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The role of social enterprises in facilitating labour market integration for people with disabilities: A convenient deflection from policy mainstreaming?

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Abstract

There is limited research on social enterprises being conducted in the context of disability in relation to labour market integration. Drawing on the perspectives from representatives of work integration social enterprises and persons with disabilities employed in these enterprises (n=21), this study examines first, whether, and how do work integration social enterprises promote inclusion for persons with disabilities; and second, explore the role of WISEs in enabling persons with disabilities to transition into open employment. Thematic analysis revealed three key emergent themes: Cocooned inclusion but not transition, Reinforced normative demarcation, and WISEs as a deflection from institutionalizing proactive disability policy measures. This article argues that although WISEs were able to provide persons with disabilities with job opportunities, their purported function in enabling persons with disabilities to transition into open employment remains constrained by larger factors beyond their control including prevailing norms and the absence of proactive disability employment measures.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, social enterprises have received growing attention in public policy, academia and popular discourse as a promising and innovative means to resolve increasingly complex societal challenges (McCabe & Hanh, 2006; Sinclair & Baglioni, 2014). Broadly speaking, social enterprises (SEs) are hybrid organizations that employ market-based strategies in response to societal challenges (Gerrard, 2015) and are one of many tangible outcomes of social entrepreneurship (Mair & Marti, 2006). Research on the conceptual definitions, functions, capabilities, performance, and impact of social enterprises has also grown rapidly (Lee & Chandra, 2020; Monroe-White & Zook, 2018; Rothschild, 2009). One key study area on SEs pertains to its function and ability to combat social exclusion; or alternatively, to facilitate social inclusion for disadvantaged individuals (Martinelli, 2012; Oosterlynck, Novy, & Kazepov, 2019; Smith et al., 2018).

Yet, an important research gap in SE literature is the lack of attention paid to the *context* within which social entrepreneurship take place, and where social enterprises operate (Chandra, Teasdale, & Tjiptono, 2020). As put forth by several studies (Chandra, Teasdale, & Tjiptono, 2020; Welter et al., 2019), social entrepreneurship is a contextualized phenomenon. In this vein, empirical work examining the role of social enterprises in the *context of disability* remains underexplored (Meltzer, Kayess, & Bates, 2018), especially in Hong Kong, a city underscored by a productivist welfare regime (Holliday, 2000) that prioritizes economic growth and productivity in lieu of social rights, and where social policies are primarily used as a means to promote economic participation via the market (Chui et al., 2018; Chui, Shum, & Lum, 2019).

This study fills this gap by situating itself in the intersections between social enterprise and disability studies, and draws on the perspectives of work integration social enterprises (WISEs) representatives and persons with disabilities involved with those WISEs to address the following interrelated research questions: (1) Whether, and how do work integration social enterprises promote inclusion in persons with disabilities?; and (2) whether WISEs enable persons with disabilities to transition to open employment? Given the rapid proliferation of SEs as a global phenomenon, this study has international relevance, especially for those who seek to understand the complex and dynamic intersections between social enterprises, inclusion and labour market participation of people with disabilities.

Social enterprises as a vehicle to enable labour market integration

Globally, persons with disabilities constitute as much as 15% (or one billion) of the world's total population (ILO, 2020). Despite concerted efforts in pursuing equal opportunities and inclusion for persons with disabilities, disparities prevail in human capital outcomes, such as employment, education attainment, and income levels compared to the general population (Humber, 2014; Lillestø & Sandvin, 2014; Meltzer, Robinson, & Fisher, 2020). Specifically, exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream labour market and to decent work remains pervasive (ILO, 2020).

While this study recognizes that exclusion/inclusion comprises multiple life domains including economic, social, cultural, and political integration (Burchardt et al., 2002), we focused on examining the role of work integration social enterprises (WISEs) in facilitating *labour market integration* for persons with disabilities for three primary reasons: First, because employment has been theorized as a key mechanism for inclusion (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Chau et al., 2018; Hall, Kurth, & Hunt, 2013), with studies demonstrating positive correlations between paid work and life satisfaction among persons with disabilities (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Chau et al., 2018; Hall, Kurth, & Hunt, 2013). Conversely, exclusion from the labour market or unemployment has been consistently linked to worse health and wellbeing outcomes (Modini et al., 2016). Second, while increased policy emphasis is placed on furthering the development of social enterprise as a vehicle to create employment opportunities for disadvantaged communities, there remains a dearth in empirical data to substantiate such claims (Chui, Shum, & Lum, 2019; McGabe & Hanh, 2006; Teasdale, 2010). Third, there remains limited SE studies in the context of disability (Meltzer, Kayess, & Bates, 2018; Smith, McVilly, McGillivray, & Chan, 2018). Disability itself may present a unique set of challenges that require different solutions for social enterprises and policymakers to contend with.

