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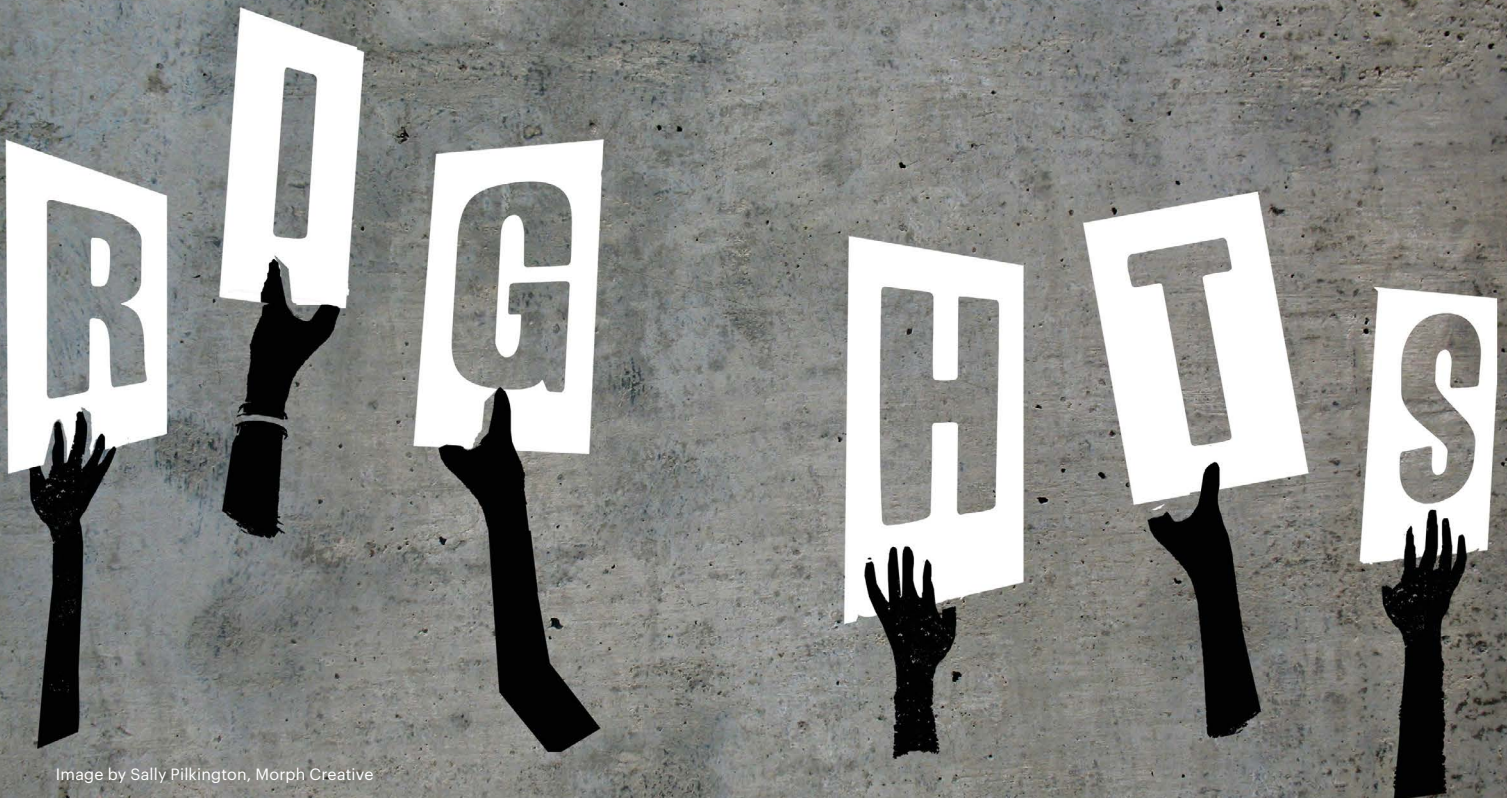
Working Paper No. 2

ACTIVISM IN THE FACE OF REPRESSION: UK UNIVERSITIES AS ALLIES FOR HONG KONG ACTIVIST STUDENTS AND ACADEMICS



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1. Gready, P. & Jackson, E. (2023) **Universities as Sites of Activism and Protection**, York: UNESCO Chair in Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, Working Paper No. 1

About the authors

The authors of this paper have chosen to remain anonymous due to the elevated risks posed by the National Security Law.

