

The Tutoring Industry in Hong Kong: From the Past Four Decades to the Future

ECNU Review of Education
2019, Vol. 2(1) 77–86
© The Author(s) 2019
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/2096531119840857
journals.sagepub.com/home/roe



Richard Eng

The University of Hong Kong, China

Abstract

Purpose: This article sheds light on the historical changes in the tutoring industry and discusses the nature and driving forces of tutoring in the Hong Kong context. Based on the historical overview, this article introduces new developments in tutoring and discusses how tutoring fits into the bigger education picture.

Design/Approach/Methods: Private tutoring in Hong Kong saw its takeoff in business in the 1980s, when the economy started to boom and parents were more willing to spend money on their children's education. These parents hoped that their children, by receiving university education, could improve their families' lives and secure a brighter future. Public examinations were used as a screening tool to select the cream of the crop for university admissions. Therefore, for many local mainstream school students, passing the public examinations with flying colors became the be-all and end-all of their studies. Tutorial schools regarded their fears as an opportunity and devised courses to suit their needs and allay their fears.

Findings: More recently, educational reform, declining birth rate, and technological advances have brought challenges for tutoring businesses. They have explored new markets and changed the mode of operation to increase student intake and cut costs. It is expected that local tutorial schools, in particular the big tutorial-school chains, will provide more online courses for learners from early childhood to adult and will reduce the number and scale of off-line courses. Also, we may see a new kind of "star" tutors catering not to local mainstream school students but to their local international school counterparts.

Originality/Value: Literature on tutoring in Hong Kong mainly investigates the phenomenon in recent times, specifically the past two decades. This article is the first attempt to draw a holistic picture of tutoring's historical development from an industrial perspective.

Keywords

Education regulations, Hong Kong, private tutoring, public examinations, star tutors, tutorial-school chains

Date received: 19 January 2019; accepted: 26 February 2019

Corresponding author:

Richard Eng, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong, China.

Email: richard5@hku.hk



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

Self-introduction

I am a cofounder of a tutorial-school chain called “Beacon College” in Hong Kong. The college is now operated under its parent company “BExcellent Group”, which went public-listed in the Hong Kong Stock Exchange in 2018. At the very beginning, I operated a tutorial center called “June and Richard Languages and Commercial Centre” with a partner named June Leung in 1989 in Yuen Long, which was a rural district in Hong Kong’s New Territories. We provided tutorial classes for both junior and senior secondary students on a number of core subjects including English, Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Accounting. At the beginning, my partner and I were the only teachers of our center. We had three classrooms which in total could accommodate a maximum of 79 students at any one time. Since tutorial classes would not start until students had finished their day school at around 4 o’clock, our classrooms were not in use in the daytime. A year later, we saw an opportunity of operating a day school in the district because there were a lot of Secondary 5 (S.5) and Secondary 7 (S.7) students who failed in the then two local public examinations, namely the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE). They wanted to retake the same examinations in the coming year and would want to go back to a mainstream school and take the same subjects again. However, there was a shortage of school places in the district at that time. Hoping to provide more school places for those S.5 and S.7 students and to utilize the classrooms to the fullest, we operated a day school in the same premises registered under the name of “June and Richard Languages and Commercial School.” In 1992, we changed our school name to Beacon College, since our aspiration was, and still is, to guide students on the path toward success in their studies, like the function of a beacon.

Today, our company operates 19 branches in Hong Kong and has a teaching team of about 300, including teaching assistants. As required by law, all of our teaching team members are university graduates; some are even holders of master’s or doctoral degrees from prestigious local and overseas institutions such as Harvard University, Cambridge University, and Oxford University. We provide tutorial services to kindergarten, primary, secondary, and university students, and also to adults, but the main focus is on the upper secondary students preparing for the single public examination: the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE).

For the HKDSE examination, we provide Secondary 4 (S.4) to Secondary 6 (S.6) students with 1-year regular tutorial courses on the four core subjects (English Language, Chinese Language, Mathematics, and Liberal Studies) and most elective subjects (Business, Accounting, and Financial Studies [BAFS]; Economics; Geography; History; Physics; Chemistry; and Biology). In addition to regular tutorial courses, we provide intensive courses (ranging from 1 to 3 months) and 1-day courses on the aforementioned subjects for students who want to recapture the essence of the subject content in the regular courses or to have a taste of the way a particular tutor teaches in class (as in the case of the 1-day course).

