

Executive Summary

Research background and objectives

1. The Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, was commissioned by the Hong Kong Professionals And Senior Executives Association (HKPASEA) to conduct a study on “The advantages and limitations of the participation of professionals in public affairs” from March to September 2019. The aim of the study was to understand the perceptions, attitudes, and difficulties encountered by professionals in participating in public affairs. It is hoped that the policy recommendations made in this study will help to promote measures and practices that encourage and facilitate professionals to participate in public affairs.

Research methodology

2. The research team conducted a non-probability online survey from March to May 2019. The survey reached professionals via the HKPASEA network, and 746 successful cases were obtained. From April to May, five focus groups were also held, involving a total of 38 interviewees from different industries, including finance, legal, medical, engineering, and architecture.

Survey results

Competency and willingness: Preference for participation

Interest in participating

3. Among the public affairs positions in which the respondents showed the most interest, 28.8% of respondents chose “Member of advisory and statutory bodies” and 23.3% chose “Executive member of professional associations”. Less than 10% chose each of the other positions, while 23.3% expressed “No interest”.
4. Most respondents were willing to be a member of an advisory or statutory body, with an average willingness rating of 6.52.¹ Respondents who indicated a very

¹ The survey used an 11-point scale (from 0 to 10, with 5 as the midpoint). A higher rating represents a better evaluation.

high level of willingness (a rating of from 9 to 10) constituted 22.1%, whereas those who indicated a low level of willingness (a rating of less than 5) constituted only 17.7%.

5. The respondents showed a wide range of interest in public affairs, with the top choices being in the areas of “Land and housing” (17.3%) and “City development and planning” (17.2%), while the least popular choice was “Political system” (1.7%).

Experience in participation

6. Forty-two per cent of the respondents possessed experience in serving in public affairs positions. The most common of these positions were “Executive member of professional associations” (30.3%), “Member of advisory and statutory bodies” (16.9%), and “Executive member of community organizations” (8.8%). Only an extremely small percentage had experience in participating in the other positions.
7. The respondents had different levels of experience in participating in various public activities. Over the past year, 59.9% of them had participated in “Volunteer activities”; 25% to 35% had participated in “Public or stakeholders consultations”, “Petitions”, and “Expression of opinions in media”; and less than 10% had participated in “Demonstrations or rallies”.

Competence in participating

8. The respondents generally agreed that it is important to have the qualities listed below to participate in public affairs. They gave the following average ratings to those qualities, listed here in descending order: “Honesty and integrity” (9.26), “Social responsibility” (8.92), “Professional knowledge and experience” (8.52), “Leadership and analytical skills” (8.42), “Social network” (8.05), “Creativity and innovation ability” (7.92), “Know government and politics well” (7.78).

Competency and willingness: Preparation to participate

Information resources

9. The majority of the respondents indicated that they receive public affairs information from various channels, relying on some channels more than others. About 65% accessed information on public affairs at least once daily via “Mass media” and “Social media”. Less than 45% accessed public affairs information at least once daily via a “Personal network”.

Time resources

10. About 70% of the respondents said that they could allocate time to participate in public affairs, but most indicated that they could only allocate a short period of time. Around 30% could allocate less than five hours per week and another 30% said that they could devote five to ten hours per week on public affairs, while less than 10% stated that they could allocate more than ten hours per week.

Motivation to participate

11. The main reasons that the respondents gave for participating in public affairs were: “Personal reasons” (such as raising one’s social status, accumulating social capital, fulfilling aspirations, having a sense of belonging; 47.7%), “Work reasons” (such as helping one’s career or professional development, company encouragement; 39.5%), and “Social and governmental reasons” (such as assisting the government to implement policies, improving society; 38.2%). Only a minority of respondents chose “Public affairs position reasons” (such as the attractiveness of the remuneration and influence from holding a public affairs position; 13.1%) and “Family reasons” (such as family encouragement; 4.3%).
12. The main reasons that the respondents gave for not participating in public affairs were: “Work reasons” (such as long working hours, high work pressure, being focused on career, no support from the company; 49.9%), “Family reasons” (such as taking care of one’s family, objections from family members; 24.1%), “Personal reasons” (such as obstructing the development of personal interests, no ability or interest; 17.0%), “Social and governmental reasons” (such as disagreement with the government, difficulty in changing the status quo, no knowledge on ways to participate; 15.4%), and “Public affairs position reasons” (such as a waste of time, irregular participation times, low remuneration; 15.0%).

