effort" to avoid setting age limits in hiring and recruitment unless with justifications. The law was further amended in 2007, making it a legal obligation for employers to provide equal opportunities in recruitment and hiring.

³⁵ In 2016, the average age of SHRC membership was 72.4 for males and 71.8 for females, while 63% of its members were aged 65-74. SHRC grew out of an experimental programme of contracted part-time work for older persons in Tokyo in 1974, before being recognized as a national programme and supported by the then Ministry of Labour in 1980.

³⁶ See Taylor et al (2008). The difficulties to get employed may also be related to the established practice of recruiting fresh graduates in Japan and widespread unwillingness to hire people aged 40 and above.

4.4 The above policy measures, coupled with the economic need of older people to support livelihood, appear to be effective in boosting employment of mature persons in Japan. **First**, LFPR for persons aged 60-64 increased steadily from 55% in 2006 to 60% in 2011 and further to 68% in 2017. To a certain extent, this could be attributable to the mandatory requirements of employers to offer jobs to their older workers until the age of 65, even though they have reached the minimum retirement age of 60 (**Figure 3**). **Secondly**, mature persons took up as much as 40% of the labour force in 2017, up from 38% in 2007. **Thirdly**, work income accounts for some 40% of the income of the elderly population in Japan, doubling that of around 20% in OECD. This nevertheless also suggests that the pension income was on the low side in Japan.

Figure 3 – LFPR of older persons in Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong, 2011-2017



4.5 However, there are concerns in Japan that the expansion of employment of mature workers is not accompanied with improved job quality. According to a survey conducted by Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training in 2007, 83% of workers aged 60 and above were engaged in temporary or contract jobs, with only 12% working as full-time regular employees. As to monthly earnings, only 42% of those workers receiving extended employment after the age of 60 received the same pay as before. For those re-employed on contract terms after the age of 60, they had to face wage cut within a range of 20%-50%.³⁷

³⁷ See Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (2017).

5. Measures to promote employment of mature persons in Singapore

5.1 The resident population in Singapore is likewise ageing fast, as its proportion of elderly people aged 65 and above picked up visibly from 8.5% in 2007 to 13% in 2017, and is expected to nearly double to 25% by 2030. Excluding foreign workers, the resident labour force is expected to shrink as soon as from 2020. It was estimated that a 1% fall in labour supply growth could lead to at least 0.5 percentage point reduction in GDP growth per annum, according to an econometric study.³⁸

5.2 Against the above backdrop, the Singaporean government has been keen to make good use of older workers. Back in 1993, it enacted the Retirement Age Act ("RAA"), introducing and setting the statutory minimum retirement age at 60. Since the 1990s, the Singaporean government has relied on the strong collaboration of Tripartite Committee (between the government, labour unions and employers) to roll out dedicated policies and legislation to promote the employment of mature persons.³⁹

5.3 The following is a summary on key policy measures adopted by the Singaporean government over the past two decades or so:

- (a) **Raising the statutory minimum retirement age to 62:** Six years after the enactment of RAA, the Singaporean government amended RAA and raised the minimum retirement age to 62 in 1999, which is still in force now. It used to carry a provision to allow employers to cut wages of up to 10% for employees aged 60 and above to relieve the related cost impact on employers, but that has been removed in July 2017;
- (b) **Restricting early lump-sum withdrawal of retirement savings:** Singaporeans used to be able to withdraw all of the retirement savings accumulated under the Central Provident Fund ("CPF") once reaching the age of 55. To discourage early retirement, a Minimum Sum Scheme was introduced under CPF in 1987,

³⁸ See Strait Times (2017a).

³⁹ The tripartite partners are the Ministry of Manpower, the National Trades Union Congress and Singapore National Employers Federation. For instance, the Tripartite Committee made a suggestion in 1997 to raise the mandatory retirement age to 62. It was followed by forming the Tripartite Committee on Employability of Older Workers in 2005, proposing an enactment of a legislation on re-employment.

requiring members to keep a minimum balance in their accounts for the provision of a monthly payout for about 20 years. Since 2013, CPF members born after 1958 with a minimum amount of saving in their retirement account were mandatorily required to buy an annuity offering lifelong payout from the age of 65.⁴⁰ Separately, in case a member chooses to delay their first monthly annuity payout from the age of 65 to 70, the payout amount would increase by 7% for each deferred year. All these arrangements have created extra incentives for older persons to stay in the workforce;

- (c) **Enacting legislation to protect re-employment rights of employees up to the age of 67:** In January 2012, the landmark RAA was substantially amended to become the Retirement and Re-employment Act ("RRA"). Under the new law, employers are mandatorily required to re-employ their mature workers after the minimum retirement age of 62 (either on a fixed-term contract or annually renewable contract) till the age of 65, with salary and benefits based on reasonable factors like productivity, duties and responsibilities.

