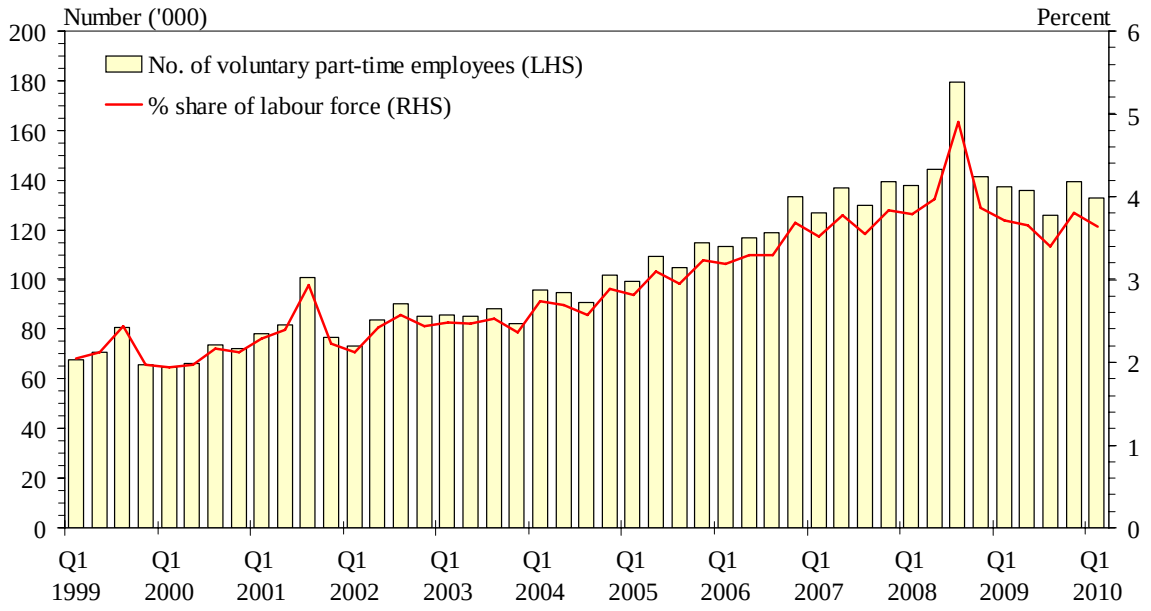
Box 5.1

Recent trends of voluntary part-time employees

Voluntary part-time employees[1] have grown in relative importance over the past decade. From 2.2% (70 900 workers) in 1999, the proportion of these employees in the labour force has risen to 2.9% (95 400 workers) in 2004 and further to 3.9% (133 100 workers) in 2007, before hovering mostly around this level in more recent years.

Chart 1 : Voluntary part-time employees have been mostly on the increase over the past decade



Relative to their full-time counterparts, voluntary part-time workers generally have lower levels of educational attainment and are engaged in different types of jobs in terms of skill requirement and economic sector. Analysed by educational attainment, 41% of voluntary part-time employees in 2009 had lower secondary education or below, compared with 28% for the total employed population. In terms of occupation categories, 32% of voluntary part-time employees were engaged in elementary occupations (versus 14% for the total employed population), while another 27% comprised service workers and shop sales workers (versus 17%). Furthermore, 32% of these part-time workers were employed in public administration, social and personal services (versus 25% for the total employed population), whereas 29% were in retail, accommodation and food services (versus 16%). Below is a summary of other more distinctive features of voluntary part-time employees.

[1] Defined as employees working voluntarily for less than 35 hours a week (except those on vacation), who are not available and have not sought additional work, i.e. excluding those who are underemployed.

Box 5.1 (Cont'd)

In terms of demographics, middle-aged females comprising largely homemakers made up the largest group of voluntary part-time employees. Reflecting this, some 47% of such employees in 2009 cited "busy with housework" as their reason for engaging in part-time work. This represented a noticeable rebound from the share of 38% in 2004, and was also larger than that of 43% in 1999. Moreover, there was a growing trend of students taking up voluntary part-time work over the period. This was borne out by the increasing proportion of voluntary part-time employees citing "busy with school work" as reason for not able to work longer hours, from 7% in 1999 to 16% in 2004 and further to 17% in 2009.

Also worthy of note is that whereas part-time employees have on average lower education qualifications and work skills, apparently the quality of this particular group of workers has undergone a considerable upgrading over the years, alongside the general uplifting in education standard of the entire working population. Nowadays part-time opportunities are no longer confined to the lower segment of the labour market, and have in fact become increasingly available at the middle and upper segments in recent years. As an indication, the employment size in respect of managers, administrators and professionals working on a voluntary part-time basis expanded notably by 37% between 2004 and 2009, following the increase of 7% over the period 1999 – 2004. Furthermore, the number of voluntary part-time employees with monthly earnings above $10,000 went up by 35% over the past five years, in contrast to the 10% drop observed in the preceding 5-year period.

Part-time working allows both employers and employees to have a higher degree of flexibility in coping with the changing economic and labour market conditions, which is conducive to more efficient utilisation of human capital and enhancement of resilience and competitiveness of the local economy.