

Ericka Anne Regalado (3035484970)

Supervisor: Dr. Jaspal Singh

Transdisciplinary Undergraduate Research Project

Common Core, The University of Hong Kong

## **Hong Kong Universities: Re-imagining Spaces for Dialogue**

In this paper, I study the various factors that influence students' experiences and expectations of the university through a questionnaire. I analyze participants' responses and make inferences to observable phenomena within university campuses to suggest that universities in Hong Kong must create more opportunities for students to engage in dialogue, and in that process, become critical agents of the dynamics of language use and advocates of social justice, cosmopolitanism, and global citizenship.

### ***Sociopolitical Context: Academic Freedom in Hong Kong***

Academic scholarship on pedagogy and education in Hong Kong revolve around studies of cultural identity, cosmopolitanism, global citizenship (Lin & Jackson), the inclusion of general education or civic education in school curricula, and the degree of academic freedom within academia (Petersen & Currie). These research projects constantly provide holistic measures, proposals and new insight of the university system to further advance and improve Hong Kong's education system. At its foundation, academic freedom is legally protected by legislation. As stipulated in Hong Kong's Basic Law enacted in 1997, Article 137 states that individuals "shall have the freedom to engage in academic research, literary and artistic creation, and other cultural activities." Despite enjoying academic autonomy and the freedom of political involvement, Petersen & Currie observed that there remains an implicit curtailing of scholarship freedom in terms of research work and applications for grants, with academics leaning away from discussions that would compromise the institution's socio-political relationship with China (591). The effects of Hong Kong's political issues play an overarching role in students' experiences within the classroom. Students constantly find themselves negotiating the limits in which they can voice their opinions, even more so when such discussions inevitably reveal where students fall on the political or ideological spectrum.

The threat of academic surveillance and censorship culminated after the implementation

of the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020. Successive worrying events within the city's eight universities funded by the Universities Grants Committee (UGC) contributed to the growing concern over academic freedom. At The University of Hong Kong (HKU), these events include the dismissal of Associate Professor of Law, Dr. Benny Tai<sup>1</sup> for "misconduct" over his role in co-founding the Occupy Central with Love and Peace campaign that initiated the 2014 social movement; the removal of the campus Lennon Wall<sup>2</sup> and Democracy Wall<sup>3</sup>, former symbols of resistance, and sites of solidarity and free expression of political grievances; and the institution's decision to sever all administrative and affiliated ties with the Student Union due to the union's "potentially unlawful public statements [that may] bring legal risks to the University."<sup>4</sup> HKU's decision to break off affiliation with the student union echoed similar instances at both The Chinese University of Hong Kong<sup>5</sup> and Lingnan University<sup>6</sup>. In an effort to relieve professors and students' concerns, HKU's administration office has recently announced their intention to set up a group and mechanism that "monitor legal developments within the national security law" and "evaluate allegations of security law violations."<sup>7</sup>

Hong Kong's political environment and its repercussions within academia have understandably caused apprehension, as students find that the university can no longer be a space for critical discussion of contentious issues. The decision to introduce a mechanism to safeguard academic freedom and legally protect its staff and students at HKU is in itself an alarming development that extends beyond the classroom. Students and academic staff are becoming increasingly conscious of the pressure to self-censor and avoid research topics regarding politics in China and Hong Kong. On the other hand, students also find it difficult to navigate other discourses and discussions amidst the culture of political correctness. These discussions cover topics of gender, sex, race and discrimination, social justice, religion and violence; topics that pervade the everyday and demand students' attention and participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Wong, Rachel. "End of academic freedom': University of Hong Kong to fire pro-democracy activist and law prof. Benny Tai." *Hong Kong Free Press*, 28 July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Magramo, Kathleen. "University of Hong Kong tears down Lennon Wall on campus, barricades site after students' contract to manage area expires." *South China Morning Post*, 10 October 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Kwan, Rhoda. "University of Hong Kong removes all posters from 'Democracy Wall' and student union premises." *Hong Kong Free Press*, 12 July 2021.

<sup>4</sup> "HKU statement regarding the HKU Students' Union." *The University of Hong Kong*, 30 April 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Tsang, Emily & Mok, Danny. "Hong Kong national security law: Chinese University cuts ties with student union, accuses body of 'exploiting' campus, bringing school into 'disrepute'." *South China Morning Post*, 25 February 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Chan, Ho-him, "Coronavirus: Hong Kong's Lingnan University distances itself from 'politicised' student union after mass email refers to 'Wuhan pneumonia'." *South China Morning Post*, 9 June 2021.

<sup>7</sup> "Hong Kong university's guidelines on security law stoke fears over freedoms." *Reuters*, 14 April 2021.

Within universities in Hong Kong, the Humanities are constantly being expanded and developed in response to the increasing need to equip students with the language to confront such discourses. We witness universities addressing this need with the introduction of the Gender Studies Department, and the branching off of various Area Studies under the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at HKU, as well as the implementation of compulsory General Education components in all universities regardless of students' degrees. At the height of such developments, the diversified university curricula incentivize students to critically negotiate spaces and discussions outside of their field. The expectation for students to deliberate and comment on subjects novel to them can be a daunting task, especially within university spaces where student advocacy groups are taking steps to advocate for political correctness and cultural and linguistic sensitivity.

### ***Methodology and Objective***

68 students who study in, or have graduated from, Hong Kong universities have completed a questionnaire centered on their understanding of political correctness, their expectations of universities, and the reflection of their experiences in engaging in academic discussions and discourse. My main objective for administering this questionnaire was to discern whether students felt that they have had adequate opportunities for critical discussions about contemporary global issues concerning politics, human rights, race, gender, trauma, and violence, and whether they felt supported and guided by the university in that process.

In this questionnaire, I asked participants to reflect upon their experiences in discussions they have had in university courses and tutorials. In my questions, "the university" primarily refers to key individuals who facilitate discussions and curate students' learning environment. These refer to faculty departments that develop course curricula and course professors, tutors, and teaching staff members delivering such discourses. Nonetheless, it is notable to take into account that course mates, course materials and department guidelines are variables that can significantly influence the classroom environment and students' experiences in discussions. These are variables I had not anticipated initially when framing my questions. I acknowledge that participants may interpret the questions differently. In my analysis, I will attempt to identify gaps in my questions and make inferences between these gaps and with participants' responses across social variables, such as students' age, academic field, and university of study.