Nevertheless, existing studies examining the nexus between social enterprise and labour market integration for marginalized communities do provide insight. Employment-focused social enterprises, which are also commonly known as work integration social enterprises (WISEs), are specifically designed to provide job opportunities to those who would otherwise be excluded from the mainstream labour market (Kummitha, 2016; Qian, Riseley, & Barraket, 2019), or to train disadvantaged individuals in order to enhance their employability through job training. Studies have shown that WISEs were able to generate a range of positive social and psychological benefits including enhanced psychological well-being, self-efficacy (empowerment), and expanded social networks and capital among disadvantaged individuals involved with those WISEs (Chui, Shum, & Lum, 2019; Ho & Chan, 2010). Several, but limited studies, have also shown that social enterprises are able to create job opportunities for persons with disabilities and combat labour market exclusion (Gidron, 2014; Kim, 2009; Spear & Bidet, 2005). Despite evidence affirming the role of WISEs in creating job opportunities for disadvantaged individuals, few studies have examined possible conundrum between WISE and its role in enabling persons with disabilities to transition into open employment.

Study context: Hong Kong policy approach to employment for persons with disabilities

There are an estimated 679,600 persons with disabilities¹ in Hong Kong, accounting for approximately 9.7% of the total population of 7 million. Of the 558,000 persons aged 15 and over with disabilities in Hong Kong, approximately 76,200 (13.6%) were employed persons (Census and Statistics Department, 2013).

¹ Persons with disabilities comprise those who had one or more of the following disabilities: (1) restriction in body movement; (2) seeing difficulty; (3) hearing difficulty; (4) speech difficulty; (5) mental illness/ mood disorder; (6) autism; (7) specific learning difficulties; (8) Attention deficit /hyperactivity disorder; and intellectual disability (Census and Statistics Department, 2015)

Unlike neighbouring regions such as Mainland China and Japan, Hong Kong does not have a comprehensive disability employment policy or corresponding affirmative policy measures such as disability employment quotas, and tax incentives for employers. Nevertheless, measures aimed at facilitating employment for persons with disabilities do exist, and are primarily conducted through two policy pathways. The first is through the Work Orientation and Placement Scheme (WOPS) implemented in 2005 that provides employers with wage subsidies for a maximum period of 9 months and a maximum payable subsidy of HK\$51,000 (equivalent of US\$6,358) for hiring persons with disabilities. The second policy pathway is through offering non-governmental organisations to set up employment-focused social enterprises that specifically creates job opportunities for persons with disabilities (the maximum funding support per business is HK\$3 million) (LWB, 2019). In particular, the *Enhancing Employment of People with Disabilities through Small Enterprise Project* (3Es) launched in 2001 specifically seeks to address the underemployment of persons with disabilities. Similar to other public policy funds aimed at developing social enterprises, only nonprofits are eligible to apply for this funding scheme. Consequently, work integration social enterprises affiliated with nonprofits became the dominant SE model (Chan et al., 2019; Chan, Kuan, & Wang, 2011; Tang, Fung, Au, Lee, & Ko, 2008). Most employment support services for person with disabilities are mainly provided by these social enterprises (Cheng, Chiu, Fung, & Au, 2015).

The Hong Kong government stipulates the primary objectives of WISEs as twofold: to enable “people who are at risk of permanent exclusion from the labour market by integrating them into work and society through a productive activity,” and “to assist the unemployed to move back to mainstream employment” (Commission On Poverty, 2005). As one can see, WISEs are conceived from the policy standpoint as a key vehicle to facilitate inclusion, and transition to open employment for persons with disabilities in Hong Kong. By 2018, there were 651 social enterprises in Hong Kong (SEBC, 2019). Amongst them, it is estimated that there are 73 social enterprises that employ persons with disabilities (SEBC, 2020). Yet, data regarding the total number of persons with disabilities working in social enterprises is unavailable. Taken the social economy sector as a whole, however, social enterprises were reported to have employed approximately 7,000 people in 2015 (Legislative Council, 2016).

