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# A “Narrowly Diverse” General Education: How Democratic are the University of Hong Kong’s Institutional Channels for Engaging Students for the Common Core Curriculum?

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## Abstract

Large discrepancies still exist between the perceptions of teachers and concerns of students as reflected by the continuing difficulties in developing flexible and effective General Education programmes both worldwide and in Hong Kong. The Common Core Curriculum, a variant of General Education at the University of Hong Kong, is getting more mature and complete through its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of implementation this year. However, in line with the global paradigm shift of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with regard to issues like providing feedback, initiating suggestions, and raising questions through the institutional means, one can still get an impression that “it is always the same group of proactive individuals with endless rephrasing demands”. One should hence understand why does a relatively comprehensive, free, and organised environment for involving students may not help mobilisation and participation that much. This article argues that the existing institutional channels for student engagement is “narrowly diverse”. They are “diverse” when teacher-centred consultation and learner-centred participation are always presented in different formats. While they are simultaneously “narrow” in terms of quality assurance in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as the foundations of both learning and teaching. Although most students prioritise them with higher expectations and values, the institution instead resorts to top-down but not bottom-up student participatory channels with a lesser extent of “democratism”. Meanwhile, a student-led education is argued as a more drastic and radical transformation when they can be fully empowered as the genuine designers and users.

**Keywords:** Higher Education; General Education; Common Core Curriculum; The University of Hong Kong; Democratic Innovations; Student Engagement

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“At this point, teachers appear to have a 19<sup>th</sup> century curriculum, 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings and organisations, and 21<sup>st</sup> century learners facing an undefined future” was a remarkable comment made by Bruce Wellman regarding the contemporary landscape of higher education across the world (Ernst-Slavit & Gottlieb, 2014: 139). The will of General Education (GE) is a direct response

to the rapid expansion of interconnectedness and interdependence that are highly emphasised as the central tenets of both theorised and living globalisation shaping our world. The ultimate objective of the General Education curriculum (GEC) is to cultivate different innovative attitudes, social skills, and intellectual knowledge among students to address both the complexities and uncertainties of 21<sup>st</sup> century life. Although such a paradigm shift of higher education to the attainment of a balanced and systematic exploration across the interdisciplinary fields of learning does exist in both worldwide and in Hong Kong, the illustrative claim made by Wellman reflects the imperativeness of refining the curriculum and expectations, reorganising the educational facilities, and re-engaging all students to become curious and inquisitive about their learning.

In Hong Kong, all 8 publicly funded local universities are mandated by the Government to include GE elements into their respective curriculum under an extension of degree structure from 3 to 4 years, which was crucial in another wave of the root and branch educational reform since 2012. The increase of the normative length of undergraduate study reflects the turn of educational philosophy from a heavy, if not sole, focus on specialisation to a more holistic approach to the educational experience. Both the missions and histories of universities lead to various curricular approaches to the universal goal. For the University of Hong Kong (HKU) as the comprehensive colonial research university, faculty and administration focus on the first-year experience as well as on the middle and latter parts of the undergraduate programme (Finkelstein & Walker, 2008). The term “Common Core” (CC) is used as a variation of the GEC at HKU. It is entirely different from its usage as the study of core classical texts among universities in the United States. Instead, “common” signifies the sustainable process of delimiting the scope of rigid and non-traditional curriculum while “core” draws students’ close and special attention to the commonality of human experiences of deeply profound significance to humankind as core values (Tsui, 2012).

At HKU, all undergraduates are required to select 6 courses out of more than 210 choices (or 4 for students coming from double degree programmes) across four Areas of Inquiry (AoIs), including Scientific and Technological Literacy (CCST), Humanities (CCHU), Global Issues (CCGL), and China: Culture, State, and Society (CCCH), whereas students must complete at least one course in every AoI with two additional courses of their own choice. Through these courses of diverse natures and themes that beyond students’ disciplinary studies, all students are engaged with active and interactive learning methods of practices like experiential learning projects, inquiry-based media production, case-based experiments, and small-group debates and role-plays as the means of assessment. As most undergraduates with deep-rooted mentality of remote learning spent consistent hard effort over the examination-cramming, elitist, and narrow-focused educational system that is characterised by both mandated curriculum and standardised assessment, the development of GEC hence becomes vital for university education to emphasise less on hard knowledge but more on soft skills. Meanwhile, the GEC of collaborative nature also encourages students to shape both ideas and norms with communication and cooperation in order to produce the desired outcome together eventually. This is also missing element in typical local secondary education when most of the local students focus a lot on achieving individually and academically,

which allow them to achieve a higher socio-economic status and uphold principles like efficiency and competitiveness in terms of economic gains in the discourse of globalisation.

As the rationale of GEC is contrary to the perceived competitive and zero-sum nature of local education, since the implementation of the Common Core Curriculum (CCC) at HKU in 2012. Many central and long-lasting arguments, as well as polemics have emerged and circulated around the campus. All these controversies are eventually brought to the annual formal debate table by HKU Student Union Council (SUC) in 2015. The intense debate is apparently an embodiment of the educational values that all individuals hold to be paramount, ranging from free inquiry to reflectively researched questions to the high quality of verbal and written expression. Although more than two-third of the popularly elected councillors eventually roundly defeat the motion of abolishing the CCC, student voices from both sides in this unexplored archive should be carefully scrutinised in order to fully understand the diverse desires and needs as well as excitements and anxieties of students towards this relatively new curricular experiment.