To prepare HKDSE students better for the examination taken from late March to May each year, we hold large-scale mock examinations around January and February. This allows the students to experience what it will be like in the real public examination, and to know their weak areas, so that they may use the remaining time to improve their knowledge in those areas.

Other services our tutors and their team members provide include marking students’ written work (e.g., compositions for the two language subjects) on the Internet and 24-hr WhatsApp and e-mail for students to ask questions. Our company has also opened accounts on Facebook to provide channels for students to voice their opinions on our services as well as quality of teaching and handouts.

Apart from the local examination, we cater to takers of overseas examinations such as the International English Language Testing System, the Scholastic Assessment Test (originally called the Scholastic Aptitude Test), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language. International examinations for overseas studies have become a fast-growing market in Hong Kong in the past decade.

Alongside our company, a few other local tutorial service providers have taken a similar pathway of development in the past three decades. Among them, two have employed aggressive territory-wide advertising strategies, namely Modern Education (previously called “Intel Education”) and King’s Glory. Over the years, they have been our major competitors on the local tutorial market; today, Modern Education, King’s Glory, and Beacon College are the three big tutorial-school chains in Hong Kong. Modern Education and our company are public-listed.

What was the tutoring industry like in Hong Kong in the 1980s

The tutoring industry in Hong Kong began to take off in the 1980s, partly because Hong Kong people had become richer. Primary education was made compulsory in 1971 and secondary education had since been much expanded, and more parents were willing to spend money on their children’s education. Also, the booming economy demanded more labor, so it was common for both parents in families to have jobs, hence leaving their children less attended at home. Some people saw a growing need for childcare and homework tutoring services and set up tutorial centers to serve this growing market. The premises of such kind of tutorial centers did not need to be big, so the startup investment was small. Suddenly, small tutorial centers sprang up like mushrooms, especially near or inside public housing estates. These estates were densely populated and so had an abundant supply of school-age children and teenagers.

Alongside the small tutorial centers in the 1980s were a few big tutorial schools. Most of those tutorial schools (which were called “evening schools” at that time) were not operated in the kind of tutorial-school chains that we see today but were situated in just one location. They commonly advertised through newspapers, and the content of their advertisements highlighted their school names and the subjects they provided. The names of the tutors were rarely mentioned or posted, much less their photos. In that era, almost all tutors in those tutorial schools were paid on an hourly basis. Some tutors, however, had already enjoyed fame in the education sector, mainly because they had previously taught/were teaching in local prestigious day schools or were authors of popular textbooks or both. Some of these tutors had special remuneration arrangements with the tutorial schools for which they worked. These famous tutors could attract many students and taught as many as 200 students at one time, or even more, although the Education Regulations set out by the Hong Kong Education Bureau (2012, with the original version dating back to 1971) stipulated that a teacher could not teach more than 45 students at any one time. This regulation is still in force today (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2018). In 1982, I took such kind of mass tutoring in Physics, Chemistry, and Biology in an evening school which used the premises of a day school for the provision of tutoring services. Classes were conducted in the hall of that school from Monday to Friday, and there were as many as 200 students taught by some famous tutors of the time.

The advertisements of those big tutorial schools focused mainly on their school names and courses, so individual tutors could only rely on word-of-mouth publicity to attract students to their classes.

Other players in the tutoring business included upper secondary/university students who provided tutorials on a one-to-one basis in their students’ homes. Private tutoring in the students’ homes was prevalent throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Such prevalence was shown in a study by Kwok and Lam (1994), in which a sample of 444 S.4 and S.6 students from three schools were invited to fill in a questionnaire about their need for private tutoring under the education system of Hong Kong. The study revealed that 299 students (67.3%) felt that they needed supplementary tutoring outside schools. Among these 299 students, 181 (60.1%) said they would choose tutoring classes in tutorial schools, while 114 (38.1%) said they employed private tutors to teach them at home. It could be seen that the percentage of private tutoring in the students’ homes was more than half of the percentage of students taking tutorial classes in tutorial schools.

Against such a background, we started our business.

The tutoring industry: From the 1990s to the present day

Advertising worked wonders

The golden age of the tutoring industry in Hong Kong started in the 1990s. There were a number of reasons behind the boom of the industry, including students' strong desire to receive university education and their parents' traditional mind-set that university education could change their children's future lives for the better.