Method

To achieve our research objectives, we adopted a qualitative method of inquiry for our study by using semi-structured in-depth interviews. We employed purposeful sampling to select five work integration social enterprises whose organizational missions were to create job opportunities for persons with disabilities (see Table 1) from an open directory of social enterprises made available by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, an umbrella organisation of more than 400 nonprofits in the city. All of the WISEs we selected employed persons with disabilities.² We did not focus on one particular type of disability because our priority was to understand the overall employment experience of persons with disabilities. Among each of those WISEs, potential participants were invited to participate in the study via email if they fulfilled the following criteria: (1) they were employees of WISEs at the time of the study; and (2) they self-

² Persons with disabilities were defined as those who have one or more of the following disabilities: (1) restriction in body movement; (2) seeing difficulty; (3) hearing difficulty; (4) speech difficulty; (5) mental illness/ mood disorder; (6) autism; (7) specific learning difficulties; (8) Attention deficit /hyperactivity disorder; and intellectual disability.

identified as having at least one form of disability. In addition, managers and/or founders of those WISEs were invited to participate in the research. The inclusion criteria for the managers were that they be a manager or a founder at the time of the study. Under that sampling frame, 21 participants in five WISEs participated in the research, the demographic details of which are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1]

An interview guide was used to elicit the participants' views pertaining to the present research objective. Questions posed to employees included: 'Can you describe your work experience in the current WISE?'; 'Do you think WISEs can promote inclusion in Hong Kong?'; 'Do you think WISEs are enabling you to transition to open employment?'; 'If not, what are the barriers?' Questions posed to the managers and founders of WISEs included: 'What were your motivations for setting up the WISE?'; 'Do you think WISEs promote inclusion?'; 'What challenges do you encounter in your attempt to promote inclusion?'; and 'Do you think WISEs enable persons with disabilities to transition to the open market?'; 'Other than WISEs, what else can be done to enable more persons with disabilities to participate in the labour market?' Interviews took place between May 2016 and March 2017 at venues convenient to the participants. Having acquired the participants' informed consent, we audiotaped and transcribed all interviews verbatim. This study was approved by the University of [blinded for review] Human Research Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2012) in the following steps. First, we read the transcripts repeatedly in order to familiarise ourselves with the data. Second, phrases and words relevant to our research questions were extracted and were openly coded. An initial list of codes was generated. Third, we collapse these initial codes into relevant categories, from which the final emergent themes were generated. For example, when it was evident that one emergent theme was that participants had little intention to transition into the open market, we classified those illustrative examples under the theme 'Cocooned inclusion but not transition'. We then reviewed and refined all of the themes before presenting them. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical process.

[Figure 1]

To ensure data reliability, the two authors of this article undertook the coding process independently. Comparisons between the emergent themes were made, and where there were discrepancies, the authors went back to the data and resolved disputes. A third author of this article then reviewed the emergent findings to generate further consensus. All data were analysed using the qualitative statistical software NVivo. The following presents these emergent themes, substantiated by illustrative quotes extracted directly from participants.

Results

Three key themes relating to the role of WISEs in promoting social inclusion and in enabling persons with disabilities to transition into open employment emerged from our thematic analysis. The themes were *Cocooned inclusion but not transition*, *Reinforced normative demarcation*, and *WISEs as a deflection from institutionalising proactive disability policy measures*. In reporting these themes, we strove to explicate the relationship between the participants' views and the overall disability policy measures (or lack thereof) in Hong Kong.

Cocooned inclusion but not transition

The first evident theme generated from our data revealed that although participants indicated they were able to garner a sense of inclusiveness and belongingness via their employment in WISEs, they did not believe that the commercial market offers a similarly inclusive working culture and environment. As evidenced by the excerpts below, participants were able to identify specific workplace culture and processes (e.g. interpersonal relationships) that had enabled them to experience inclusion. However, this sense of inclusion was not observed and felt beyond the WISE itself. This is significant because it reveals the dynamic and complex nuances within the workplace environment that directly challenges the assumptive relationship between employment and inclusion, as purported by some theorists (Hall et al., 2013) as well as the government's claim that WISEs were able to combat social exclusion (Commission On Poverty, 2005).