Self-efficacy

13. Most of the respondents considered themselves competent to hold public affairs positions, with an average rating of 6.65. More than 20% of the respondents regarded themselves as very competent (a rating of from 9 to 10), while 14.4% thought of themselves as less competent (a rating of less than 5).

Competency and willingness: Political stance

Political stance

14. Only around half of the respondents had a political stance. More respondents were on the right and centre of the political spectrum (Pro-establishment camp 26.0%, Moderate camp 16.9%), whereas less than 10% of the respondents were on the left of the political spectrum (Pan-democracy camp 6.3%, Localist camp 1.3%).

Opportunities and channels: Support of the government

General evaluation

15. Although the respondents tended to agree that the government supports professionals in participating in public affairs, the average rating on this matter was only 5.98. Less than 10% of the respondents gave a very high rating (a rating of from 9 to 10), whereas around 20% gave a negative evaluation (a rating of less than 5).

Support measures

16. Regarding the five government measures that could encourage professionals to participate in public affairs, the measures that the respondents thought would be effective were, in descending order: “Encourage professional groups to include participation in public affairs positions as a recognized category of Continuing Professional Development” (56.0%), “Advertise and promote channels of participation” (27.2%), “Increase the remuneration of public affairs positions” (22.4%), “Raise the power of public affairs positions” (21.5%), “Establish channels of participation on the Internet” (16.9%).
17. Regarding the six government measures that could help employers to encourage professionals to participate in public affairs, the measures that the respondents thought would be effective were, in descending order: “Provide economic incentives for employers” (41.7%), “Encourage the establishment of a company culture of employee participation in public affairs” (34.0%), “Provide participation guidelines for companies” (28.9%), “Promote the values of public affairs participation to companies” (25.4%), “Commend exemplary employers” (20.9%), “Inform employers regularly on the participation of their employees” (5.5%).

Evaluation of measures

18. Regarding the five government measures aimed at enhancing the participation of youth in public affairs, although the respondents were inclined to agree that the measures were effective, their average ratings on the measures were not high. The average ratings, in descending order, were: “Established the Public Affairs Forum as an online platform” (6.44), “Carried out the Youth Ambassadors Programme” (6.29), “Set up the Youth Development Commission” (6.25), “Established the Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Office” (6.17), “Implemented the Member Self-recommendation Scheme for Youth” (6.12).
19. Regarding the six government measures that could nurture professionals as political talents, the respondents were inclined to agree that the measures would be helpful. The average ratings, in descending order, were: “Increase the number of public affairs positions” (7.31), “Provide internship and secondment opportunities in government departments” (7.29), “Provide appropriate mentors or partners” (7.16), “Provide subsidies to study public administration courses” (6.96), “Establish institutions to nurture political talents” (6.84), “Organize public affairs participation workshops” (6.57).

Opportunities and channels: Support of employers

General evaluation

20. Although the respondents tended to agree that their employers supported professionals in participating in public affairs, the average rating on employer support was only 6.14. Less than 15% of the respondents gave a very high rating (a rating of from 9 to 10), whereas around 20% give a negative evaluation (a rating of less than 5).

Support measures

21. Regarding the four company measures that could encourage professionals to participate in public affairs, the measures that the respondents thought would be effective were, in descending order: “Implement flexible working hours” (59.3%), “Provide annual leave for public services” (42.3%), “Beneficial to evaluation and promotion” (32.8%), “Implement a five-day work week” (18.4%).

Important concerns

22. Regarding the reasons for why employers support employees in participating in public affairs, none of them were chosen by over half of the respondents. The reasons chosen by the respondents were, in descending order: “Improves the public’s image of the organization” (49.7%), “Fulfils corporate social responsibility” (44.3%), “Strengthens the relationship between the company and the government” (43.2%), “Assists in the career and professional development of employees” (27.1%).
23. Regarding the reasons for why employers do not support employees in participating in public affairs, the reasons chosen by the respondents were, in descending order: “Hinders the daily operation of the company” (67.9%), “Worry about being politically sensitive” (53.3%), “None of the company’s business” (35.6%), “Hinders the career and professional development of employees” (5.9%).

Focus group results

Advantages of the participation of professionals in public affairs

24. The advantages of finance professionals include: Uphold professional integrity and knowledge, and possess independent thinking and excellent ability in analysing data.
25. The advantages of legal professionals include: Uphold professional knowledge to ensure procedural justice, and are more often invited to join committees related to appeal, litigation, and legal reform.
26. The advantages of medical professionals include: Possess higher social status, have relatively flexible working hours, and have a deeper understanding of medical public policies.
27. The advantages of engineering professionals include: Possess professional knowledge, have an excellent ability to engage in rational analysis, are capable of assisting the government in explaining public engineering projects and in providing social services related to engineering.
28. The advantages of architecture professionals include: Uphold professional integrity and knowledge, possess independent thinking and judgement, and have a high standard of work.