However, one should stop to think about how different the desire and belief of the students and parents in the 1990s were from those of the students and parents in the 1980s. Did the students of the 1980s have less desire to receive university education? Or did the parents of the 1980s not think that university education could change their children's future lives for the better? From my experience, there was not much difference in their desire and belief. I passed my secondary and university school life in the 1980s, and what I saw was that students of my time, albeit not as rich as those in the 1990s, were as eager to receive university education, and so were our parents. I was living in a public housing estate at that time, and the students who took the mass tutoring classes I attended in 1982 came from the same or nearby districts, where the household incomes were similar. We belonged to the low-income group, but our parents were still willing to pay the tutorial fees for us, hoping that our academic performance could improve. As far as money is concerned, the 1980s was the period when the economy of Hong Kong began to take off, and so more parents were willing to spend money on their children's education. Therefore, if there was no discernible reason for a sudden change in such desire and belief, why did the tutoring industry boom at a frenetic speed in the 1990s but not in the 1980s? My observation was that the change in advertising strategies employed by tutorial schools in the 1990s, which were in stark contrast to those employed in the 1980s, was a major catalyst. Koh (2016) rightly describes the function of tutorial schools' advertisements as "feeding on the emotional insecurities that the culture of education in Hong Kong has generated" (p. 206). By emphasizing the possibility of failing in the public examinations due to lack of examination skills, tutorial schools could stoke students' fears and attract them to enroll in their tutors' courses. These innovative advertising strategies came into existence in the mid-1990s, thanks to the competition among three big tutorial-school chains of that time, one of which was operated by my company.

The big three

Because of the great demand for private supplementary tutoring even in the rural area, our college expanded from one town to two others in the 6 years following our establishment. During that period, two other fast-expanding big tutorial companies were Modern Education (called "Intel Education" at that time) and King's Glory. The major difference was that they were expanding from the urban area into the rural area, while we were going in the opposite direction. Then in 1998, we opened our first branch in Mongkok, which is in the urban area, and in the early 2000s, we set foot on Hong Kong Island. In parallel, the two other big tutorial companies set up their branches in the densely populated "satellite towns" in the rural area. Such satellite towns, despite being situated in the rural area, were densely populated because the local government had set out plans to develop the rural area in the 1970s to satisfy the growing demand for housing due to rapid population growth. High-rise buildings were erected in the centers of those satellite towns, but on their outskirts, one could still see greenery typical of rural places. The era of the three big tutorial-school chains in Hong Kong began.

In this period of expansion, the three big tutorial-school chains competed for space (to set up branches) and rank (to be number one in the market). Creative marketing strategies evolved, with advertisements beginning to focus not just on the tutorial school name but also on tutors, since it was

to everyone's knowledge that students learnt from tutors and not from the tutorial schools themselves. I came up with this idea in 1993 and put it into practice by posting my name, photo, courses, and tutorial-school name in newspapers and then magazines. Tutors suddenly became idols, and students were their fans and admirers. By the end of the 1990s, the battlefield of advertising included television and the radio. Tutors attended interviews and projected themselves as experts who not only knew the subjects well but could also teach unique examination skills to help students obtain high scores in their school and public examinations. They would give tips about what topics and question types might appear in the upcoming public examination papers. In 2003, I thought of publicizing myself on the back of buses, which proved to be a success. The two other big chains jumped on the same bandwagon.

Creative marketing strategies included renting spaces in shopping malls, which was rarely a practice before the 1990s. Those shopping malls were usually frequented by young people, but the monthly rent was much higher than that in commercial buildings and even shop spaces on the ground floors of housing estates. Rental expenses therefore became one of the biggest expenses for large tutorial schools, and they were a natural barrier to potential entrants to the industry. Notwithstanding, a few tutorial-school chains did appear in Hong Kong in the 2000s, but their scale was much smaller and less territory-wide than the three big chains. To date, the three big chains are still the largest tutorial service providers, but the ranking has been reshuffled in terms of numbers of branches and students.