I feel very supported and cared for...my boss learned sign language just to communicate with us. (P1, female, with hearing impairment)

Unlike how our boss cares about us here, in the [open market] nobody cares about anybody. They won't be bothered with talking to you or really getting to know you...but my colleagues here, we talk a lot to each other and care about each other (P2, female, with hearing impairment)

Previously I couldn't find any meaning at work... I had no motivation to work and was always worried someone may take advantage of me because of my disability. Here I feel safe...I don't want to leave this workplace at all. (P12, male, with mental illness)

WISEs take into account our abilities. They allow us to have some flexibility...When I first started, I worked 4 hours, then when I [could] cope I gradually increased my working hours to 8. You can't do that in the open market. (P15, female, with mental illness)

Despite positive gains from their employment in WISEs, participants indicated that similar accommodative employment measures were not available in the open market. To our participants, barriers to participate in the open labour market are still very much evident for persons with disabilities. All participants in our study had no intention or desire to seek employment in the open market.

Interviewer: *you said you can't find a job in the open market—why is that?*

Respondent: *I am quite old now and I have a hearing problem. It's very difficult for people [like myself] to find a job.* (P1, female, with hearing impairment)

It's so difficult for us people to look for a job elsewhere...I don't have any plans to leave [my current workplace] and am very happy here. (P12, male, with mental illness)

I think there are barely any opportunities [in the open market]. I wouldn't consider trying to apply for a job elsewhere. It's so harsh in the open market, I mean if you made a mistake people would just kick you out, but here, people are more considerate and accommodating. At least that's how I feel. (P15, female, recovered from mental illness)

The managers and founders of the WISEs echoed similar views. Participants noted that although the WISEs were able to provide job opportunities for persons with disabilities, the market still lacked actual opportunities to enable persons with disabilities to transition into the open job market. In that respect, WISEs appear to be able to achieve inclusiveness within themselves, but only in a cocooned sense. Exclusion from the mainstream labour market prevails. Indeed, the employment rate of persons with disabilities aged 15 years or above remains disproportionately low compared to the general population, at approximately 13.6% and 60.8% respectively (Census and Statistic Department, 2017). Managers also point out that without proactive measures in addressing the inaccessibility and 'disabling workplace environments' (Hall & Wilton, 2011) in the private market, the impact of WISE in facilitating social inclusion for persons with disabilities would remain limited. Taken together, WISEs have limited function in terms of enabling persons with disabilities in transitioning to open employment.

We are an empowerment platform, enabling our friends with visual and hearing impairments to demonstrate their talent and capability here at our workplace. But how many of them can I hire as a WISE? Not even 100 in total. So even if we are a very successful WISE, so what? I think we are doing meaningful work here, but look, we have so many persons with disabilities with high qualifications here in Hong Kong, with university degrees, yet they have so many difficulties in finding jobs in the private market. Their employment rate is something like a little under 30% compared to about 80% among 'abled graduates'...why is that? So WISEs become sort of like ivory towers...after all, I feel the corporates are very reluctant to hire people with differences. (P5, manager of WISE #2)

Most of our employees with disabilities are content where they are now. They find the work meaningful, but if they try it out in the open market, the competition is much fiercer and maybe the risks are much higher, so they prefer staying to work in WISEs...Also, we need more diversified opportunities in the open market for people with disabilities...right now it seems only 'low-skills' jobs are available to them, like cleaning...but in fact many are highly educated. There are really very limited opportunities in the open market (P13, manager of WISE #3)

We consider [it] a successful case of transitioning if s/he can find a job in the open market and maintain it for at least 6 months or longer...our success rate is [a] little lower than thirty

percent. This means most couldn't achieve this...most of them come back to our WISE. (P21, manager of WISE #5)

Reinforced normative demarcation

Our second emergent theme was reinforced normative demarcation. Whereas our participants with disabilities overwhelmingly indicated that they felt a sense of inclusiveness via their employment in WISE, managers and founders questioned the very notion of whether WISEs can successfully combat exclusion and discriminatory attitudes towards persons with disabilities at the societal level. They observed that because the majority of the public still equated social enterprises with charities, WISEs may actually, albeit unintentionally, exacerbate and perpetuate their own 'otherness' and marginalization from 'mainstream' society. That finding shed light on how existing societal norms regarding the role of WISEs constitute a key barrier to facilitate inclusion.