The questions are written and framed from the first-person perspective, with the intention that participants will reflect upon experiences at a more personal and palpable level.<sup>8</sup> The questionnaires were administered via Google Forms and shared on my social media. The landing page explained the purpose of my research and participants were asked to give consent to participate before proceeding to the questions. All questions were set to optional, and responses were collected anonymously. Given the sensitive nature of some questions regarding political discussions and free speech in the questionnaire, it is understandable that participants may have been hesitant to respond candidly, particularly with the NSL in consideration. Taking into account the potentially unreliable and unsafe storage of such information on Google, other qualitative means such as personal interviews or focus groups could have possibly been a more reliable and substantial method to collect information, albeit losing the element of anonymity.

Among the eight UGC-funded universities, participants were predominantly from The University of Hong Kong (HKU) with 33 students; followed by 10 students from City University of Hong Kong (CityU), 8 from The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), and 5 from the University of Science and Technology (HKUST). The remaining respondents are from other institutions, including The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), Open University of Hong Kong (OpenU), Lingnan University (LU), Hang Seng University (HSU), Caritas Institute of Higher Education (CIHE), and HKU Space. As the majority of participants are currently undergraduates (77.9%) and under the age of 25 (97.1%), participants' reflections on their experiences in university primarily stem from their undergraduate years. 43 participants study subjects in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences, with the remaining ones distributed evenly among Medicine, Business and STEM fields. It is important to note that as students varied across faculties, age and academic background, my result sample can neither be representative of a specific university's undergraduate experience, nor of Hong Kong's universities as a whole. Another perceived limitation is that the scope of the questionnaire cannot measure teaching initiatives or strategies that have facilitated a learning environment conducive for engagement with difficult discourse and intellectual development. Instead, my paper foregrounds the different factors influencing students' undergraduate experiences that result in their perceived lack of opportunity and space to critically discuss and engage in political discourse within

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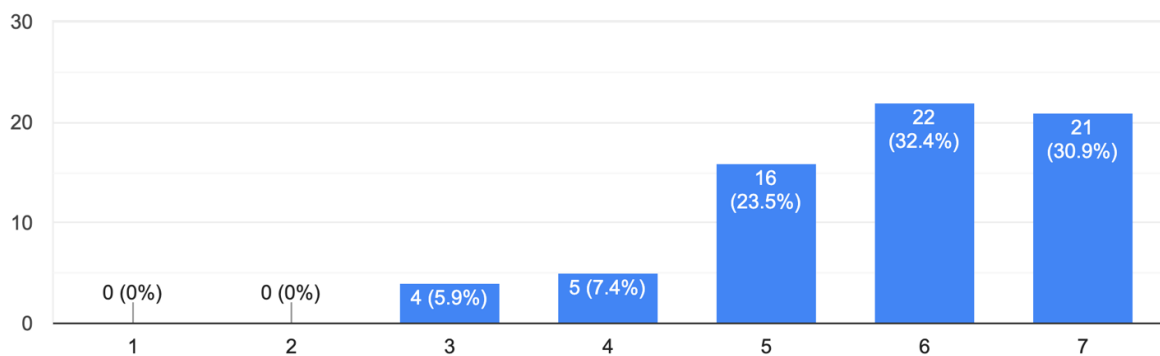
<sup>8</sup> "First-person questions push respondents to answer with what they actually did, instead of projecting potential future behaviour in a given scenario or opinions." (Anderson, *UX Collective*)

universities.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

On evaluating students' university experiences, participants were asked to reflect on 13 questions along a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1, "strongly disagree," to 7, "strongly agree." To start with, almost all participants agreed that the university should hold spaces for students to express more risky or unorthodox ideas (Figure 1), with a majority reflecting that they feel more trained to be accepting of others' opinions (Figure 2). While these two figures encouragingly indicate that participants consider Hong Kong universities as viable sources of instilling cultural sensitivity and critical thinking in students, the incongruity between students' expectations of universities and their overall experience reveal otherwise. Evidently, further study and in-depth interviews can be conducted with students to determine how the university can substantially continue to create "safe spaces" conducive for the expression of different ideas. The subsequent section will further explore the notion of "safe spaces" within pedagogy.

4. I feel that the University should be an environment for me to take more risks and express unorthodox / unconventional opinions.  
68 responses



*Figure 1*

12. I feel that the University has trained me to be more accepting of others' views and opinions.

68 responses

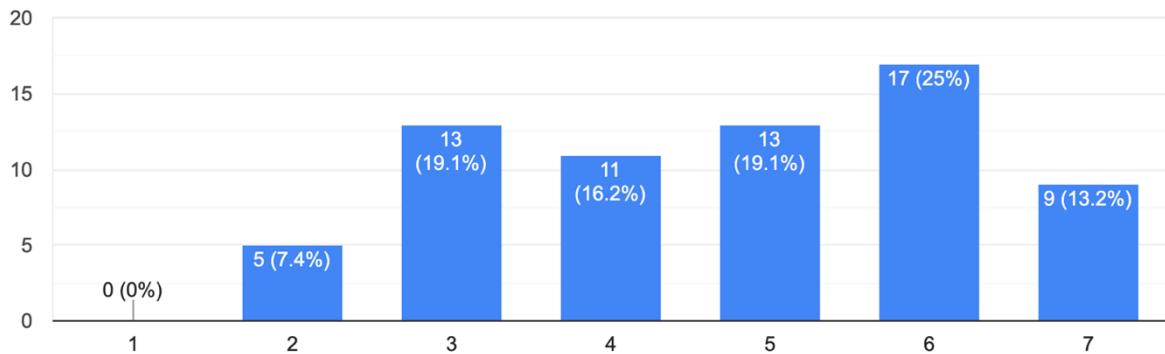


Figure 2

Figures 3 and 4 reflect an evenly distributed judgement of whether the university has provided them with opportunities and “safe spaces” to engage in difficult discussions and express their views. The concentration of students’ answers towards “undecided,” and “more or less” agreeing or disagreeing reflect the participants’ ambivalence towards perceiving the university as one that fosters an environment for debate and conversation. However, my questionnaire did not provide a framework for participants to respond with a mutual understanding of what a “debate” or a “difficult conversation” is. Students’ varying thresholds for these terms inevitably result in a more difficult and potentially faulty analysis of data results. Perhaps participants’ ambivalence also reflects the lack of a mutual understanding towards what constitutes a “safe space” for pedagogical discussion. Au and Kennedy (2017), through focus group interviews with Hong Kong local secondary school students in 2011, observe that the participants consider their teachers as authority figures and are included not to challenge teachers (257). The undemocratic nature of classrooms in local secondary schools could potentially translate to participants’ reluctance to question university administration. However, this argument conflates the learning environment among the many local schools in the city, as well as university students’ background and educational upbringing. Another important point to consider is that participants’ responses were gathered during the pandemic. At the time of data collection, 17 participants were either Year 1 or 2 students, and thus have mostly experienced university only through virtual classes. The experiences and expectations that this group have of the university can vary substantially from the other groups. As institutions and teaching staff take on the novel task of navigating and imagining ways for effectively delivering virtual classes, the challenge to construct a “safe space” for students inevitably adds more weight to the heavy

demands of online teaching. The subsequent sections will further explore the notion of “safe spaces” within pedagogy.