For those employers who have exhausted all options and still cannot re-employ their eligible older workers,⁴¹ they must pay an one-off Employment Assistance Payment ("EAP") to the affected workers as a last resort, equivalent to 3.5 months of salary for workers subject to a minimum of S\$5,500 (HK\$31,020) and a maximum of S\$13,000 (HK\$73,060). The payment aims to help the employee tide over the difficulties while seeking new employment.

⁴⁰ The current required minimum saving in the retirement account is S\$60,000 (HK\$372,000). The payout depends on the plan opted for by the member, with the standard default plan ranging from S\$720 (HK\$4,046) to S\$2,060 (HK\$11,577).

⁴¹ The worker should have satisfactory work performance and should be medically fit. The eligible workers should be engaged six months before he or she reaches the retirement age. The terms of re-employment must be mutually agreed. The Ministry of Manpower is responsible for handling any dispute on that.

With effect from July 2017, the mandatory re-employment age has been lifted further from 65 to 67, while employers are allowed to transfer the re-employment obligations to other employers;

- (d) **Wage subsidies to employers hiring mature workers aged 55 and above:** The Special Employment Credit was launched in 2011 to enhance employability of lower-skilled workers. Since mid-2017, employer hiring eligible workers with monthly earnings up to S\$4,000 (HK\$22,600) can receive monthly wage offset which is tiered by age and can be up to 11% of monthly earnings until end-2019.⁴²

For higher-skilled workers such as professionals, managers, executives and technicians ("PMET") aged 40 and above, a monthly subsidy has been granted under the Career Support Programme introduced since 2015. At present, a monthly subsidy equivalent to 50% of salary is reimbursed to employers for the first six months of employment, 30% for the next six months and 20% for the third six-month period. The total subsidy is capped at S\$42,000 (HK\$236,040) for the 18-month period;

- (e) **Reduced employer's contribution to CPF for hiring mature workers:** Since 1988, the employers' contribution rates to CPF has decreased with the age of employees to improve the employability of older workers who generally have higher pay under the seniority-wage structure. At present, the employers' contribution rate for their elderly employees aged 65 and above is 7.5% of total wages, less than one-half of the respective rate of 17% for the younger cohort aged 35 and below;
- (f) **Grants to employers for redesigning workplace and process to meet the needs of older workers:** The enhanced WorkPro scheme was introduced in July 2016, providing one-off financial support to those companies which need to (i) redesign their workplaces or work processes; (ii) offer flexible work

⁴² Since 1 July 2017, the benefit has been 3% of wage for hiring workers aged 55 to 59, and 5% for 60-64, and 8% for those aged 65 and above. There is an additional bonus offset of 3% for those aged 65 and above.

arrangements; and (iii) adopt age management practices for their older workers aged 50 and above. Each employer can receive a grant of up to S\$480,000 (HK\$2.7 million);

- (g) **Financial subsidy for low-pay employees to work longer:** The Workfare Income Supplement Scheme was launched in 2007 providing incentives for low-pay and low-skilled workers aged 35 and above with a monthly income below S\$2,000 (HK\$11,300) to stay in the workforce. To provide extra incentive for older workers, the annual ceiling of the income supplement is set at S\$3,600 (HK\$20,340) for workers aged 60 and above, more than twice the respective ceiling of S\$1,500 (HK\$8,430) for workers aged 35-44. A total of 40% of the payout is paid as direct cash payments and the rest of 60% as injection into workers' CPF accounts;
- (h) **Protection over age discrimination:** While there is no comprehensive age-discrimination law in Singapore, there are provisions in RRA protecting employees below the prescribed minimum retirement age from unreasonable dismissals based entirely on the ground of age. RRA also allows remedies for unlawful dismissals and unreasonable denial of re-employment. According to the Singaporean government, age-discrimination is not prevalent in Singapore, with only 42 complaints filed to the authorities in 2017;⁴³ and
- (i) **Retraining of older workers:** The Singaporean government has invested some S\$400 million (HK\$2.3 billion) on funding courses for workers to upgrade their skills in 2016.⁴⁴ It also spent about S\$37 million (HK\$208 million) for giving retraining credit of S\$500 (\$2,810) to persons aged 25 and above. Amongst the 120 000 recipients so far, 63% were aged at and above 40. However, according to an earlier study completed in 2009, there is limited substantive data available to show that such retraining had "an impact on employment opportunities and continued employment for older workers".⁴⁵

⁴³ See Ministry of Manpower (2018a).