Factors behind the boom of tutorial schools in Hong Kong

The education system in Hong Kong has much spoon-feeding, which to a large extent stems from the shortage of university degree courses. Despite the presence of options such as associate degrees and self-funded degree courses, students still want the government-funded undergraduate programs that enjoy stronger recognition and cost less. To achieve their goals, students need to work very hard, but success still hinges on the single university entrance examination, namely the HKDSE. Before 2012, there were two public examinations in Hong Kong, namely, the HKCEE taken by S.5 students and the HKALE taken by S.7 students, but they were replaced by the HKDSE examination. The government asserted that this would reduce students' examination pressure, but it has turned out to be the contrary. Local tutorial schools, parents and students regard the single public examination as a critical screening tool for university entrance, so parents have become even more willing to spend money on their children's tutorial lessons.

Subjects taken in the HKDSE examination include the Chinese Language, the English Language, Mathematics, Liberal Studies, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Economics, Geography, and BAFS. The first four subjects are compulsory, whereas the rest are elective. University programs have different minimum requirements on these subjects. Since most students are worried that they may not meet the requirements of their target university programs, a number of them take tutorial courses as early as the first year of the upper secondary level (S.4), while most of them will do so when they are in the final 2 years of study (S.5 and S.6).

Even if they can meet the minimum requirements of the programs they want to do at university, students may not be admitted because the number of degree courses offered by the universities in Hong Kong does not satisfy the demand. This means that students must get very good results to outperform others. Despite the expansion of degree places, parents and students regard some local universities to be more prestigious than their local counterparts. To Chinese people, ranking is very important. Moreover, because of the increase in the number of examination takers following the combination of two public examinations into one, together with students coming from Mainland China and the fact that students in local international schools can also apply for local universities with their International Baccalaureate (IB) or General Certificate of Education Advanced Level

(GCE A-Level) results, the expansion of university places is offset by the vast increase in the number of applicants for such places. Simply put, parents and students' mind-set of local universities ranking and the increase in the number of university applicants from channels other than the local public examination have stoked fears among local mainstream school students. Local tutorial schools regard the fears of these students as an opportunity and have devised courses to suit their needs and allay their fears. Koh (2016) summarizes the clever advertising strategies of tutorial schools as "sell[ing] messages of hope and confidence in an emotional educational climate" (p. 205) which is characterized by students' fear and anxieties.

From the students' perspective, tutorial schools provide freedom of choice which formal grammar schools (i.e., the day schools they are attending) do not. As Bray and Kwo (2014) point out, students cannot easily change (regular mainstream) schools once enrolled, but their families may have greater choice over tutors for particular subjects, types, duration, and intensity of tutoring in the private tutoring sector (pp. 23, 24). Because tutorial schools do not need to follow the curriculum set by the Hong Kong Education Bureau as strictly as formal grammar schools, they have more flexibility in course duration, class time, and content. These courses vary in course duration (e.g., a regular course lasts 10 months, an intensive course lasts 1–3 months), class time (a lesson may last as short as 1 hr and as long as 3 hr), and even tutors. Such flexibility in course design is not found in formal grammar schools. Further, students can change tutorial schools freely or attend more than one tutorial school.

Because tutorial schools can design their own content of teaching, they can split subjects into different topics or papers for students to choose. Take the English Language subject as an example. There are four papers in the English Language subject: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Tutorial schools usually provide a regular course in English Language which includes all the four papers for the junior secondary form (S.1–S.3), while they divide the four papers into four courses according to the name of the paper for the upper secondary form (S.4–S.6). In doing so, students can choose any one, two, three, or all four papers according to their academic needs, which means saving time and money. In this aspect, tutoring has become a kind of retail business in which the consumer (the student) can select the items (courses) desired to meet the goal of passing the examinations with flying colors. Koh (2016) rightly describes these tutorial schools as commodifying education as services. He also summarizes their practice as "customis[ing] knowledge for exam success" (p. 205).

Behind the scene: How tutors of big tutorial-school chains teach

Through analysis of the answers in the marking schemes set by the examination body, the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, tutors teach skills to answer questions and obtain the highest possible marks. In most cases, the main approach of tutorial schools is to hone their students' skills in doing the tasks required in the different papers of different subjects. More specifically, they start by teaching subject knowledge which is specified in the examination syllabus, followed by an analysis of the question types and questions which require such subject knowledge to arrive at the answers and then the application of appropriate skills in presenting the answers in compliance with the marking schemes.

In big tutorial-school chains, classes are usually conducted in two modes: live and video. In the live mode, a tutor conducts teaching in front of a class of students, whereas in the video mode, prerecorded lessons on video are played in class, with a teaching assistant handling class discipline, distributing handouts, and catering to students' needs. While some students like live classes, more students prefer video classes since they have more time slots and branch schools from which to choose.