1. I feel that the university creates a safe space for me to express my views.

65 responses

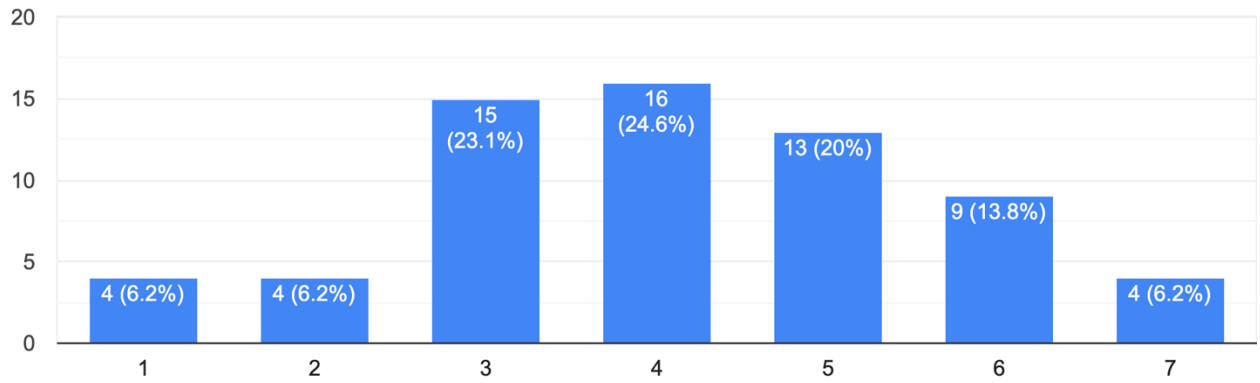


Figure 3

2. I feel that the university creates opportunities for students to engage in debates and difficult conversations.

67 responses

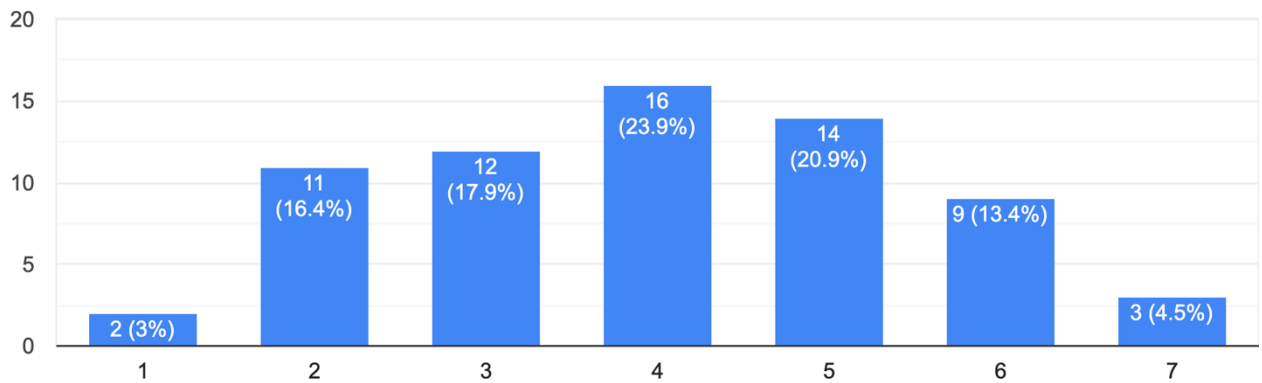


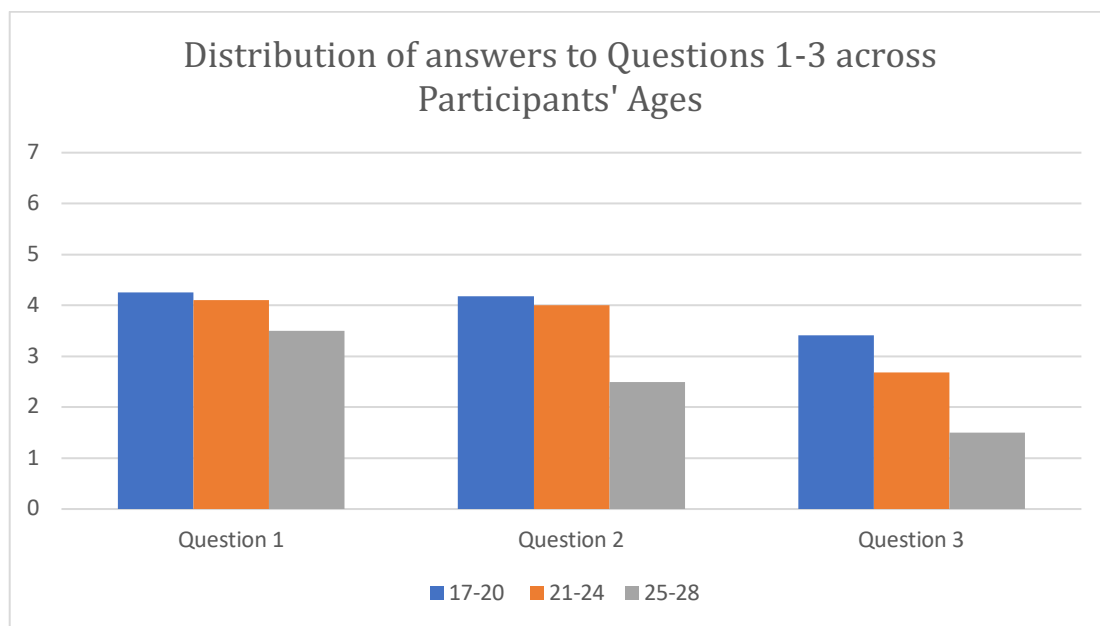
Figure 4

Further dissecting my data along participants’ different social variables, Figures 5-7 below evidently present a pattern in responses between the various groups.<sup>9</sup> I chose the first three questions<sup>10</sup> to compare participants’ responses, as they center primarily on the institution

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix for the legend key of Figures 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> Question 1: “I feel that the university creates a safe space for me to express my views.”; Question 2: “I feel that the university creates opportunities for students to engage in debates and difficult conversations.”; Question 3: “I feel that the University creates a safe space to speak about ongoing political issues in Hong Kong.”

and students' thoughts of their university experience. The recorded number under each variable is the average taken from the sum of participants' responses on the 7-point Likert scale. In other words, an average below four would indicate that the majority of participants within the group disagreed with the question; and vice-versa, an average above four indicates that most agreed with the question.