By advocating universalism as the virtue and vision of university's curriculum, supporters of the CCC argue for the interdisciplinary and non-traditional nature of courses that broaden students' horizons and widen their scope of knowledge. It creates an accessible platform for them to meet friends across the faculties and complement other courses or even their specialised majors, which all guide and assist one to map out broader pathways and deeper interconnections for the future life beyond university education. Nevertheless, several critics will then come up with some creative terms or tall tales like "major in CC" and "self-created day-off on every Wednesday" to illustrate their suggestions for further improvement or even grievances and lamentations. The former argument criticises the demanding or even unreasonable workload for some types of CC courses, especially when compared to the respective major and elective courses for some students. While the latter claim is concerned about the discontent towards some lesson content that are irrelevant to students' specialised and professional disciplines, and even the current unengaging teaching style that cannot retain students' attention or even their presence in those lectures.

While it appears that student engagement is essential to both higher education and general education, an interesting puzzling picture is observed in the CCC at HKU: despite the fact that expectations and demands towards the curriculum remain generally high, student involvement in institutional channels remains relatively passive and low when compared to the non-institutional ones. Regarding the recent development and situation of the CCC at HKU, Kochhar-Lindgren (2016: 62-63) summarises that "the responses by students and staff to the creation, implementation, and refinement of the Core has ranged from enthusiastic participation to deep resistance, but the central thrust of the administrative and pedagogical work has become to enhance the experience for everyone involved". The CCC is indisputably one of the experiments across Asia to create a more student-oriented learning experience. However, even though the CCC is getting more mature and complete through its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of implementation this year, with regard to several issues like providing feedback, initiating suggestions, and raising questions through those institutional

means, one can still get an impression that “it is always the same group of proactive people with endless rephrasing demands” from both sides inside the echo chamber.

In this light, it becomes imperative for one to first consider different extent and categories of existing top-down conventional institutional mechanisms to understand why a relatively comprehensive, free, and organised environment for involving students may not help mobilisation and participation that much? The paradox presented here becomes more interesting when the former means are normally deemed as empowering students with more power and authority in initiating a series of pragmatic and concrete inside-out changes. By underling the paradox of the CCC at HKU, this article provides an alternative perspective on student engagement at GEC in higher education. A lingering yet prominent question for further exploration is that if some of the existing participatory means offered by the institution might not help a lot to narrow the discrepancies between the perceptions of teachers and concerns of students, can the CCC at HKU or even the GE in Hong Kong rethink, reinvent, and revitalise itself through the adoption of student-initiated curriculum as a more drastic and radical transformation in the near future? In this sense, students will actively take up both the agency and responsibility to shape the GEC as an “open innovation” by themselves with ongoing facilitation from the professors.

Following this logic, this research paper is organised as follows. First, the “democratic innovations theory” as the ground for this research will be briefly introduced. Then, a series of conventional top-down institutional channels of involving students for the CCC at HKU would be reviewed and evaluated. The entire system of student engagement offered by the CCC at HKU can be broadly classified into two categories, namely teacher-centred and top-down consultation as well as learner-centred and bottom-up participation. The last section will conclude the research article and discuss some implications to future higher education development in Hong Kong.

## The Democratic Innovations Framework

Many scholars in recent decades have widely agreed that a repressive school environment can complicate both the learning and teaching activity with reduction of their effects while the internalisation of democracy as the political philosophy of education in the school environment is essential for allowing students to achieve the best learning outcomes (for details, see e.g. Dewey, 2004; Gutmann, 1999; Soder, 1996). Inspired by the gradual ladder of citizen participation invented by Arnstein (1969: 216-224), Hart (1992) as well as Bovill and Bulley (2011) even further extend, develop, and revise a tailor-made continuum model for education to better recognise both the level and mode of student involvement in schools. One should appreciate their valuable contributions in creating such a dominant angle to critically assess the level of student involvement at schools. However, the democratic innovations theory (e.g. Smith, 2009) can supplement the current model focusing on the general institutional design due to several reasons.

Although the democratic innovations framework is another theoretical model adopted to assess the degree of engagement among individuals, such a democratic model of individual

participation is argued as more appropriate in this issue. Both learning and teaching in an engaging and participatory environment are always argued as never just for the privileged few but all students when equality and justice are at its core. The notion “democracy” still fits very well with the way various scholars see democratic education as both a means and an end in itself. Regardless of the variation of democratic theories with different emphases, but they all stress the importance of both enhancing and deepening participation in students’ individual or even collective capacity. Meanwhile, many previous models can help evaluate the overall extent of institutionalisation for students in a relatively rough and homogenous manner, they might not be very productive in studying a specific case with clearly designed, explicitly defined, and systematically arranged criteria. On the contrary, as the incorporated possible factors that may affect the engagement process, four democratic qualities and two institutional goods can be usefully applied to investigate whether the existing mechanisms are properly designed and implemented. It would also be more realistic and pragmatic for this short qualitative-based research to focus more on the institutional arrangement of the student engagement process as it is formidable for one to collect sufficient information to analyse the effectiveness of the exercise like all the stands and views of the students involved before the engagement, especially the linkage between the process and the final policy outcome in curriculum or pedagogy after the entire student engagement process.

Unlike much of educational theory, there is never a magic one-size-fits-all formula to improve student engagement through different commitments and strategies, especially each democratic institution may prioritise various goods depends on the specific issue with certain conditions that matters. This is particularly crucial for the case of CCC at HKU when there is indeed surging evidence of student disillusionment and disenchantment with the institutions of student engagement yet strong commitment to democratic norms, principles, and values. Although Hong Kong is argued as a hybrid regime, people of different socio-political stance still advocate effective civic engagement institutions for one to experience and exercise democracy in formulating politics that are influential to their rights, lives, and interests (Case, 2008). In Donald Tsang’s comments as the former local Chief Executive, officials are encouraged to “change their mindset, from that of policy formulator to that of interest coordinator” (Loh, 2010: 7). While for the case of local education, the major task for senior officials of higher education is simply to balance “interests” above all else as in line with the consistent pursuit of “constructive scholarship of learning and teaching” through increasing and deepening mutual engagement in the higher education sector. As the higher rungs of the ladder of student participation, the top-down authorities should work collaboratively with bottom-up students as key stakeholders to ensure genuine and authentic engagement when student voice is involved from the beginning to the end (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Harrington & Healey, 2014). In view of these idealistic goals, it becomes illuminating for one to consider such pragmatic paradox previously mentioned and more crucially how can it be resolved, which is most oriented to the situation of CCC at HKU.