I don't really advertise ourselves as a WISE...we want to promote inclusion...and not have people think of us as a charity. (P4, founder of WISE #1)

How many people in the public actually understand the purpose of WISEs? Speaking from my experience, I think very few...When we charge for our services or products, customers ask why aren't we selling them at a cheaper price. They ask for discounts and simply assume that we are a charity...This mind set really needs to change. (P7, supervisor of WISE #2)

Not only do managers expressed indignation toward the negative normative perception of WISEs, but also regarding disability itself. Recounting the numerous occasions where patrons would ask for a discount on their products and services because they were a WISE that employs persons with disabilities, one participant indicated that such requests were patronizing and reflect the underlying normative assumptions about persons with disabilities. This discovery also provided additional insight into why transitioning into the open market remains very difficult for persons with disabilities. As argued by Moser (2000), 'the main problem is a norm that locates agency, mobility and a centred subjectivity in a naturalised and given human body. Measured against this norm, disabled people will always be constituted as Other, as deficient and dependent' (p. 201).

Put it this way, we don't treat our employees like they are service recipients or clients. If you're talking about equal opportunity and inclusion, then persons with disabilities are also entitled to equal participation in contributing to society. They don't need to be put in the spotlight or need [the public's] pity, just respect and actual opportunities. This is an important distinction that is necessary to achieve inclusion. But it seems the public simply does not understand this. They still focus on our employees' disabilities rather than their capabilities. (P9, founder of WISE #2)

Right, so although we are rehabilitation-oriented, we don't want the public to treat us like a charity...the average person thinks charities offer subpar quality of service or

goods...they ask me why we are charging market price since we employ persons with disabilities or they ask for discounts! We are not selling 'charity' ... But I think the public is still confused. (P14, supervisor of WISE #3)

WISEs as a deflection from institutionalising proactive disability policy measures

Although the Hong Kong government actively embraces WISEs as a promising tool for social inclusion (Commission On Poverty, 2005), participants indicated that WISEs should not be conceived as a panacea to combat the exclusion of persons with disabilities. Hence, our third emergent theme concerns itself with the complex and dynamic relationship between WISEs and public policy, or the lack thereof. Despite existing employment support schemes enacted by the government (Social Welfare Department, 2020), participants indicated that they were '*painfully insufficient*' (P9, founder of WISE #2) and remedial in nature. Indeed, government-funded employment schemes only had a total quota of 1,633 quotas (Social Welfare Department, 2020, p. 8). Considering that there were approximately 179,900 persons with disability aged between 18 to 64 years old (working age population) (Census and Statistics Department, 2015), participants criticized the government for shunning or deflecting its own responsibility from mainstreaming and implementing more proactive policy measures in ensuring equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. Instead, this responsibility has been disproportionately allocated to the nonprofit sector. The absence of more proactive disability policy measures has even led one participant to question the *raison d'être* of WISEs:

Yes, you can apply for government grants to start your own social enterprise...but I think that is kind of shoving its own responsibility to address employment or inclusion issues of persons with disabilities to the nonprofit sector. Why isn't there a comprehensive rehabilitation policy? To go even one step further, I would ask whether being employed in a WISE means that they are truly integrated and accepted by society? Honestly there would be no need for us [WISEs] to exist if the government actually had a good policy to ensure equal employment opportunities or social integration for persons with disabilities.' (P16, manager of WISE #4)

Such testaments are reflective of the underlying tenets of Hong Kong's overall approach to welfare, which has been described as a productivist welfare regime that prizes 'efficiency', profitability, and economic growth above the social rights and equity of people (Chui et al., 2018; Holliday, 2000). Under this paradigm, adhering to its principle of non-interventionism (Yang & Kühner, 2020), social policy interventions are only remedial in nature, reserved only for the most vulnerable in society as 'hands out' rather than used as an enabling and empowering tool to facilitate equal opportunities and inclusion for disadvantaged individuals in a comprehensive manner. Participants suggested for the government to take the lead to employ persons with disabilities themselves in order to create a more inclusive society.