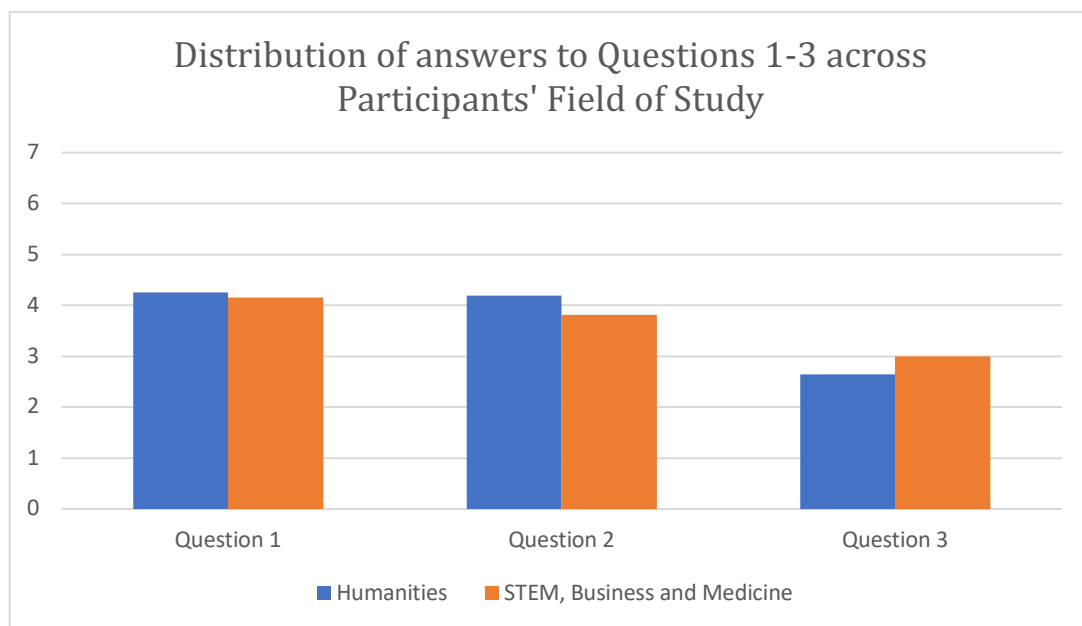
*Figure 5*

The first variable dissecting participants' ages in Figure 5 evidently demonstrates a decreasing average towards the older age groups in all three questions. This suggests that students recently admitted to university may not have formed a definitive expectation of the university thus far or have experienced a relatively more positive and open learning environment in universities compared to high school. Although only two participants were from the 25-28 age group, their undergraduate experience primarily coincided with the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the subsequent years when the city was going through attempts at restructuring institutions and reforming civil society.<sup>11</sup> Students paid the effort to participate in the movement in whichever way they could, with some joining others in occupying the streets, and some by boycotting classes from primary schools to university levels. As conflicts between protestors and the police and the government escalated, the movement's student leaders and other students have had to retreat indefinitely. This could translate to the far more demoralizing

<sup>11</sup> "Hong Kong protests: Timeline of the occupation." *BBC News*, 11 December 2014.



experience students from this age group have had within the university. As a whole, it is crucial to observe the decreasing average among all groups as the questions progressed and asked more specific circumstances. The third question regarding discussions of political issues consistently scored the lowest in all groups of the different social variables. This is a point of concern I personally resonate with and understand. I will explore this further in the following paragraphs.



*Figure 6*

Between the two fields of study, I assume that STEM, Business and Medicine students may have had less opportunities for discussions of politics and important societal issues simply because of their more intensive and centralized academic curriculum (Figure 6). Judging from my knowledge, most students from these academic backgrounds at HKU do not take any more than six courses outside their own major. Lastly, between the different universities, most averages fall on “undecided” or “more of less disagree” within the 7-point Likert scale, and are evidently consistent throughout. Perhaps a distinct observation is the perceived fewer opportunities for debates and conversations in institutions apart from HKU and CUHK (Figure 7). The results from CUHK draw an important reflection on the quality and effectiveness of dialogue, as results reveal that despite more opportunities for discussion, participants may feel that such spaces are not “safe” anyhow. Apart from what I perceive is a hesitance to challenge the university, the responses also demonstrate the lack of a substantive measure to evaluate the university and the ambiguity of the terms I have used in my questionnaire. The questionnaire could perhaps produce more viable and constructive results had I narrowed my focus to more

definite circumstances that students can look back and reflect on. Nonetheless, none of the results fell on the scale of 5-7 that “agrees” with the questions, which is perhaps a notable aspect that universities can work to address and explore further.