According to Smith (2009: 6), democratic innovations refer to how “innovations are evaluated according to the extent to which they realise the six goods of democratic institutions”,

which “enable us to judge the democratic legitimacy and practical feasibility of innovations”. The four fundamental democratic goods are inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement, and transparency while the two additional and complementary institutional goods are efficiency and transferability. The first dimension is inclusiveness that concerns whether every student receives the equal opportunity to participate and is able to express, be heard, and affect the output of discussion. It is then followed by the second dimension of popular control on whether students are empowered with the power over significant elements of the decision-making process, ranging from problem definition to option analysis to option selection and eventually to policy implementation. The third dimension is considered judgement that emphasises whether students can make thoughtful and reflective judgements after being fully informed and have various chances to discuss with their counterparts. The fourth dimension goes to transparency on whether students are capable to scrutinise the activities of institutions with clear conditions and decisions of the deliberation process in order to establish trust and confidence. Both efficiency and transferability are added by Smith as two further economically practical and broadly applicable domains, whereas the former is about whether the benefit of organising various student engagement events outweigh the cost involved on individuals and institutions while the latter is on whether the design can be easily transferred to and effectively functioned in different educational scales, contexts, and issues. After understanding the basic concepts of these six goods, Smith’s model will be utilised to provide a new perspective in the study of student engagement in the context of CCC at HKU.

## **Conventional Institutional Channels of Student Engagement**

Although the term “student engagement” is still highly contested among scholars, one can still broadly conceptualise it as the wide range of activities that involve two distinct yet interrelated domains. They are educational enhancement in learning, teaching, assessment, and subject-based research as well as quality assurance towards learning and teaching practices and educational policies (Dunne & Owen, 2013). In view of this definition, the following section will classify the series of existing activities that involve students under the CCC at HKU as either teacher-centred and top-down consultation or learner-centred and bottom-up participation for discussion. The former includes activities that teachers ask for more input and feedback from students, such as student ambassador programmes, course and teacher feedback, and a staff-student consultative committee meeting, while the latter comprises activities that students develop more agency and ownership over education, such as student learning festivals, student-student workshops, and transdisciplinary distinguished undergraduate research fellow exchange programme.

### *What is the teacher-centred and top-down consultation?*

The small set of CC student ambassadors is the most enthusiastic and passionate group central to different teacher-centred activities with regard to the CCC at HKU. All the 34 current and alumni student ambassadors who coming from a variety of background, including local, Mainland, and international peers, are devoted to make the programme a much livelier and more

intellectually exciting experience, as well a more relevant one to students' lives on the ground. As the CC always puts heavy focus on establishing a reciprocity of relationships, explorations, struggles, and learning, all student ambassadors are making various valuable contributions along all of these lines. There are a couple of general meetings every two to three months that allow student ambassadors to gather together and discuss issues related to both learning and teaching of the CC with Professor Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, who is the Director of the CCC at HKU. Some crucial issues are discussed throughout the 6 meetings in the last two academic years 2015/2016 and 2016/2017, such as the possibility to implement the recommendation that only the 5 out of 6 successfully completed CC courses with the highest grades covering all 4 AoIs be counted towards the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA), the idea of initiating a CC interdisciplinary studies minor, and the criteria for choosing the 10 participants for the initial round of the transdisciplinary distinguished undergraduate research fellow exchange programme.

Reaching the academic year of 2016/2017 as the second year of establishment of the group of CC student ambassadors, they were invited by several departments at HKU to share in various occasions. On 20 September 2016, the Academic Advising Office (AAO) invites several student ambassadors to share some of the first-hand learning experience as senior students in both lectures and tutorials as well as personalised approaches to various assessments for the CC courses in the playful and interactive Freshmen 101 Series: Successful Strategies for the Common Core Workshop. Many incoming students comment that they can gain a better sense of the "lived experience" of the CCC and how to better think about priorities and strategies after the sharing session. On 20 September 2016, 15 November 2016, and 21 November 2016, student ambassadors are also delighted to share insights of the CCC with scholars around the world, such as colleagues from Halmstad University in Sweden as well as external examiners from 2 AoIs, including Professor Sander Gilman of Emory University from the CCHU stream and Professor Andrew Walder of Stanford University from the CCCH stream respectively. All participants agree that the current CC courses are highly promising, intellectually, and socially sophisticated. Students are the valuable pioneers to pilot more changes in both the learning and teaching landscape.

To better solicit student voices towards the CCC at HKU, several changes have been made with regard to the measures in obtaining course and teacher feedback as evaluation. As noted by Kochhar-Lindgren (2016: 63), for the CCC, there is always "an ongoing system of assessment of the tutors, teachers, courses, and programme as a whole" like "international external examiners to review collections of courses across the 4 AoIs as well as the whole enterprise" and "the Curriculum Committee has a schedule for reviewing courses in detail and recommending continuation, improvements, or discontinuation" once every two years. Based on his explanation, the Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning (SETL) survey results undeniably become vital monitoring devices for quality assurance among different senior officials, which help flag all those underperforming teachers and courses or even specific curricular or programme issues that may require closer and careful scrutiny and deliberation using other institutional mechanisms afterwards. Regarding the original format of the SETL survey adopted by different faculties and

departments at HKU, it is generally a standardised two-part form with 21 generic “core” items that is utilised across all undergraduate courses in an university-wide manner.