The qualifications of the tutors are a tapestry of their professional expertise, academic achievements, and the status they enjoy in their respective professional fields and the tutorial field. Because

a tutor today is very much like an entertainer, young tutors have the edge over older ones. Being closer to the age of their students than their older counterparts, young tutors understand more about their students' difficulties in their studies as well as their likes (e.g., fashion and video games) and are more easily contacted via the electronic media such as WhatsApp, e-mail, Facebook, and Instagram, with which young tutors are more familiar. Further, being more energetic and more ambitious in developing their career paths, some young budding tutors (those who have been growing in fame in the tutoring market) even work overnight to answer students' questions on WhatsApp and e-mail. From time to time, these young tutors hold gatherings with their students so as to develop a stronger bond with them, following the same principle as setting up fan clubs for pop singers. Older tutors may not choose and/or have the ability to do the same. In the 1980s and the 1990s, relationships between tutors and students were mainly knowledge-based. If students had questions or problems with learning, they would ask the tutors after class. Today, relationships have become market-based. Tutoring companies shape and promote newly recruited tutors as knowledgeable and approachable beings who can teach students to "kill-in-a-second" (*miaosha* in Chinese, as seen in some tutors' advertisements, which means "finish a question instantly"). Tutors who look charming and have a high academic status (such as master's or even doctoral degrees from prestigious universities) are more likely to succeed.

Difficulties faced by tutorial schools in Hong Kong

Today, big tutorial-school chains in Hong Kong provide courses for learners of all ages instead of just catering to one or two special groups of learners (or more specifically, local and overseas public examination takers), like what it used to be in the past. One reason is that the number of upper form students who take the HKDSE examination has been falling since its introduction in 2012. Such a fall in numbers is associated with the drop in the local birth rate after 2000 and with the increase in the number of international schools. In the face of the educational reform including the HKDSE examination to replace the decades-old HKCEE and HKALE in 2012, local parents began to lose confidence in the education system because they worried about the level of international recognition of the new public examination and the introduction of a new compulsory subject called Liberal Studies into the upper secondary curriculum and examination syllabus. Some local citizens began to send their children to international schools, whose students would take overseas public examinations such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), GCE A-Level, and IB instead of the HKDSE examination. The drop in the number of HKDSE examination takers has therefore led to a decrease in the demand for private tutoring on HKDSE subjects, and the result is that tutorial schools have needed to explore those markets in which they had previously invested less effort and resources, such as the kindergarten/primary school market and the adult market. In fact, the kindergarten/primary school market has drawn the attention of big tutorial schools owing to its robust growth in recent years.

Also, in the past (roughly before 2000), students were willing to spend longer time in tutors' classes (usually 3–6 months, sometimes an academic year) to see whether the tutors they had chosen could really help them. Today, the time span has been shortened to 1–2 months. Such kind of "fast-food culture," which has become a kind of mentality of Hong Kong people, has contributed to an even more competitive atmosphere in the tutorial sector.

Like local formal grammar schools, tutorial schools are monitored by the government and subject to the same legal ordinance. They need to pass all the requirements set by the Hong Kong Fire Services Department, the Hong Kong Buildings Department, and the Hong Kong Education Bureau. However, tutorial schools are frequently busted by the Hong Kong Education Bureau officers to check on possible violations. Such kind of bust has rarely if ever been carried out on formal grammar schools. To avoid violation of the law, tutorial schools (big tutorial-school chains in particular) begin student enrollment only after they have obtained all the licenses for business operation, which takes

about 3–6 months. Paying the rent for the premises of a tutorial school (or center) without any income for 3–6 months is really a big concern for tutorial service providers.

