



## Schooling with a shadow

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The last two decades have brought an explosion of private supplementary tutoring for school-aged children. This phenomenon is widely called ‘shadow education’ because it mimics the mainstream: as the curriculum changes in the schools, so it changes in the shadow.

Shadow education has been especially visible in Hong Kong. Recent research indicated that 54% of Grade 9 students and 72% of Grade 12 students were receiving private supplementary tutoring. Some of this tutoring is provided informally by university students and others, while other tutoring is provided by small, medium-sized and large companies. Some companies advertise aggressively with street posters and on the exterior of buses.

Private supplementary tutoring has positive sides in promoting learning. It may help slow learners to keep up with their peers, and stretch further the learning of high achievers. However, private tutoring exacerbates social inequalities because middle-income and rich families can afford more and better shadow education compared with low-income families. Shadow education may also be a burden on young people, increasing the academic pressure and contributing to neglect of leisure activities.

Commentators in other parts of East Asia readily recognise these themes. Shadow education has long been a major issue in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, and the sector is expanding rapidly in Mainland China. Yet although the phenomenon was once mainly associated with East Asia, now it has become global.

Policy makers might ask how they should respond to the phenomenon. The first answer would be to improve the database. Better information is needed on both the scale and nature of shadow education, including the perspectives of both recipients and providers. A second answer might point to regulations. In general the shadow education sector is under-regulated, especially in comparison with the school sector.

At HKU's Faculty of Education, shadow education has been designated a Faculty Research Theme. Colleagues are exploring the scope and implications of shadow education not only in Hong Kong and the rest of China but also in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Georgia and Iran. Further, a Special Interest Group (SIG) within the Comparative Education Research Centre (CERC) is a focal point for partners in Jamaica, Japan, Philippines and United Arab Emirates. These countries have a wide range of cultures and economic systems.

The team at HKU is led by Mark Bray, who has studied the expansion and implications of shadow education since the 1990s. His 2009 book on the theme, published by UNESCO's International Institute for Educational

**Shadow education is growing around the world. It exacerbates social inequalities, and has a significant backwash on schooling.**

Planning (IIEP) is available in 20 languages. Related work has been published by the European Commission and the Asian Development Bank.

Through the efforts of the HKU team and their partners, governments are gradually getting the message that shadow education needs more attention. Private tutoring is still growing around the world, and has become a major concern not only for children and their families but also for schools and policy makers.