However, for the CCC, there is a particular shift from focusing on quantitative questions towards more extensive open-ended student comments for individual teachers, head of unit, and relevant departments from the academic year of 2015/2016 onwards. It is believed that such change can allow students to provide more concrete and rich details when they are qualifying and clarifying their responses. This can also encourage students to provide open, professional, and constructive comments for course enhancement. Meanwhile, in line with the objectives of the CCC, students are asked whether they develop an enhanced understanding of the issues discussed in the course, raise their awareness of the contribution they can make and enhance their creative and analytical abilities as well as the course is intellectually stimulating that help them to see from multiple perspectives. The return rates of the SETL survey results for the first semester of the current academic year of 2016/2017 are 46.4% for the CCST stream, 51.5% for the CCHU stream, 47.7% for the CCGL stream, and 47.7% for the CCCH stream. The overall average statistics is 48.3%, which includes the highest as 89.3% and the lowest as 17.8%. Likewise, the annual Student Learning Experience Questionnaire (SLEQ) is another institution-wide survey to collect information about the quality of learning experience among students for analysis and renewal of curriculum and pedagogy, which are designed for all first-year and final-year students.

Recently, there is another major breakthrough regarding the course and teacher feedback as announced by the Teaching and Learning Quality Committee at HKU. Under the collaboration between the Social Science Research Centre and Student Information System (SIS) Project Office, all SETL courses effectiveness ratings for the past three consecutive academic years, irrespective of students’ faculty affiliation or major and minor studies, would no longer be limited to staff access only but available for all students on the online SIS (via HKU Portal) from 1 August 2017 onwards. According to the Senate policy, it is mandatory for all university departments to share course evaluation results with students through channels that they deemed suitable. To further facilitate course selection and enhance administrative transparency among students in the new academic year, all course coordinators may provide further comments or remarks on each score, with a view to informing them about measures that have been or will be taken to address their feedback or to explain irregularities that might have affected the rating. Meanwhile, staff members can download the relevant data for further analysis and improvement of both learning and teaching.

Another prominent event associated with the aforementioned two dimensions is the annual staff-student consultative committee meeting that was started from the academic year of 2015/2016 onwards. All undergraduates at HKU are provided with an open and interactive forum to express their views and provide feedback about their CC courses. Students are always actively involved and played with an integral part in helping to jointly construct both the curriculum and the learning. In fact, it is one of the most prominent channels of communication that the CCC adopts to ensure course quality as well as bring out future course revisions and improvement. In the previous two meetings on 20 April 2016 and 14 March 2017, the representatives from the



Executive Committee of HKU SUC, CC student ambassadors, and the CC Committee are gathered together. They all discuss many course data and development like the SETL survey results and grade distribution, learn about how the programme is structured from the inside-out, and share suggestions for further enhancing the student-centred learning experience of the CC. Under the facilitation by the CC Committee, these short meetings are surrounding issues about what works best, what needs work, and more crucially any question folk might have. Just as with the practice for meeting among CC student ambassadors, all comments and actions taken are recorded in the meeting notes for further attention of the higher authorities at HKU concerned.

### *What is the learner-centred and bottom-up participation?*

Since one of the goals of the CCC that is of a very high priority is to make student work with high research values more visible, the student learning festival is launched an important biyearly activity in every November and April that celebrates undergraduates' creativity, talent, and learning experience. Starting from the academic year of 2015/2016, students' exemplar work like posters, videos, podcasts, and models in tackling issues which required them to integrate knowledge, methods, and media across different disciplines that are showcased to the general public in the festival. Both teachers and students display and talk about their work and ventures. Under the three major elements of engagement, experiment, and enjoyment as inspired pragmatism, one can observe how students have successfully brought together expertise from across faculties and clearly demonstrated the substantial value of crossing disciplinary boundaries. Both the education and learning of students are hoped to be moving from inside the classroom into open spaces like the CC Longue or even the Haking Wong Podium for the festival. They can get out into the city and beyond so that the CC can be a kind of gathering place or a nexus for new ideas, new innovations, new ways of learning, and just various ways of people meeting each other.

Several student-student workshops also become successful products under the expansion of the CCC's seminars, events, and exhibits for students and the campus as a whole. Since the implementation of the CCC at HKU, many discussion sessions are initiated by students on topics like mass media, women and activism, art and politics, and comparative student movements. There are also different workshops on a series of themes, such as disability and sex rights, urban identity in local Hong Kong neighborhoods, financial literacy and how to trade online as well as coding education and everyday life. A series of literature reading and current events salons are also off the ground from this academic year of 2016/2017 onwards, such as the possibility of negativity as a contemporary political tactic, the question of being and history as well as the cracks of the contemporary. Through embodying both the principles of activeness and creativeness with the connection of theoretical discussion with empirical analysis, students are expanding the CCC and trying their best to reach out to the public around themes that would impact society.

To characterise the uniqueness of the CCC at HKU, one must mention the recently implemented annual non-credit bearing transdisciplinary distinguished undergraduate research

fellow exchange programme. With the respective facilitation by Professor Gray Kochhar-Lindgren and Rick Dolphijn, the programme is a self-initiated and self-organised collaborative research between a batch of around 10 to 11 CC undergraduates at HKU and similar number of counterparts from the Humanities Honours Programme at Utrecht University. The Utrecht students come to HKU in mid-April while students at HKU will return to visit the Netherlands in early-June. Participants from both sides are required to research and present public events on fundamentally crucial topics of their own choosing that they judge to be in the most pressing need of attention, such as thinking machines, emerging social architectures, philosophy in the streets, and future cities. Although only student ambassadors who having been nominated by teachers and evaluated by one another and the Director in meetings are selected in the first-year programme, 84 applications are received for selection in the second year, reflecting a much higher level of popularity when compared to other exchange programmes offered by HKU.