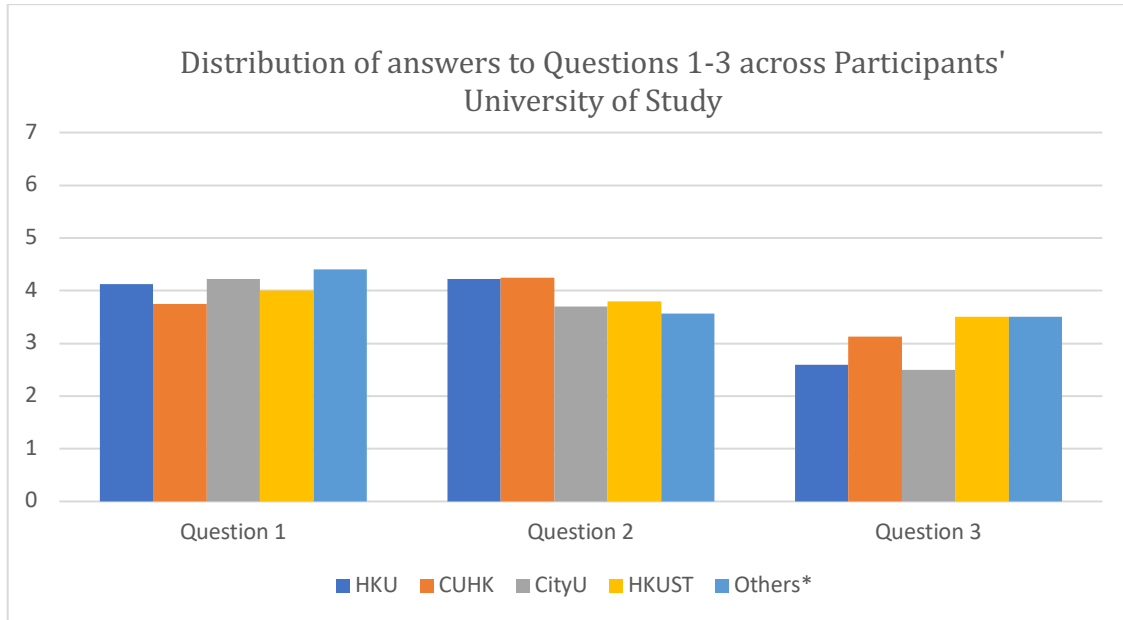


Figure 7

What topics have been the most sensitive or difficult to navigate and discuss?

68 responses

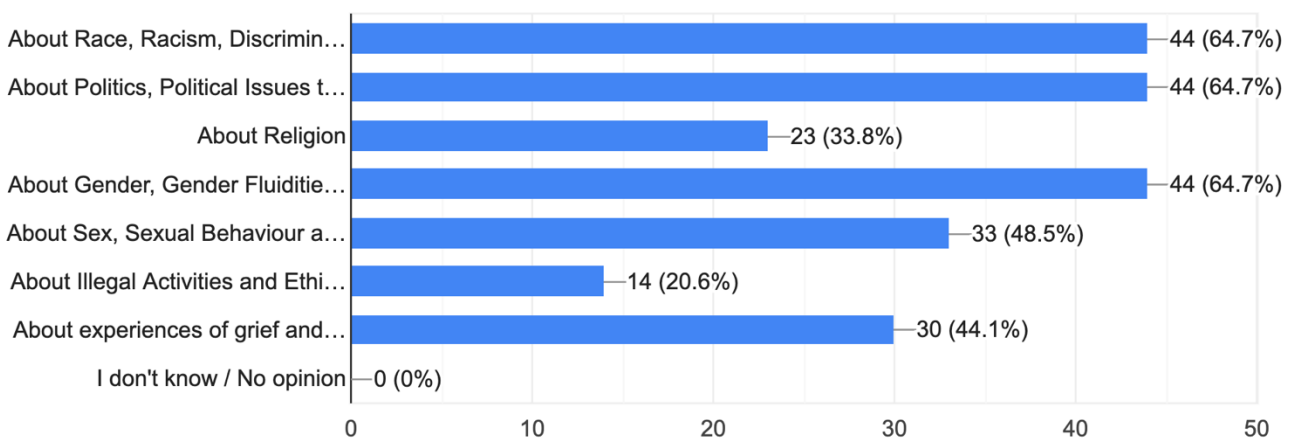


Figure 8

I attempt to identify the types of “sensitive” or “difficult” topics that students find difficult to discuss in Figure 8. By delineating seven contemporary issues and discourses I find prominent

today,<sup>12</sup> the results reveal that participants find topics of “race, racism, discrimination,” “gender, gender fluidities, nouns and pronouns,” and “politics and political issues today” most difficult to navigate. I would suggest that these findings are predicated on the increasing display and circulation of global issues raised and advocated for on social media, consistently demanding individuals’ attention and emotional and intellectual engagement. It is thus understandable that individuals are overwhelmed by the influx of concurrent discourses and global issues, even more so when they are expected to deliberate on and discuss such subjects when they have not had prior guidance and spaces to do so. Perhaps most discernible are students’ anxieties over expressing themselves on political topics (Figure 9). An overwhelming majority of 46 students out of 67 also responded that the university has not been able to create a safe environment for them to engage in discussions about current political issues in Hong Kong (Figure 10). Further study and qualitative responses from the other 21 participants who had responded positively and noted that the university had afforded them space to deliberate on political issues would have been constructive to determine how to continue fostering such spaces for other students. These results can be studied in conversation with the aftermath of the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019-2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ANTI-ELAB) Movement, and the implementation of the NSL. Not only are local Hong Kong students expected to navigate the boundaries to which they can speak, write or discuss local politics, even students and academics outside the city are advised not to fly into Hong Kong with lecture recordings or teaching materials that could potentially be incriminating, subject to the NSL.<sup>13</sup> During the 2019-2020 Movement, the university itself, in both its administrative and physical space, had not been a “safe space,” as campuses became sites of violent clashes between protestors and police forces. The recent raid into HKU by the national security police<sup>14</sup> further affirmed students’ perception towards the university as one that can no longer be deemed a “safe space.”

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<sup>12</sup> The choices include: “About Race, Racism, Discrimination,” “About Politics, Political Issues today,” “About Religion,” “About Gender, Gender Fluidities, Nouns and Pronouns,” “About Sex, Sexual Behaviour and Practices,” “About Illegal Activities and Ethically Questionable Activities (i.e. Drugs, Underage Consumption of Alcohol / Tobacco)” and “About experiences of grief and loss, trauma, or violence (i.e. Mental Health, PTSD, Domestic Abuse, Rape).”

<sup>13</sup> Woolcock, Nicola. “Wipe references to China to protect students, Soas lecturers told.” *The Sunday Times*, 7 May 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Lam, Nadia et al. “Hong Kong national security police raid university student union as part of investigation into stabbed officer motion.” *South China Morning Post*, 16 July 2021.