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The Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR) is an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre based at the University of York. CAHR's co-director, Professor Paul Gready, was awarded the UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space in 2023 to promote an integrated system of research, teaching and training, as well as community engagement and communication. As Chair, CAHR facilitates collaboration between high-level, internationally recognised researchers and teaching staff of the University of York and other institutions in the country, as well as elsewhere in the region and in other regions of the world.

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Executive Summary

This study sets out to examine what role, if any, universities in Hong Kong have in providing support to social and political activism in Hong Kong in the context of shrinking civic space due to oppression from China. The findings reveal shrinking academic freedom and increasing government control in Hong Kong's higher education system. In addition, dissident voices are being silenced through a campaign of intimidation, imprisonment and threats to physical security – particularly following the implementation of National Security Law of 2021. With more Hongkongers migrating to the UK, such as through the new British National Overseas (BNO) scheme and visiting the UK temporarily for study, our findings suggest UK universities might play a stronger role in the protection of activists in the face of repression at home. We raise the need for universities to create and protect space for activism by Hong Kong academics, students, journalists and art-ivists.

This paper begins by introducing the political control mechanisms and repressive strategies that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exercises through the Chinese higher education system. This provides the context for understanding the 'mainlandisation' of Hong Kong's political and education systems (Chan, Nachman and Mok, 2021; Vickers and Morris, 2022) and the significance of the National Security Law to Hong Kong activism.

Using Hong Kong as a case study, the authors interviewed 13 informants based on these inclusion criteria: their job or activism must gravitate towards scholar activism or student activism in the Social Movement of Hong Kong in 2014/2019. The sampling strategies aimed to maintain diversities in terms of informants' occupations, fields of study (for scholars) and forms of activism performed in 2014/2019. The case describes total state capture of Higher Education institutions in the home country and how a powerful state can extend their control to another country through student and staff mobilisation. The rise of China and its influence, as well as UK universities' dependence on China for student income, offers us an opportunity to explore how UK universities can continue defending human rights and support student and scholar-activism where they face limited conditions for mobilization and activism.

Findings confirm the different roles UK universities can play in protecting:

- Safe space and activists' wellbeing (physical, psychological, social and educational wellbeing).
- Space for social and political activism (academic, student and civil society).
- Space for learning and knowledge production.

Informants in this research welcomed a combination of both direct and targeted, and indirect and non-China/Hong Kong specific interventions by universities. The latter is considered both helpful and less controversial. Direct and targeted support for Hong Kong student/academic activists would involve measures to protect their anonymity when speaking in class and completing assignments on human rights issues in Hong Kong and China. Good practice has suggested the following:

- Seminar teachers could inform students in advance of politically sensitive topics and create a separate and safe space for discussion.
- Extra measures for protecting anonymity during submission of assignments.
- Protecting the university campus as space for free speech, activism and student assembly. Campus security will need to be briefed on the likeliness of counter protests during any protests or stands taken against human rights violations by China.

Indirect and non-China/Hong Kong specific interventions will require higher education institutions in the UK to step up their support for students/academics at risk and other human rights defenders, taking a whole-person approach to supporting human rights defenders/activists beyond the

dominant finance-focused approach. This will include building infrastructure and services for addressing mental health issues, social isolation, and loss of social networks and educational opportunities incurred by having to flee their home countries.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
Background: The pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, the National Security Law and the impact on the Higher Education System	8
The implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) and the chilling effects	9
Recruitment and sampling, data collection, and limitations of the study	9
Demographics	10
Protecting space for political and social activism	12
1. Protecting space for social activism in Hong Kong and the UK	12
2. Protection of safe space and activists' wellbeing	15
3. Protection of space for learning and knowledge production	17
Concluding remarks	19
References	20