The dynamic exchange across disciplinary, cultural, and geographical boundaries is a virtual thread of collaboration in between the physical visits, all participants who are highly motivated, committed, creative, and curious are invited to serve as “change-agents”. Both parties work very hard to generate their own learning experience and create tangible outcomes that will be of immense value for the local and global communities. The major themes last two years are in line with the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) that is a priority for HKU, such as speculations on minority politics, future societies, and displacement as unforeseen cultures in the globalised world for the first year as well as civil engagement in society’s service as student leadership in the university for the current second year. Throughout the programme, HKU participants will do many preliminary research and readings, invite artists, business leaders, designers, scholars, policy-makers, and non-governmental organisations to engage in the events, create publicity through social media platforms as well as hosting and facilitating the events in Hong Kong and Utrecht. One of the major learning outcomes for the programme as discussed by the CC student ambassadors is to decide what types of usable, tangible, and continuous outcomes as well as concrete evidence they might produce as part of the expectations of the quality of knowledge exchange. Therefore, participants are initiating public events like installations and exhibits, research and reflective writing, a shared HKU-Utrecht University Transdisciplinary research website as well as new collaborative research networks, videos, and social interventions. All these can contribute as part of the expectations of the quality of knowledge exchange. Participants who have engaged the programme will then serve as the mentors of new participants in future years through sharing personal experience and offering mutual support.

## **How Democratic are HKU’s Channels for Engaging Students?**

In commenting on the situation of involving students through conventional institutional channels developed by the CCC at HKU, one can holistically describe it as “narrowly diverse”, at least in its most ideal form as envisaged by its designers. Theoretically speaking, since student engagement is both an inevitable and irreversible trend in higher education development, the CCC at HKU

indisputably demonstrates active involvement, considerable effort, and substantial thought into the issue as reflected from the diversity of institutional channels offered by it. Our previous discussion also reflects its particular success in activities that embody both the elements of learn-centred and bottom-up participation. However, one can simultaneously argue they are overly narrow to a practical sense with regard to quality assurance in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment that mark as the foundations of both learning and teaching. Although most students prioritise them with higher expectations and values, the institution instead resorts to top-down student engagement channels with a lesser extent of “democratism”. However, connecting the dots between the theoretical discussion of democratic innovations theory and the empirical picture of the CCC at HKU becomes indispensable in justifying its mixed success in the realisation of the six democratic goods and more importantly outlining the overall dilemma that is previously mentioned.

Although the institutional design can never guarantee fully considered judgement to be made, the ideal scenario is that the available channels empower all students to become capable to make judgements after they have been perfectly informed of the issues surrounding the CCC at HKU and have exchanged views or perspectives with other students. Therefore, it is crucial to equip the students with necessary information so that they could involve in constructive exchange and fruitful discussion with one another. Most of the detailed and updated information related to the CC at HKU are uploaded to both of its official website and Facebook webpage or sent through internal electronic mail system in a timely manner and can be easily accessed. There are also many public forums, meetings, discussions, and activities of multiple nature, scale, and medium that provide effective information exchange, especially the combination of both offline and online as well as formal and casual elements. To further facilitate discussions, vivid and reader-friendly summary reports of survey results, written submissions, and gists of discussions are either visually or verbally presented by the CCC at HKU to review, such as SETL survey results and grade distribution. With regard to the topical discussions for both students and teachers to exchange views, senior officials like those coming from the CC Committee are always present as facilitators with some suggested question guides. Professor Gray Kochhar-Lindgren as the Director of the CC always sets the context in the beginning of the meeting about the technical background and the current development of CC at HKU. One should also note that for many learner-centred and bottom-up activities at HKU, several senior CC officials are also willing to be present to provide information, reply queries, and even clarify misunderstandings among the students.

All these help participants from different background to be well informed about the progress and well aware of the focus of discussion in that particular meeting. In-depth discussions can be attained in a relaxing small-group environment when more participants are encouraged to speak up rather than speaking up in front of a big crowd. This can also avoid some students to keep silent or oversimplify their views in a large-group setting. Meanwhile, these discussions allow students with diverse faculty background, school positions, and personal values to make thoughtful and reflective judgements after exposing to a wide range of perspectives. They will then more likely to think out of the box, and consider factors and angles that they have never been aware of

before. Both the engagement and contribution potentials for CCC are always substantially huge when prior knowledge, ideas, and understandings from all students can be easily gathered together through this coherent and coordinated platform. Take the formulation of selection criteria for the initial round of the transdisciplinary distinguished undergraduate research fellow exchange programme as an illustration, different student ambassadors are required to work together, make compromises, and reach consensuses. This implies that participants could not merely think from narrow and self-centred perspectives or insist on their individual opinions, or else they can never come up with their counterparts a mutually agreed conclusion as the expansion of enlarged mentality through the current institutional design of the CCC at HKU.

Both the positive commitment and active involvement of the CCC at HKU can be further exhibited in its relatively high level of including diverse voices through student engagement. Regarding the fairness of the participant selection rules and procedures, nearly all institutions are open to all students while only a very few restrict participation through various means like random selection or selection upon academic results due to the seat quota. Both the location and time for these activities are also very student-friendly when most of them take place during school hours and inside the campus. All these institutions are designed to motivate students from different background to express, discuss, exchange, and develop preferences in a more thorough manner in order to enhance representativeness. Although some may challenge that CC student ambassadors who are affiliated with the CCC may not represent the student interests but favour the official interests, the argument that only those submissive and obedient members would be re-appointed again next year does not stand when all of them are self-nominated, implying that there is no need for any one of them to uphold CC favouritism and please the authority in order to secure their seats. The very high regular meeting attendance rate with diverse viewpoints towards the CCC further reassures one that these representatives can act on behalf of or be accountable to their peers. After all, the role of students does not end at expressing their views but they should always be able to accommodate the views of others for reaching a widely accepted agreement in the end.