5. I have political views that I am afraid to share.

68 responses

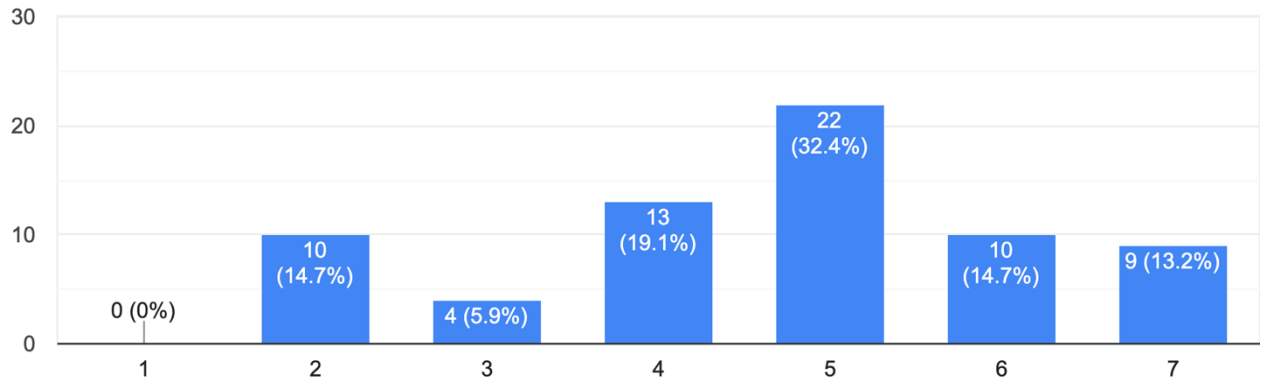


Figure 9

3. I feel that the University creates a safe space to speak about ongoing political issues in Hong Kong.

67 responses

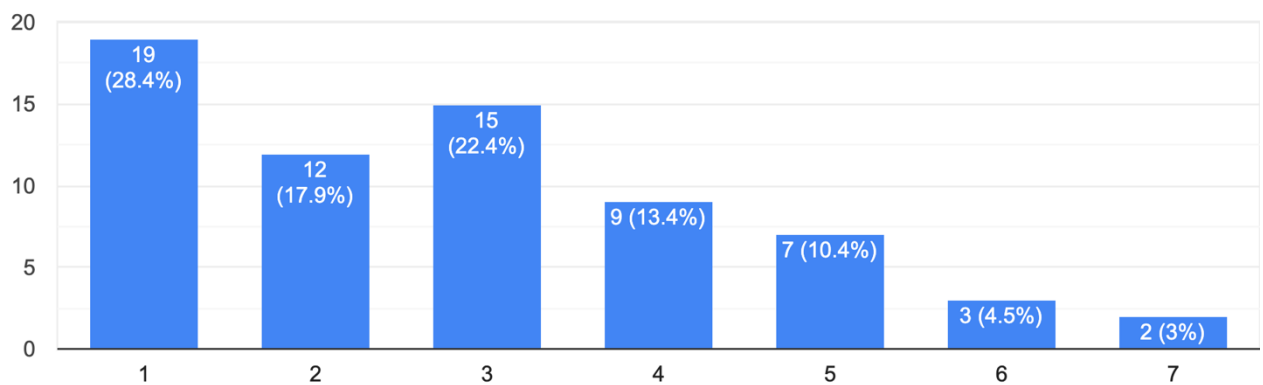


Figure 10

Hong Kong students' political anxieties accrued alongside societal demands to negotiate and situate their positionality and responsibility to stand in solidarity with other social movements globally. These are demands that locals in Hong Kong have been compelled to reckon with over the past few years and would understandably look to communities and educational institutions for support and guidance. As my essay will later note, the university must move beyond its theoretical boundaries and create meaningful avenues and spaces for students to engage in academic praxis. How can teaching staff in universities foster a pedagogical environment for critical engagement and discussion that students can take up within other

communities to which they belong, such as their families? How can students reclaim space within the classroom and turn it into a communal space of hope and social change?

### ***Safe Spaces in the University: Political Correctness in Praxis***

How do you understand the term, "Political Correctness"?

68 responses

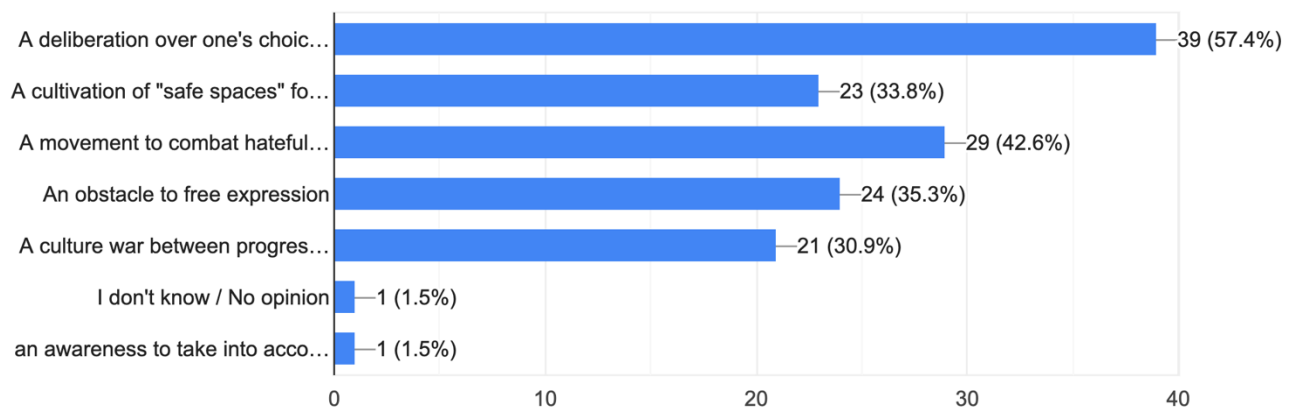


Figure 11

Another section of my questionnaire reflects on participants' perspective towards "political correctness" (PC), with my intention to determine whether the term carries positive or negative connotations. Thus, I included eleven terms that I find associated with PC based on articles I have read on PC discourse.<sup>15</sup> Participants predominantly associated PC with the terms, "cultural sensitivity" (69.1%), followed by "identity politics" (51.5%), "censorship" (51.5%) and "language policing" (45.6%). The majority's association with "cultural sensitivity" fittingly echoes most participants' understanding of PC as "a deliberation over one's choice of words to avoid offending others" in Figure 11 (57.4%). Participants' primary associations of PC with "censorship" and "language policing" are apt observations of the circumstances in which the rise of PC has prompted heated and often controversial reports in the media, particularly in Western media depictions of cultural wars between progressive and conservative groups. One participant added that "one side calls it language policing and another side cultural sensitivity. But I feel like this term can be both if we disregard the bipartisan nature of American politics. I don't think it's a western concept [because] I think this can be applied worldwide but the most heated debate I've seen regarding this has come from Americans for an American context." Participants' least associated term with PC, "a Western concept" (25%), corresponds fittingly with the comment on

<sup>15</sup> The eleven terms include, "cultural sensitivity," "conservatives," "liberals," "progressives," "a Western concept," "censorship," "language policing," "safe spaces," "social justice warriors," "cancel culture," and "identity politics."