⁴⁴ See Ministry of Education (2017).

⁴⁵ See The Sloan Center of Aging and Work (2009).

5.4 It is noted that some of the above measures may seem to have an impact on employment of mature persons in Singapore. For instance, after the enactment of RRA in 2012, almost all (99%) of the local employees aged 62 in the private sector wishing to work further were offered re-employment.⁴⁶ Moreover, about 98% of the re-employed workers also did not experience any wage cut.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, more than S\$3 billion (HK\$16.95 billion) of wage subsidies has been granted to employers under the Special Employment Credit scheme. In 2013, 445 000 employees and 100 000 employers were benefited from the scheme and about 120 000 employees were aged 65 and above. In 2017, 350 000 employees and 93 000 employers were benefitted after the scheme was extended. In addition, some S\$5.5 billion (HK\$31 billion) of wage supplements have been paid to 830 000 workers under the Work Income Supplement Scheme since 2007.⁴⁸

5.5 The policy effectiveness of the above measures could also be reflected in the employment trends of mature persons in Singapore. **First**, the size of mature labour force aged 50 and above has expanded by a total of 25% during 2011-2017, while that for the elderly segment aged 65 and above increased even more by 92%. **Secondly**, LFPR for those mature persons aged 55-64 went up from 63.4% to 69.5% during 2011-2017, and for the elderly segment from 20.4% to 26.8%. **Thirdly**, as a result of faster expansion of mature workers, its share in total labour force increased from 30.1% to 34.4% over the same period. As to the elderly segment, it almost doubled from 3.7% to 6.5%. **Fourthly**, with generally lower education attainment, 50% of the mature workers were engaged in lower-skilled or blue-collar occupations in 2017. For the elderly segment, the respective figure was higher at 68%. **Lastly**, the monthly employment income of the elderly people is on the low side, however. For instance, the median gross income from full time work for persons aged 60 and above was about S\$2,000 (HK\$11,240) per month in 2017, just 47% of the respective figure of the total workforce in Singapore.

⁴⁶ The acceptance rate of the offer for reemployment was 98.1% in 2012, according to the Economics Unit of the Ministry of Manpower. The Unit also estimated that the law had led to an average 1.6% increase of employment rate of older persons per annum. Yet, a government study concluded that other factors also contributed to this policy effectiveness, including a "tight labour market" and "tightened foreign worker policy" before policy implementation. See Ministry of Manpower (2017a).

⁴⁷ See Ministry of Manpower (2018b).

⁴⁸ See Ministry of Manpower (2018b).

6. Observations

6.1 In Hong Kong, LFPR for elderly persons has doubled within a decade to 11.0% in 2017, but it was less than half of the corresponding figures of 23.5% seen in Japan and 26.8% in Singapore. On top of the general schemes applicable to all age groups, the provision of monthly training allowance to employers under EPM seems to be the only tailor-made measure to promote employment of mature persons in Hong Kong.

6.2 By contrast, both governments in Japan and Singapore have launched far more schemes to boost employment of mature persons. They specifically include (a) enacting specific legislation for mandatory re-employment of mature workers; (b) offering subsidy to employers to retain or recruit older workers; (c) offering subsidy to such workers to stay on employment; (d) supporting government-sponsored organizations to arrange flexible and short-term jobs for elderly; and (e) offering statutory protection against age discrimination at the workplace.