Despite the satisfactory inclusiveness of presence, the case might not be quite applicable to the dimension of voices under an uneven participation as exhibited in the CCC at HKU. Arnstein (1969: 216) argues that “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless” as “it allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit” that “maintains the status quo”. The logic is simply that physical presence is never equivalent to equality of voice when the key is always who chooses to engage but never the number of students who participate that matters. Although all the devoted and engaged parties are keep refining the process of CC over time, one should also acknowledge the associated issue of increasing the participation for the remaining students. Considering the figures for the SETL survey results, one can observe that the response rate cannot even reach half of the class or even as low as around 20% that is roughly around 24 students in a standard CC class size of 120 students. Given the facts that the SETL survey the most thorough, convenient, and reliable institutionalised channel for soliciting student feedback as well

as a high return rate is crucial for data representativeness and allowing valid data interpretation, one can easily foresee that teachers may misunderstand or misinterpret the situation of both learning and teaching inside the partial picture. With regard to the situation of receiving generally lower response rates through online surveys than those of paper surveys, senior officials always urge concerned teachers and tutors to arrange the administration of the online SETL survey either in class or during the tutorials. Meanwhile, they are also encouraged to notify students before the administration such that they will attend class with Internet access devices as well as how can and even how will their evaluation and comments help to improve the course. However, all these repetitive and routinised reminders obviously still cannot achieve their desired outcome.

Nevertheless, one can never subjectively or conclusively define HKU students as educationally apathetic when a much higher response rate is portrayed in other peer-connected and non-institutional channels. A pool of information like past grades and workload ratings measured in both an individual and average scale as well as grading rubrics and personalised advice are available on a number of “secret” websites like Triklo and online forums like CC Information Exchange (*qingbao jiaoliu*) on Facebook. All these details are voluntarily contributed by students as future norms of reference for course registration in an extremely enthusiastic and motivated manner. Since these “underground” servers are spontaneously created for bringing convenience rather than making profits among students themselves, serious traffic jams are always witnessed when a supermajority of students are getting access to them at the same time during course registration periods. Similar practice applies to those situations when many of these students as “silent majority” would bypass the official mechanisms and discuss or obtain advice from their fellow peers and experienced seniors on those CC courses that are deemed to be “relaxing (*tappy*)” and “good (*leng*) grade”, which is simply allowing them to accomplish the course with an excellent Grade A performance with the least amount of effort and workload.

Although both the educational ideology and operation mechanism of the CCC at HKU are claimed to be governed and administrated within a robust and effective framework, the constructed and perceived reality is entirely different from dynamic construction with regard to the issues of quality assurance. Since only very few HKU students would spend both time and effort on recognising and understanding the complicated processes and procedures, the implementation and monitoring as well as the uses and applications, they may then perceive the issue with a narrow and biased approach. It is argued that the three classified categories of students exist at HKU can be adopted as a way to explain the situation. The first group refers to a number of students who are more outcome-oriented when they might just want to finish the job and get a grade. In this sense, practical details like the grading system and teaching system are far more appealing and relevant to the technical information, explaining why they are highly engaged in those utilitarian elements that are seldom or even never available by the formal institutional channels.

While both the second and third groups can be applied to those process-oriented students, the difference simply lies in their level of engagement in comprehending the CCC at HKU. Both groups are eager to voice their opinions towards issues on both learning and teaching, which can

also be deduced as the “fixed respondents” for the SETL surveys when many of their counterparts will refuse to do so at the end of the semester when every student is rushing for their respective study plan. An exception can be observed when these students can no longer salute the teaching or learning and desire to utilise their quantitative power of collective comments to arouse the related parties’ attentions, such as extremely unclear instructions, unorganised teaching, and unreasonable assessment results. By avoiding the potential individual bias that might be drawn into the issue for the time being, a more prominent issue deserves our attention. As for this group of students, the SETL survey seems to be the only channel for them to express preferences even though they lament that such official medium may not be too useful at all when HKU seldom informs them of any processing manner or follow-up action. These students will then feel extremely powerless to induce any concrete or visible change as time goes by, which are further exacerbated by the accumulation and discontent towards some problems existed in the CCC.

By joining together with the first group of students, this illustrates why a series of endless and strong rumours are initiated and promulgated around the campus, particularly those warning peers for not selecting some “bad” CC courses that are treated by them as the only way to turn into individual and vague voices into realistic and collective changes. They can easily observe their “success” through the online webpage of “CC Courses Enrollment Statistics” with timely update of both the available vacancies and applicants waiting for approval. The last group of students is undeniably the most devoted and interested individuals, regardless of their individual stance, who always make full sense of the issue and engage in every chance offered by the institution. Situated inside the echo chamber, this again echoes the overall observation of “it is always the same group of proactive individuals with endless rephrasing demands” from both sides in many teacher-centred and top-down consultations offered by CCC at HKU while some students might be unfortunately marginalised or excluded in this particular case. Fung (2006: 67) argues that all engagement mechanisms can be open to all but simultaneously “selectively recruit participants from sub-groups which are less likely to engage”, which perhaps shed light on how the CCC at HKU can avoid students being further marginalised or excluded in the future.