PC discourse as one that “can be applied worldwide.” These responses are affirmative indications of Hong Kong students’ awareness of PC, albeit a discourse not extensively discussed within universities.<sup>16</sup>

This participant highlights a crucial idea regarding PC, namely that it can be understood as both a positive and negative connotation depending on which side the individual is on the PC debate. At the core of my discussion is the debate over what constitutes a “safe space” in a university, and how members of a group can create an egalitarian and inclusive space safe for all, and not only for one specific group. It is inevitable that, depending on the facilitator, group dynamics and the topic at hand, a space can be safe to some, and hostile to others. Rom (1998) posits that a safe space should not simply allow for different individuals’ voices to be accepted and recognized, rather, there must be room to “respond to those voices, to criticize them, to challenge them, to sharpen our perspectives through the friction of dialogue” (407).

8. I should be allowed to express myself freely, regardless of whether they might offend others.

68 responses

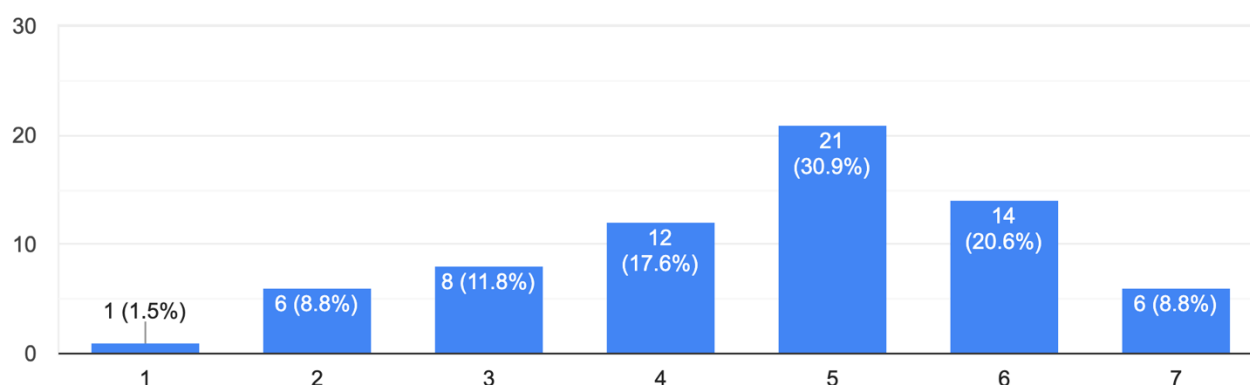


Figure 12

Rom’s argument makes for a viable commentary on one question in my questionnaire where participants were asked to reflect on whether they “should be allowed to express [them]selves freely, regardless of whether [their words] might offend others.” Initially, I was surprised to find that the majority of participants (60%) agreed to the statement (Figure 12). I

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<sup>16</sup> This is merely based on a personal observation during my undergraduate studies at HKU. Upon speaking with students around me, they generally have not heard of the notion of political correctness being discussed in universities, nor do they immediately correlate difficulties of engaging in certain discourses as a factor of political correctness.

questioned whether free speech should be upheld at the expense of offending and marginalizing others. Yet, upon personally asking others around me the same question, I've come to realize that participants might have taken the question one step further. A friend remarked, "what if I speak up against those whose voiced speech or opinion have offended others? I'm expressing my discontent over their speech, and in that process, might cause offence to them too. In this case, I think it is justifiable."

This comment is an example of what Rom (1998) and Fairclough (1995, 2003) find crucial to be practiced and established within institutions. Fairclough (2003) asserts that PC plays a crucial role within education as a form of "cultural governance," wherein institutions facilitate a culture of learning and unlearning certain discourses and internalized values and identities especially harmful to marginalized communities (20). He proposes that institutions and educators must equip students with the capacity and ability to critique their own positionalities towards language, society, and culture through the framework of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) (1995, 221). He writes that CLA "can lead to reflexive analysis of practices of domination implicit in the transmission and learning of academic discourse, and the engagement of learners in the struggle to contest and change such practices" (1995, 222). The capacity to identify the dynamics of power, hegemony and intervention within discourse enables students to challenge underlying systemic structures, and above all, to recognize how social factors and their environment have informed their perceptions, beliefs, and identity. Results from my questionnaire suggest that students are aware of the gap and lack of dialogue taking place within classroom regarding crucial issues. One can imagine how much more constructive these reflections can be when students are taught and aware of how implicit dynamics of power are sustained in what is, and what is not said. This in turn can even create a more inclusive community of students who can proactively take responsibility over their own speech and contribute to fostering safe spaces for discussion, rather than solely expecting the university to provide them with such spaces.

The inclusion of PC discourse is crucial in the contexts of Hong Kong, as current scholarship agree that there is a need for civic learning and pedagogy that cultivates values of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism among students. Lin and Jackson's study (2020)

highlights the limitations of Hong Kong's education system to foster students' cosmopolitan<sup>17</sup> values in praxis. Through their methodology, they illustrate that the notion of cosmopolitanism is indeed ingrained among students' local identity but is often only elucidated in abstract terms.<sup>18</sup> They identify local primary and secondary textbooks that, in the attempt to exemplify Hong Kong's unique cosmopolitan communities and industries, instead "reproduce and reinforce the everyday discrimination and stereotypes in Hong Kong," misinforming students of the social reality that marginalized communities experience in the city (94). Likewise, Au & Kennedy (2017) find that local secondary schools have not adequately and holistically promoted civic learning and engagement.<sup>19</sup> They suggest that schools should create more opportunities for students' direct participation in leading school and community activities, as well as to curate a democratic and open class environment to equip students with the necessary skills to critically engage and challenge discourse (258).