Within the industry, there has been a lack of initiative among local tutorial companies to set up an association or union to monitor its members' discipline. Such kind of association of tutoring providers, as we could call it, would be useful for monitoring the behavior of its member tutorial schools. It could also be a representative to voice opinions to government authorities and as a registered body to accredit tutorial schools for the provision of quality education to students, in a way similar to the "Q-Mark" ("Q" stands for "quality") granted by the Hong Kong Q-Mark Council in recognition of the competency of a company located in Hong Kong, Mainland China, or Macau in providing products and services to consumers. Most, if not all, local tutorial schools do not want to be monitored by others or to lose business because of divulgement of their operating practices by the association or its members. An association of this kind did exist in Hong Kong between 1997 and 2000. Members included the big three previously mentioned as well as a few international tutoring providers and local smaller tutorial schools, but the total number of members was less than 10. The association disintegrated in silence around 2000, mainly because the members wanted to protect their vested interests and the association had failed to exert the influence as originally expected and hence failed to perform its functions for the benefit of its members. It is sad to know that members of the local tutoring industry are divided, while there are associations of tutoring providers in neighboring countries such as Japan (the Japan Juku Association) and Korea (the National Hagwon Association).

Moreover, the bigger a tutorial school, the more vulnerable it is to negative media coverage. From time to time, media have reported about tutorial schools operating branches without proper licenses or employing underqualified teaching staff and sexual harassment or even sexual affairs between tutors and students. All these could bring the tutorial schools into disrepute.

Last but not least, local big tutorial schools depend heavily on star tutors (those who have been heavily advertised by tutorial schools and therefore enjoy great fame and have many students) who generate a significant proportion of revenue, profitability, and business for the tutorial schools. The Share Offer Prospectus of my company BExcellent Group Holdings Limited produced by VMS Securities Limited (2018), which is the sole sponsor of BExcellent Group Holdings Limited, observed that substantial reliance on top tutors may adversely affect the business and profitability of the company if any of these tutors stops providing services. Such reliance is therefore considered a risk. However, unless the operators of a tutorial school are the tutors themselves, every tutorial school would face the same problem, regardless of size, since tutors are the schools' most important asset.

Into the future

In the past decade, the tutoring industry in Hong Kong has experienced some monumental contextual changes, including educational reform and a revolutionary change in the public examination structure. Such changes have, to a certain extent, sparked off confidence crisis among parents and students over the local education system. Coupled with the long-existing shortage of degree programs in Hong Kong, more and more families are planning to send their children overseas for further studies, which has provided a favorable environment for international schools to flourish. An added advantage of studying in international schools in Hong Kong is that their students can apply for direct entry to the local universities. Suddenly, the value of the HKDSE examination has fallen, resulting in a drop in HKDSE examination takers. Local tutorial schools, especially those previously relying heavily on this single market, have been hit hard. In view of the growing demand for tutoring by local international school students, tutorial schools may expand offerings for these students in addition to the HKDSE

courses and recruit tutors who have good knowledge of the curriculum and examination syllabus followed by international schools, such as IB, GCE A-Level, and IGCSE. It will even be better if these tutors have studied in local international schools, so they will be in a better position to help the local international school students overcome their difficulties. If this happens, a different kind of tutor kings and queens will come into the picture.

Technological advances will also accelerate changes in tutorial schools. Over the past few years, tutoring service providers, chiefly from Mainland China, India, and the U.S., have produced a wide range of online educational courses from which local students may choose. Such “internet tutoring” offers a way to overcome geographic barriers and reduce costs (Bray & Kwo, 2014, p. 50), so the fees are much lower than those in physical classroom settings. Further, students can save travel time because they can learn on the computer or smartphone in the comfort of their homes. Now that increasing amounts of tutoring are provided over the Internet, local tutorial schools need to invest in the development of bespoke apps and computer programs specific to their course designs. Such investments will undoubtedly incur huge expenses and are more likely to be supported by big local and international tutorial-school chains. It is expected that in the future, big local tutorial-school chains will offer both online and off-line tutorial courses for primary, secondary, tertiary students, and adult learners, but the proportion of off-line courses offered in physical classroom settings and the class sizes will be greatly reduced to save rental and labor costs, as well as utilities expenses. Even the printing cost, which could consume as much as 10–15% of the total revenue generated from tutoring in a tutorial school, will be significantly reduced.