An extended implication can be the lower degree of realisation of transparency by the CCC at HKU. The most direct dimension is the external publicity when the promotion of current student engagement exercises is still more inclined to a passive approach like merely giving out pamphlets or sending out mass electronic mails. The problem can be easily resolved when more innovative and varied forms of promotion channels are adopted by the CCC at HKU to reach out a wider audience. There are several forthcoming projects coordinated by the CCC Office at HKU in the upcoming academic year to further enhance the above co-curricular experience, such as CC Research and Innovation, CC Theatre, and CC Plus. However, the issue of internal transparency may contribute much more towards the existing paradox of the CC at HKU. Although there are some occasional updates by the CCC in the regular top-down meetings, a number of students outside the engagement activities still often express that they cannot get an idea of what steps the decision had to go through before being finalised, how student inputs are incorporated or rejected

with explicit and clear justifications, and how they could further contribute and exert influence through the decision-making process. The situation is perhaps more prevalent among matters related to the curriculum rather than those outside the curriculum. Even though students are provided with abundant participatory channels, they still worry that their engagement might be slightly neglected or even unfairly represented by the authorities or is even merely a tokenistic one to confirm decisions made elsewhere. This is further reinforced by a number of closed-door meetings at both the executive and official levels with no disclosure of the minutes to other students before announcing the ultimate decision related to the CCC as a collective decision.

Different higher education institutions, especially HKU, always emphasises its importance attached to all student inputs. However, both the students and the larger public still have no means to scrutinise how the members reach the decision and verify the preferences of various members, such as the announcement by the CCC on July 2015 that the CC courses approval method would be suddenly shifted from an auto-ballot to a first-come-first-served basis during the course selection period to ensure both fairness and equality. Although some student ambassadors discuss the aforementioned issue in the regular meetings, a larger number of students who are not consulted feel quite shocked about the situation or even challenge the legitimacy of the decision. Similar situation can be observed when students noticed the special proviso in the determination of the graduation CGPA for CC courses as previously discussed, which encourages students to get outside their comfort zone during course selection. Since the policy is only applicable to students of the academic year 2017/2018 intake and thereafter, some older returning or graduated students express opinions and demands like “rules are changing all the time”, “good idea but unfair arrangement for us”, “my CGPA can exceed 3.0 (a general academic performance of Grade B among all courses) or can even graduate with First Honour if this policy is applicable to me during my study”, and even “some students can sit on the board of Teaching and Learning Quality Committee (TLQC)”. Both cases reflect that the concern towards the transmission of information about the engagement institution and its decision to the wider public instead of only limited to the news about the discussed issue or policy, especially when the issue affects not only the participants of the engagement but also a wider group of individuals. Both Wang and Wart (2007: 276) argue that public trust can be substantially enhanced when the officials demonstrate that their “integrity, honesty, and moral leadership are institutionalised” throughout the engagement process. However, some HKU students may regard the claim in an opposite manner when they are skeptical of the institution for selectively capturing the key points or even deliberately misinterpreting the student views as downplaying the public opinions or criticisms through disappearance or distortion.

The most concerned yet inadequate democratic good among students in relation to the CCC at HKU is very likely to be popular control. Situated inside a command-and-control hierarchical governance by a relatively traditional and conservative institution, it is argued that the existing institutional channels of student engagement offered by senior officials to a certain extent are limited to some mostly “easy-going” and “safe” issues. With regard to issues like administrative changes and curriculum reforms in the student engagement process, the problem definition is

already set by the institution when the agendas of the discussion are all about how to actualise the changes. Some students hence comment that they are only consulted when the institution has determined its preferred options. Undeniably, both teachers and students always agree with the general principle of inducing changes in the CCC at HKU. Nevertheless, to most of the teachers or even officials from the higher authorities, they concern inside-out changes within the existing imperfect framework even it is associated with some deficits and limitations, whereas top-down institutions simply serve as a catalyst for further mobilisation and participation. However, our previous discussion demonstrates that many students at HKU instead regard the potentiality in initiating any genuine difference by themselves through jumping out the existing boundaries and connecting among their peers. By stepping further to the larger ecology of Hong Kong, since the commencement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, every one of us in this city is always bombarded with different buzzwords like “creative mindset”, “logical mentality”, and “independent thinking” as embodied in the context of the new curriculum blueprint, which are very likely offered or promoted by top-down institutions like the Government and schools. Nevertheless, from the perspective of these new and young generations, situated in a pluralistic society that focuses on values like participation, empowerment, and democracy, there is no legitimate reason for education as one of the important domains for not being participatory, empowering, and democratic.

Since the power of setting the agenda and determining critical policy details are still largely rest on the hands of the higher authorities, many students are strongly impressed that they have low influential power towards the ultimate decision even though the institution may formulate the most suitable decision after considering various conditions and situations. They are of symbolic roles when involving in different top-down engagement exercises. Some students may even doubt that the superficially tokenistic engagement seems to be merely an appearance sake, submissive answerability, and even further confirmation of the well-defined agenda set by the institution at the outset. On the contrary, there is a much larger degree of freedom exhibited in students initiating some learner-centred and bottom-up activities like the successful case of the transdisciplinary distinguished undergraduate research fellow exchange programme. Students can be fully engaged and empowered in the envisioning phase to form those foundation factors in shaping the important agenda and topics to be discussed in the upcoming meetings at the very beginning. The output of the student engagement institutions and views of the participants are given due weight and consideration in the final decision-making. To these students as key stakeholders, such early practice of student engagement should definitely be upheld in future exercises for the sake of attaining higher democratic element and maximising inputs from the students. Participation is no longer a strategic tool to assimilate or co-opt students but an authentic and genuine chance for students to challenge the existing institutions and practices at higher education.