Sure, the government right now can partially subsidise some equipment costs if corporates hire people with disabilities...like wheelchairs and assist[ive] devices. This is a good thing, but why not take a lead to hire people with disabilities themselves? Why leave everything to us? (P9, founder of WISE #2)

I think the government really needs to do more to enable us to gain employment ... I mean, if they took the lead and employ[ed] more people like us, wouldn't that be more impactful? Other organisations will follow if that's the case. (P15, female, with mental illness)

Discussion

Drawing on the perspectives of 21 current employees, managers, and founders of WISEs in Hong Kong, this study examined the role of WISEs in promoting inclusion of persons with disabilities, and in facilitating their transition into open employment. Although we found that employees were able to glean a sense of inclusion within the WISE, which corroborates with existing studies (Chui et al., 2019; Qian, Riseley, & Barraket, 2019), they were unable to translate this inclusion beyond the organizational level. Unlike what public policies have purported, WISE as a function in enabling persons with disabilities to transition into the open labour market remains limited. This study is one of the few in Hong Kong that situates the study of social enterprises in the context of disability. Additional insights can be generated from our findings.

First, although some scholars maintain that employment is key to inclusion (Chau et al., 2018), our findings challenge this supposition. Instead, our study revealed a more nuanced relationship between employment and inclusion. As substantiated by participants, many of whom had previous work experience in the private market, employment status itself is an insufficient marker of inclusion. Rather, it is the workplace environment, conditions, and processes such as interpersonal relationships between colleagues, and availability of flexible and accommodative employment measures, that enabled persons with disabilities to feel included and respected. This echoes existing studies that criticize the overgeneralization and assumptive relationship between paid work and inclusion among disadvantaged individuals (Dai, Lau, & Lee, 2017; Humber, 2014).

Second, it is evident that prevailing societal norms regarding WISEs (that they are charities seeking 'help' from the public), and of persons with disabilities themselves (that they are also victims seeking 'handouts') constitute key barriers in combating labour market exclusion for persons with disabilities. Indeed, negative perceptions regarding persons with disabilities have been documented in disability studies in Hong Kong (Poon-McBrayer, 2013). Similarly, that the public perceives social enterprises as charities has also been found in more recent studies (Chan, Chui, & Chandra, under review). This is significant because the very intention of WISEs is to promote inclusion, and combat exclusion. Yet, ironically, because WISEs themselves have been misunderstood and often misconceived as 'charities', the 'otherness' and negative labelling effect incurred on persons with disabilities working within them are reinforced. Dai et al. (2017) also questioned the role of WISEs in empowering and facilitating inclusion of marginalized women in Hong Kong. In this light, so long as negative normative assumptions about the functions of WISEs in society, and of persons with disabilities do not change, it is unlikely that social inclusion, in its broadest sense (Burchardt et al., 2002), can be achieved. This finding suggests the need to shift the public's perception of WISEs and of persons with disabilities themselves lest they continue have to contend with marginalization.

Third, while scholars and policymakers often conceive social enterprises as ‘transformative social innovation’ and solution to social ills (Avelino et al., 2019), this study presents a more sobering view from practitioners’ perspectives of their reality in realizing those changes. Echoing similar arguments put forth by Sinclair et al. (2018), the intended functions of WISEs (or social enterprises in general) in combating social exclusion or in facilitating social inclusion of marginalized population groups are very much constrained by existing structural conditions and normative environments. In the context of disability, participants have continuously point out the lack of comprehensive disability policy measures as most problematic. This finding reveals the complex process by which WISEs seek to alter the existing status quo (e.g. disproportionately low rate of labour market participation among persons with disabilities/ exclusion from labour market). This process is thwart with challenges, and cannot be understood without considering the wider structural conditions or policy environment.

Furthermore, as put forth by disability scholars (Hall & Wilton, 2011), our findings suggest that inclusion of persons with disabilities will remain limited so long as there are no corresponding measures to address the systematic exclusion of persons with disabilities from the mainstream labour market. As studies have shown (Chan & Wong, 2005), employers in Hong Kong remain reluctant and resistant toward employing persons with disabilities, and few accommodative employment measures are made available to persons with disabilities in the mainstream open market (where most of the jobs are). A United Nations report (2012) also noted the city’s lack of affirmative actions to ensure equal labour market participation for persons with disabilities. Thus, employment creation via WISE among persons with disabilities should not be conceived as a deflection, replacement, or solution to the lack of more proactive policy measures aimed at addressing the systematic marginalization of persons with disabilities from the mainstream labour market.