Introduction

Hong Kong is a novel case that reveals the complex challenges faced by the pro-democracy movement and human rights activists and defenders in undertaking advocacy and activism in Chinese territories. Witnessing Hong Kong's fast-deteriorating freedoms, the collapse of the rule of law, and waves of post-social movement political persecution, the West has come to a realization that China's economic integration with the global economy does not necessarily bring about democracy and freedoms in China. The rise of China and its economic and political influence have increasingly come to be seen as a global security threat. With the shrinking civic space in Hong Kong, universities in Hong Kong often play a key role in supporting free speech and open debates. Both the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong have a rich history of student activism (Ng, 2020); while the Hong Kong Federation of Students, which is an umbrella organization of student unions from different universities, was leading the conversations with the government during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. However, threats to freedom of speech and academic freedom became more realistic after the introduction of the draconian National Security Law of 2020, leading to the exodus of Hongkongers including pro-democracy academics.

This study aims to examine what role, if any, universities in Hong Kong have in providing support to social and political activism in Hong Kong in the context of shrinking civic space due to oppression from China. The findings reveal shrinking academic freedom and increasing government control of Hong Kong's higher education system. In addition, dissident voices are being silenced through a campaign of intimidation, imprisonment and threats to physical security – particularly following the implementation of National Security Law. With more Hongkongers migrating to the UK, such as through the new British National Overseas (BNO) scheme, and visiting the UK temporarily for study, our findings suggest UK universities might play a stronger role in the protection of activists in the face of repression at home. We raise the need for universities to create and protect space for activism by Hong Kong academics, students, journalists and art-ivists.

This paper begins by introducing the political control mechanisms and repressive strategies that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) exercises through the Chinese higher education system. This provides the context for understanding the 'mainlandisation' of Hong Kong's political and education systems (Chan, Nachman and Mok, 2021; Vickers and Morris, 2022) and the significance of the National Security Law to Hong Kong activism. The paper then explores the different roles UK universities can play in protecting:

- Safe space and activists' wellbeing (physical, psychological, social and educational wellbeing).
- Space for social and political activism (academic, student and civil society).
- Space for learning and knowledge production.

Finally, the paper discusses challenges and good practice for UK universities for supporting social and political activism on Hong Kong issues amid the growing influence of China in global academic settings (Fulda and Missal, 2021), such as a growing financial dependency among UK universities on Chinese students.

Background: The pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, the National Security Law and the impact on the Higher Education System

The Chinese government's role in limiting access to information and controlling media representation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is widely reported on. In academic studies, Greitens and Truex (2020: 350) for instance found that 'the Chinese political system [also] constrains and molds knowledge production' in scholarly venues. The extension of Party control to and through higher education systems is carried out by setting up Party branches that aim to 'understand and analyze the ideological conditions and to carry out well targeted ideological and political work' (Guo, 2005, p.382). These branches, in practice, recruit students to the Communist Youth League of China (共青團) and appraise academic outputs to ensure they are aligned with the political ideology of the CCP.

In earlier years, there had been some attempts to import pro-CCP and pro-China patriotism into teaching delivery in Hong Kong's education system (Morris and Vickers, 2015). This became more explicit in 2012, when the Hong Kong government tried to make 'moral and national education' mandatory in primary and secondary schools (CNN, 2012). The higher education system in Hong Kong at this time was still relatively free and was often considered a refuge for pro-democracy activism. Two of the three leaders of the 2014 'Occupy Central with Love and Peace' movement, Benny Tai and Chan Kin Man, were academics at the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Chinese University. As the occupation movement progressed, the democratic trio passed on their leadership roles to student-led groups, such as Scholarism and Hong Kong Federation of Students¹, leading to the 79-day occupation movement also known as the Umbrella Movement. This was a non-violent, civil disobedience movement that aimed to paralyse the financial hub of the city through an occupation and to put pressure on the Hong Kong and Chinese governments to yield to democratic demands.

The post-Umbrella Movement crackdown that followed shrank existing civil society space further as seen for example through the prosecution of social movement leaders and academics being fired or receiving warnings for making political statements or engaging in forms of activism. Between 2016 and 2019, further physical confrontations occurred between pro-democracy protesters and the police (e.g. Fishball Riots/Revolution in 2016) alongside surging anti-China and anti-Chinese sentiment and growing support for Hong Kong independence. Rising social and political tensions coincided with the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB)² movement in 2019. The major demand of the movement was for the Hong Kong government to withdraw the Bill, which allowed extradition of Hongkongers to mainland China for trial. Demands soon widened however to include universal suffrage and, amid a rising cycle of violence, opposition to police brutality and the prosecution of activists.