However, the foreseeable change of the tutoring mode in big local tutorial-school chains, from live and video teaching conducted in the classrooms of their premises to online teaching delivered to learners’ homes, is not without problems. First, the quality of teaching is more difficult to regulate and monitor. Bray and Kwo (2014) have rightly raised this concern, pointing out that many governments already considered the informal tutoring sector too difficult to regulate, and have concerns about the quality of teaching provided (p. 49). When Internet tutoring becomes a popular mode of teaching and learning, regulation is even more difficult because lessons are conducted in the privacy of the homes of the students and tutors. Moreover, the students and tutors do not have to be in the same city or even the same country. Second, the qualifications of the tutors are difficult to verify. Yung (2015) queried the claims made in advertisements by some tutors in Hong Kong and remarked that “Some [tutors of large tutorial companies in Hong Kong] . . . claim that they have over 10,000 students, and *boast about* their students’ achievements in public examinations” (italized added for emphasis). Last but not least, through the Internet, anyone without attaching to any tutorial schools could become a tutor and offer courses for money. The tutors can make up false credentials to attract students. While tutors working with big tutorial-school chains should be more credible because these chains at least have the personnel and incentive for some self-regulation (Bray & Kwo, 2014, p. 50), smaller companies and “lone” tutors may not have the same capacity and incentive. In this respect, consumers’ rights to true information could not be well protected.

Moreover, big tutorial-school chains would offer more small-class tutoring in their school premises, thanks to the reduction in class size mentioned earlier. Such small-class tutoring will cater to students who have different needs and wants from those who attend big classes and video classes. Young children taking phonics classes and international school students who are used to small-class teaching in their own schools are examples. Some local HKDSE students also want small-class tutoring, and they will consult their tutorial schools and tutors for course and tuition fee arrangements. This practice is like the concept of group purchase in the retail business. Owing to the small class size, teaching will become more personal, compared with that in big classes and video classes. Therefore, the tuition fee will be much higher.

In a wider scope, it is foreseeable that more tutoring or investment companies from Mainland China and even beyond would merge with, acquire in part or acquire in full local tutorial companies, or vice versa, to provide students with tutoring and consultancy services for overseas studies.

Conclusion

In the face of the unprecedented change in the local school curriculum and examination system, as well as advances in technology and change in students' mentality toward after-school tutoring, tutorial schools in Hong Kong need to respond with swift and determined actions in order to survive. A big tutorial-school chain with a long history may have advantages such as reputation and financial resources, but it may take longer for the tutorial-school chain to revamp its mode of business operation, since it has been operating in its current mode for many years. A revamp would demand much investment of time and money, and a lot of high-tech equipment previously installed in the classrooms would be wasted.

The government can also play a part by reviewing the education ordinance and broadening its scope of regulation to cover Internet tutoring offered to local students and adult learners. Whether the outcome is desirable is hard to judge, but one thing is certain: The regulation of Internet tutoring is an extremely difficult task and requires the co-operation of governments of different countries and cities.

Author's note

Richard Eng is the nom de plume of Ng King Hang.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Bray, M., & Kwo, O. (2014). *Regulating private tutoring for public good: Policy options for supplementary education in Asia*. Hong Kong, China: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong and Bangkok: UNESCO.
- Hong Kong Education Bureau. (2012). Chapter: 279A education regulations—Gazette number version date. Empowering section. June 30, 1997 (Cap 279 Section 84, p. 17).
- Hong Kong Education Bureau. (2018). *Guidelines for registration of a new school* (p. 1). Retrieved from [https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/sch-admin/sch-registration/about-sch-registration/purpose-built%20\(en\)%2015.10.2018/2b%20_%20eguide-purpose-built%20_oct%202018.pdf](https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/sch-admin/sch-registration/about-sch-registration/purpose-built%20(en)%2015.10.2018/2b%20_%20eguide-purpose-built%20_oct%202018.pdf)
- Koh, A. (2016). On “Gods” and “Kings” in the tutorial industry: A “media spectacle” analysis of the shadow education in Hong Kong. In J. Moss & B. Pini (Eds.), *Visual research methods in educational research* (pp. 189–208). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kwok, H. K., & Lam, C. M. (1994). *A study of secondary school students' need for private tutoring under the education system in Hong Kong* (pp. 4–5, 18). Hong Kong, China: Chiu Wah Publication [in Chinese].
- VMS Securities Limited. (2018). *Share offer prospectus of BExcellent Group Holdings Limited* (p. 35). Hong Kong, China: Equity Financial Press Limited.
- Yung, W. H. (2015). Ethical dilemmas in shadow education research: Lessons from a qualitative study of learners' experiences in lecture-type tutoring in Hong Kong. In M. Bray, O. Kwo, & B. Jokić (Eds.), *Researching private supplementary tutoring: Methodological lessons from diverse cultures* (pp. 97–115). Hong Kong, China: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong and Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.