Factors hindering professionals from participating in public affairs

29. The factors hindering finance professionals include: long working hours, the need to always be ready to work, the need to often take business trips, difficulty in applying for leave, and great pressure to perform at work. This is especially the case for young accountants and employees in accounting firms.
30. The factors hindering legal professionals include: a lack of time (long working hours and the nature of the business of legal professionals as “trading time for money”), the need to always be ready to work, a lack of company support (such as not including pro bono legal services in billable hours), the paucity of support provided by Chinese law firms and Chinese management to junior lawyers, the lack of experience and social networks among young lawyers to participate in public affairs.
31. The factors hindering medical professionals include: the high cost of participating (the nature of the business of private doctors as “personal labour work”), the need to personally handle the diagnosis of patients, a heavy workload, the limitation of their abilities to medical matters, a poor understanding of politics, and the small size and insufficient openness of the group of medical professionals who participate in public affairs.
32. The factors hindering engineering professionals include: long and irregular working hours, a lack of company support (the company prioritizes profit and middle management do not support the participation of employees in public affairs), unequal opportunities to participate (junior engineers have to handle a heavier workload and are under greater professional pressure, and also have less company support and opportunities to participate in public affairs).
33. The factors hindering architecture professionals include: long working hours, the high cost of participating (may lead to a lower salary and bonus), the lack of company support and opportunities to participate, and authoritarian employers who do not encourage employees to participate in public affairs.

Policy recommendations

34. Based on the opinions of the respondents as expressed in the online survey and in the focus group interviews, the following policy recommendations are made in this study to the government, employers, and the various professions for their reference.

Government: Enhance policies and measures to encourage participation in public affairs

35. **Recommendation 1: Increase and promote explicit channels of participation.** Select members of advisory committees through public recruitment; arrange flexible forms of participation in public affairs.
36. **Recommendation 2: Improve the mechanism for screening members of advisory and statutory bodies.** Publicly disclose the member selection criteria and mechanisms of advisory bodies; increase and institutionalize the quota for members of professional groups to join advisory bodies.
37. **Recommendation 3: Break the stereotype of advisory and statutory bodies as “rubber stamps”.** Increase the space and transparency for political discussions to take place in advisory and statutory bodies; strengthen the role of committee members; try to adopt the opinions of committee members, especially the young members.
38. **Recommendation 4: Lower the cost of participating in advisory and statutory bodies.** Arrange meetings during non-office hours to lower the negative impact on the daily workload of committee members.
39. **Recommendation 5: Increase economic incentives for talented people to hold public affairs positions.** Establish project funding for civil society think-tanks, professional groups, and dedicated youth to support public policy research.

Government: Enhance policies and measures to nurture political talent

40. **Recommendation 6: Enhance arrangements for the Member Self-recommendation Scheme for Youth.** Implement the scheme to all government advisory committees; raise the upper age limit for applicants to 40 or 45 years old; adopt an interactive mode of the “tea reception” to select members.

41. **Recommendation 7: Set up youth committees under advisory and statutory bodies.** The standard for selecting members shall remain the minimum entry level and equal opportunity.
42. **Recommendation 8: Develop a regular secondment system for young members.** Develop a system for the regular secondment of young members to advisory and statutory bodies, such as conducting the process on a bi-yearly basis.
43. **Recommendation 9: Promote secondments and internships in government departments.** Implement secondments and internships in local and overseas government departments; set up a coordination unit to acquire and negotiate the quota for each professional field; establish an online database for enquiries from professionals.

Employer: Enhance the policies on encouraging employees to participate in public affairs

44. **Recommendation 10: Improve the corporate governance principle of companies.** Adopt corporate social responsibility and also “environmental, social, and corporate governance” as the corporate governance principle and development goal, and also encourage professional employees to work hand in hand with their company to fulfil that goal.
45. **Recommendation 11: Set up annual leave for public services.** Count the number of hours that employees spend annually in participating in public affairs, and transfer those hours to annual leave according to certain rules on ratios and upper limits.

Industry: Enhance the policies on encouraging members of professional groups to participate in public affairs

46. **Recommendation 12: Establish the value of participating in public affairs.** Include participation in public affairs in recognized categories of Continuing Professional Development for all professional groups.
47. **Recommendation 13: Set up an observer system.** Provide learning opportunities for dedicated professional youth to attend public affairs meetings as observers.