## **Conclusion: Moving towards a Democratic-Led Education?**

All of the traditional and formal mechanisms offered by the institution are never argued as totally unnecessary for involving students. Instead, a dynamic, flexible, and adaptive student engagement



should always prevail in all types of educational setting, especially both the global and local ecology of education is changing in every single moment. Both the executive and management parties at HKU should not or can never be constrained by their paradigm when formulating the engagement framework, especially the most desirable mode of student engagement can never be easily or even conclusively determined under the influence of a wide range of complex factors like the type, nature, and impact of concerned policies. When issues emerge that have a core relevance for students, they are occasionally tackled from a paternalistic and condescending angle, implying a risk that policies and debates will be driven by misrepresentations. The co-existence of multiple strategies of student engagement is the most likely pathway adopted by HKU when every single measure has its own limitation and effective coverage in respect of the particular context. After all, the diverse modes of student engagement may obtain results with variations that can assist the higher authorities at HKU in verifying its findings so as to better capture the entire picture of preference among students with different thoughts and mentalities towards the CCC. Following this logic, one can easily hypothesise that the more the CCC at HKU can comprehend the citizen and modify the policies accordingly, the more student-oriented policies can be ultimately developed inside the institution. If one wants to go further towards an in-depth and thorough student engagement, drastic and radical transformation as a breakthrough is needed through embodying a much higher extent of democratism, which is also an effective and efficient way getting out of the ongoing paradox of student engagement in the CCC at HKU.

As Gärdebo and Wiggberg (2012: 9) propose, “if there is to be a single important structural transformation during the coming decades, it is the changing role of students as university’s unspent resource who are given more room in defining and contributing to higher education”. Given the fact that educational policies always carry heavy influence towards students, who are also the future pillars of society and stand to benefit from or bear the costs of the policies, extensive involvement should be implemented such that the policies can be more thorough in catering to the diverse needs and expectations of students. This perfectly comes along the way when an increasing number of scholars around the world recently argue for the significance of students turning into co-creators, co-producers, and co-designers of their individual learning in higher education but not yet fully attempted in the context of Hong Kong (e.g. Collis & Moonen, 2005; McCulloch, 2009). HKU does achieve some remarkable performances in enhancing both learning and teaching outside the curriculum. There are also many available approaches to further ensure that students can influence curriculum design and planning, monitoring and review, as well as redevelopment and programme revalidation in terms of inclusiveness and transparency. However, for the realisation of popular control, both the desirability and possibility of student-led GEC as the first domain of initial design and planning inside the curriculum is perhaps inevitable though controversial for further investigation in higher education. One can always foresee that a fully democratic student-led education leading to stronger interest, greater commitment, and enhanced engagement among students in both teaching and learning. Having said that, this is not merely limited to the perception of the issue as a procedural one. After all, democratic-led education among students themselves is always about bringing diverse voices and perspectives into

intentional interaction, dialogue, and collaboration rather than displacing any particular stance or perception. Situated in this critical juncture with endless social disputes and political deadlocks, Hong Kong over the horizon apparently needs far much more critical, creative, and new thoughts to solve all sorts of big and small problems standing in front of all of us.

## Notes

1. Regarding the discussion of educational aims for HKU, Tsui (2009) highlights that throughout their learning processes, students should develop both the capacities and capabilities in the pursuit of academic or professional excellence, critical intellectual inquiry, and life-long learning; tackling novel situations and ill-defined problems; enacting personal and professional ethics, self-reflection, and greater understanding of others; intercultural understanding and global citizenship; communication and collaboration; and leadership and advocacy for the improvement of the human condition.
2. As one of the common learning experiences, undergraduates at HKU are expected to attain four goals upon the successful completion of the CCC, including articulate a broader perspective and a deeper critical understanding of the complexities and interconnections between problems and issues of profound importance; better navigate the interrelatedness and diversity between their own and other cultures; more actively and fully participate as individuals, members of social groups, and citizens in global, regional, and local communities; and develop the creative, collaborative, and communication skills that will contribute to the quality of their own and others' lives (for details, see <http://www.commoncore.hku.hk/>).
3. For the ladder of student participation in education, Hart (1992) as well as Bovill and Bulley (2011) include four parts with eight specific rungs, ranging from the lowest non-participation to the middle tokenism and eventually to the highest empowerment, including tutors control decision-making (dictated curriculum with no interaction [manipulation] and participation claimed with tutor in control [therapy or decoration]); tutors control decision-making informed by student feedback (limited choice from prescribed choices [informing] and wide choice from prescribed choices [consultation]); students have some choice and influence (students control of prescribed areas [placation] and student control of some areas of choice [partnership]); and students control decision-making and have substantial influence (partnership as a negotiated curriculum [delegated power] and student in control [learner control]) (all words in [square bracket] are adopted by Arnstein (1969: 216-224) for discussion).
4. Since 2009, through collaborating with the Social Sciences Research Centre at HKU for tasks like distributing surveys, processing data, and generating reports, the anonymous SETL survey is introduced by HKU to collect both general and specific student experience on courses and instruction towards the end of every semester. These survey results are also automatically included as one part of the Performance Review and Development at HKU for professoriate and academic staff on issues like identifying those excellent in teaching or may require additional support. To further reinforce both accountability and transparency, all course coordinators at HKU are responsible for stating on the faculty-based Report on Evaluation of Undergraduate Curricula on how are they going to review, disseminate, and discuss the SETL survey results with both staff and students. To increase response rates, all course teachers are strongly urged to arrange the administration of the SETL survey in class or in tutorials.
5. Although all the 21 generic "core" items listed in the SETL survey are developed, piloted, and validated by the Teaching and Learning Quality Committee at HKU, faculties and programmes are still highly encouraged to apply for adding faculty-specific or programme-based items. However, the only requirement is that all items included in the SETL survey must undergo a vetting procedure with approval by the Senate of HKU (for details, see [http://tl.hku.hk/system/files/Revised\\_SETL\\_AppendixA.pdf](http://tl.hku.hk/system/files/Revised_SETL_AppendixA.pdf)).
6. All analysed results for the SLEQ are available for individual faculties and programmes on the online Institutional Survey Reporting System that is started since 2011. The data allows further discussions held with deans, associate deans, programme directors, and relevant staff members to address issues arising from the findings for the purpose of curriculum and pedagogy monitoring and enhancement.

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