Taken together, the challenges outlined from our participants in their quest to realise their WISE missions may, to a large extent, be attributed to the underlying tenets of a productivist welfare regime, where existing employment support services remain residual at best and are primarily aimed at enhancing the employability of people with disabilities at the individual level without actually addressing structural and institutional inequalities and barriers (Chui & Chan, 2019; Cockain, 2018). This article by no means wishes to discredit the role of WISEs in enhancing the well-being of persons with disabilities and in creating positive social and economic impacts. However, our findings do call into question the extent to which WISEs are able combat exclusion for disadvantaged individuals from the mainstream labour market. Thus, on the basis of the current findings, this article argues that the over-romanticisation of WISEs may have diluted our attention from important public policy discourses and debates that should address the systematic marginalisation and disenfranchisement of persons with disabilities, as well as other disadvantaged population groups. Other researchers have produced similar findings pertaining to Hong Kong’s lack of systematic policies in facilitating a socially inclusive society (Chui, Arat, Chan, & Wong, 2019).

To conclude, this study examined the roles of work integration social enterprises in facilitating social inclusion of persons with disabilities in Hong Kong, and in enabling them to transition into the open labour market. Empirical evidence revealed that although WISEs can create an inclusive work environment for persons with disabilities, their role in facilitating persons with disabilities to transition into open market remains questionable. So long as there are no comprehensive disability employment policies that address marginalisation at the institutional

level and no efforts in addressing the negative normative assumptions pertaining to WISEs and persons with disabilities, the demarcation between persons with disabilities and ‘abled’ persons will prevail. Last, an inclusive society should afford persons of differences equal opportunities to participate across different life domains including labour market (economic), social, political, and cultural integration (Burchardt, 2002). This article challenges the key supposition, as purported by existing SE policies in Hong Kong, that employment in WISEs is indicative of ‘inclusion’ for disadvantaged individuals. It is not.

Limitations

Findings generated from this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, we focused specifically on acquiring the perspectives of founders, managers, and employees in work integration social enterprises. Future studies may consider eliciting the views of employers in the private sector to provide a more comprehensive view of the issue of employment of persons with disabilities. Second, the qualitative nature of this study precluded the possibility of testing relationships. Future studies may consider adopting quantitative methods to examine, for instance, the intention among persons with disabilities to seek open employment on a larger scale, and to investigate the barriers they face. Longitudinal studies tracking the employment trajectories of persons with disabilities from WISEs to the open market would also be invaluable. Last, this study did not include samples of persons with disabilities currently employed in the open market. Thus, as acknowledged by Abbott et al. (2019), future comparative research is needed to consider the effectiveness of social enterprises in facilitating labour market integration relative to other approaches. Future SE literature conducted in the context of disability may consider addressing this particular gap.

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Name ^a	Sex	Disability? (Y/N)	WISE	Industry
P1	F	Y- With hearing impairment	#1	Food industry
P2	F	Y- With hearing impairment	#1	Food industry
P3	M	Y- With mild intellectual disability	#1	Food industry
P4	M	N- Founder	#1	Food industry
P5	F	N- Manager (Marketing)	#2	Experiential learning
P6	M	N- Manager (Operations)	#2	Experiential learning
P7	M	N- Supervisor	#2	Experiential learning
P8	M	Y- With visual impairment	#2	Experiential learning
P9	M	N- Founder	#2	Experiential learning
P10	F	Y- With mental illness	#3	Food industry
P11	F	Y- Recovered from mental illness	#3	Food industry
P12	M	Y- With mental illness	#3	Food industry
P13	F	N- Manager	#3	Food industry
P14	M	N- Supervisor	#3	Food industry
P15	F	Y- With mental illness	#4	Food industry
P16	F	N- Manager	#4	Food industry
P17	M	Y- Recovered from mental illness	#4	Food industry
P18	M	N- Supervisor	#4	Food industry

P19	M	Y- Recovered from mental illness	#4	Food industry
P20	M	N- Manager	#5	Retail
P21	M	N- Manager	#5	Retail

Table 1. Demographic details of study participants ($n = 21$)

Figure 1. Analytical procedure