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Socioeconomic characteristics of mature labour force in Hong Kong

		Mature labour force (Aged 50 and above)			Elderly labour force (Aged 65 and above)			Overall labour force (Aged 15 and above)		
		2007	2012	2017	2007	2012	2017	2007	2012	2017
1.	Population size	2 069 100	2 504 500	2 893 900	812 800	916 700	1 153 800	5 699 600	5 985 500	6 156 500
2.	Size of labour force	766 100	1 025 900	1 243 600	425 000	64 800	126 500	3 405 800	3 516 300	3 639 800
3.	Labour force participation rate (%)	37.0%	41.0%	43.0%	5.2%	7.1%	11.0%	59.8%	58.7%	59.1%
4.	Employed population	733 400	997 500	1 209 600	42 100	64 300	124 100	3 260 500	3 392 000	3 516 400
5.	Unemployed population	327 000	284 000	341 000	5 000	5 000	2 400	145 300	124 300	123 400
6.	Unemployment rate (%)	4.3%	2.8%	2.7%	1.1%	0.8%	1.9%	4.3%	3.5%	3.4%
7.	Education level of workforce (% share)									
	- Upper secondary and below	84.5%	81.8%	78.6%	81.8%	82.1%	86.1%	67.8%	63.4%	57.9%
	- Tertiary and above	15.5%	18.3%	21.4%	18.1%	17.9%	13.9%	32.2%	36.6%	42.2%
8.	Occupations of workers (% share)									
	- Managerial and professional workers	30.6%	32.7%	34.6%	36.1%	36.9%	28.6%	38.7%	41.1%	43.3%
	- Lower-skill workers ⁴⁹	60.8%	58.8%	55.6%	56.8%	59.0%	66.8%	44.5%	43.9%	42.4%
9.	Weekly hours of work (% share)									
	- Less than 35 hours	14.8%	17.8%	22.7%	21.6%	27.8%	35.4%	12.8%	16.4%	20.3%
	- 35 hours or more	85.2%	82.2%	77.3%	78.4%	72.2%	64.6%	87.2%	83.6%	79.7%
10.	Median monthly earnings (HK\$)	\$9,500	\$12,000	\$15,000	\$7,000	\$9,000	\$10,200	\$11,000	\$13,000	\$17,000

⁴⁹ These include service and sales workers, crafted and related workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers, and elementary occupations but exclude clerks.

Key measures to promote employment of mature persons in selected places

	Hong Kong	Japan	Singapore
(A) Key labour force statistics in 2017			
(a) Share of those at 50 and above in labour force	• 34.1%.	• 39.9%.	• 34.4%.
(b) LFPR for aged 55-64	• 64.2 (age 50-64).	• 75.3%.	• 69.5%.
(c) Share of those at 65 and above in labour force	• 3.5%.	• 12.2%.	• 6.5%.
(d) LFPR for aged 65 and above	• 11.0%.	• 23.5%.	• 26.8%.
(B) Key measures to promote employment of mature persons			
(a) Statutory minimum retirement age	• No.	• 60.	• 62.
(b) Legislation on continued employment or re-employment of older workers	• No.	• Must offer continued or re-employment until age 65. ⁵⁰	• Must arrange re-employment until aged 67. ⁵¹
(c) Subsidies to employers to hire older persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HK\$3,000 for aged at 40 and above for a period six months. • HK\$4,000 for those aged 60 and above for 6 to 12 months. 	• From ¥100,000 (HK\$6,950) to ¥1.6 million (HK\$111,200) for raising retirement age to 65 or above, or simply abolishing the age.	• 3%-5% wage offset for hiring those aged 55 to 64 and above, and 11% offset for hiring those aged 65 and above.
(d) Funding for redesigning work place	• No.	• 60% of the expenses (or ¥285,000 (HK\$19,807) per each worker over 60, whichever is lower), with a ceiling of ¥10 million (HK\$695,000).	• Up to S\$300,000 (HK\$1.69 million) for redesigning of the work place.

⁵⁰ Under the Law Concerning Stabilization of Employment of Older Persons.

⁵¹ Under the Retirement and Re-employment Act.

Key measures to promote employment of mature persons in selected places (cont'd)

	Hong Kong	Japan	Singapore
(e) Statutory protection against age discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment Measures Act.⁵² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retirement and Re-employment Act.⁵³
(f) Other measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job fairs for mature persons; and Retraining courses for older persons. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising pensionable age to 65 by phase and bonus for deferred pension; Silver Human Resources Centers to provide temporary employment; and Subsidies for older business owners to hire older workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restricting early withdrawal of Central Provident Fund savings; Reduced employers' contribution to Central Provident Fund; and Subsidies to low-pay workers of up to S\$3,600 (HK\$20,340) a year for those aged 60 and above.

⁵² The Employment Measures Act provides protection on equal opportunities including age, although there is no stand-alone age discrimination legislation.

⁵³ The Retirement and Re-employment Act protects dismissal on the ground of age, although there is no stand-alone age discrimination legislation.

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