Both studies delineate limitations of pedagogy in secondary education rather than at a tertiary level, but their findings translate to the need for local universities to further foster local students' sense of global citizenship. Within the university context, Chui and Leung's study (2014) of HKU students' attitudes towards global citizenship and globalization suggest that universities should invest more manpower and funds into developing intercultural programmes for students. They note that while exposure to intercultural programmes have positively empowered students with a more global and cosmopolitan worldview, it is necessary that this is also fostered within the classroom space and with the curricula, in the same way that Fairclough's CLA framework proposes that discourse analysis be embedded within university curricula. Doing so requires a re-imagining of the institution's mission and vision for its students – how can institutions and teaching staff repurpose the academic space into one that actively engages the dynamics of intersectionality in praxis?

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<sup>17</sup> Lin and Jackson write that cosmopolitanism is a value promoted within education to cultivate a sense of global citizenship among students and "correct parochial and narrow-minded attitudes and practices" (89). They stress its importance in Hong Kong because the city has always been branded as an international hub that houses individuals from different ethnicities and backgrounds.

<sup>18</sup> Although cosmopolitanism is expressed as a distinct feature of Hong Kong's local identity, Lin and Jackson emphasize the need to expound on cosmopolitanism in the local context that adequately responds to social realities in Hong Kong, not only as a theory, but as practiced as "cosmopolitan stances, dispositions and habits" (91).

<sup>19</sup> Au and Kennedy interviewed a cohort of secondary students in 2009 and found that most students were more interested in social engagement and volunteering rather than participating in political discussions and activities (255), and thus, are not optimistic about their "capacity to influence the government in future" (256).



Recalling my experiences during my undergraduate years, I have appreciated moments when professors encouraged students to be involved in the structuring of the semester timetable. Rather than rushing topics to stick with the syllabus, such professors allowed discussions to continue when students were more invested in certain topics. I appreciated moments when the classroom turned into a fireside chat as we bounced off ideas with each other regarding issues that we felt strongly about. These discussions were especially constructive as professors and tutors facilitated and prompted students to question and rethink their responses, and trained students to rephrase and summarize others' responses. When asked to rethink our responses, we are made aware of our own biases and prejudices. This example echoes Rom's (1998) description of a "safe space," where both students and educators' shared ideas are challenged and capitalized to provoke further thought and dialogue. I appreciated, above all, when professors opened up a safe space for students to express their anxieties and concerns over political issues that were occurring at the time. One professor did this in the first fifteen minutes of a class that seemed to have no connections whatsoever to the course material, knowing that students were coming into class with the weight of political anxieties that should not merely be shrugged off and cast aside for the lecture. This exemplifies what I envision a classroom should be – one that is not separate and distant from social reality, but one that offers a space for students and educators to be vulnerable together. The sharing of vulnerabilities can powerfully forge a community of emphatic listeners and communicators ready to emulate such practices within their own circles and communities outside the university.

### ***Conclusion***

University institutions can begin by shifting away from a transactional process of knowledge-transmission to a more conscious and proactive building of a community where critical dialogue and the open exchange of knowledge are initiated and encouraged. While communication can be beneficial, it can be counterintuitive when not practiced with intentionality. Readings (2000) offers a critique of the modernist notion of communicative transparency that idealizes its process and outcomes,<sup>20</sup> arguing that the university must create a model of a community not "grounded upon and reinforced by a common cultural identity", but one of "subjects of *singularities*" (185, emphasis in original). This reframing allows for a community that acknowledges and foregrounds individuals' positionalities, social background,

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<sup>20</sup> Readings note that it is often wrongfully assumed that transparent communication stabilizes and contributes to the university institution's fundamental function as "bears of social bond." (183)

and responsibility toward others, of which Readings describes as a network of obligations (ibid.). Lastly, the current development of Hong Kong's political climate has inevitably influenced the academia and students' learning environment. Without doubt, institutions must find ways to work within the boundaries of national legislation and safeguard its students and teaching staff. But in what ways have these endeavors stifled self-expression instead, when both students and academic staff are exerting effort to evade putting themselves at risk? As a sovereign institution bearing the banner of free thought and discussion, how can universities leverage their platform to push back against the mounting pressure to self-censor? Given the lack of spaces within Hong Kong society for political discourse, university departments carry a social responsibility to equip their students with the capacity to emulate the forms of dialogue that foster social progress and social change. The question lies in how universities can work to provide safe spaces, a critical learning environment to "accompany"<sup>21</sup> students in engagement and dialogue that is not distant to the realities that individuals experience within society.

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<sup>21</sup> Bucholtz et al. (2016) write that "accompaniment" entails a collaboration between scholars, students, and other individuals involved outside the academic, on equal standing, towards a common goal of social justice. They describe this process as one that is "an ongoing, negotiated social process of learning to talk and work together, in which all participants contribute different forms of expertise and understanding and from which they benefit in different ways." (27). The process of "accompaniment" destabilizes the often unequal power relations between those within the academia and those in other social networks or organizations, and dispels the notion that one "empowers" or "helps" the other.

## Appendix

### **Legend key of Figures 5-7**

	<b>Q1:</b> "I feel that the university creates a safe space for me to express my views."	<b>Q2:</b> "I feel that the university creates opportunities for students to engage in debates and difficult conversations."	<b>Q3:</b> "I feel that the University creates a safe space to speak about ongoing political issues in Hong Kong."
<b>Age</b>			
17-20	4.25 (16) *	4.18 (17)	3.41 (17)
21-24	4.11 (46)	4.0 (47)	2.68 (47)
25-28	<b>3.5 (2)</b>	<b>2.5 (2)</b>	<b>1.5 (2)</b>
<b>University of Study</b>			
HKU	4.13 (31)	4.22 (32)	2.59 (32)
CUHK	<b>3.75 (8)</b>	4.25 (8)	3.125 (8)
CityU	4.22 (9)	3.7 (10)	<b>2.5 (10)</b>
HKUST	4.0 (5)	3.8 (5)	3.5 (4)
Others**	4.4 (10)	<b>3.56 (9)</b>	3.5 (10)
<b>Field of Study</b>			
Humanities	4.25 (40)	4.19 (43)	2.65 (43)
STEM, Business and Medicine	4.15 (20)	3.81 (21)	3.0 (20)
<b>7-point Likert scale:</b>			
<i>(1) Strongly Disagree      (2) Disagree    (3) More or less disagree    (4) Undecided</i>			
<i>(5) More or less agree      (6) Agree      (7) Strongly Agree</i>			
* The numbers in brackets indicate the number of responses within the particular participant group			
** Others include PolyU, OpenU, LU, HSU, CIHE, HKU Space			

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