Following a year of regular protest events in the city, in 2020 there came a massive clampdown on press freedoms and freedom of speech. Many 'illegal assemblies' were redefined as riots, and participants were arrested and prosecuted for participating. The largest pro-democracy media outlet, Apple Daily, closed down due to legal action by the government targeting the company's CEO, Jimmy Lai, and the newspaper's affiliated editors. It was the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL), however, passed by the National People's Congress of China but with effect in Hong Kong, that squeezed civic space in Hong Kong most severely. Vickers and Morris (2022) note that radical changes in Hong Kong's higher education happened rapidly after the 2019 protest movement and the implementation of the NSL. Even these authors, who were once optimistic about potential afforded by the relative autonomy of the Hong Kong higher education system, are in agreement that 'much of civil

1 The Hong Kong Federation of Students consisted of student union representatives of all the eight Hong Kong universities.

2 The trigger for the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement was proposed legislation that would enable the extradition of alleged law-breakers to mainland China, both undermining Hong Kong's judicial autonomy and raising fears of political prosecution under China's repressive laws.

society has been silenced and all meaningful manifestations of curricular or pedagogical autonomy face elimination’ (Vickers and Morris, 2022, p.187).

The implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) and the chilling effects

The NSL in Hong Kong (30 June 2020), despite condemnation by the international community, has been implemented in Hong Kong, and revealed the Beijing government’s determination to crack down on political dissent within and beyond their territories. For many China and Hong Kong scholars, however, these actions represent an acceleration of ‘mainlandisation’ under the Xi Jinping regime with similar strategies of subordination and control used in Xinjiang, Tibet and inner Mongolia (Vickers and Morris, 2022). The NSL criminalises any acts of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign or external forces, and the definitions of these are vague and wide-ranging. For example, damages to public transport facilities, which happened frequently during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Movement, can be considered terrorism. The scope of the NSL may also apply to anyone and to anywhere outside the territory of Hong Kong and China. 183 arrests have been made since the implementation of NSL up to March 2022 (Lai and Kellog, 2022). Some of these are for unremarkable incidents – possessing flags, stickers, t-shirts and banners with popular protest slogans (Amnesty, 2020). In 2021, the Education Secretary also made comments on the requirement for universities in Hong Kong to comply with the law where NSL is specifically named (Education Bureau, 2021). Under the auspices of NSL, the chief executive of Hong Kong can appoint the judge for trying national security cases, further casting doubt on the legitimacy and confidence in the Hong Kong judicial system.

International concern over the NSL also reflects the extraterritorial jurisdiction aspects of the law. Non-citizens of China and Hong Kong, even residing outside the territories, can be prosecuted under the NSL law and arrested if they arrive in these territories. The triviality of the national security crimes, such as retweeting the picture of Winnie the Pooh (mockery of President Xi Jinping) by a student, has a chilling effect on everyone living/tied to the territories (Colombia Journal of Transnational Law, 2021).

‘In response, many universities in Western countries are taking measures to protect students by making China-related academic discussions anonymous. Some scholars are deeply worried that China’s latest assertion of extraterritorial jurisdiction will further stifle academic freedom and freedom of speech in other parts of the world.’ (Ibid)

In light of the recent democratic struggles in Hong Kong and the implementation of the NSL, this case study focuses on how Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, students, academics and journalists found ways to survive the total capture of Hong Kong’s higher education system by the Chinese Communist Party. It also considers the potential and barriers for UK universities³ in supporting democratic movements in Hong Kong amidst the rising influence of China.

Recruitment and sampling, data collection, and limitations of the study

This case study is part of the work programme of the UNESCO Chair, Protection of Human Rights Defenders and Expansion of Political Space, led by the Centre for Applied Human Rights (CAHR), University of York. The programme seeks to explore the diverse ways in which universities can provide protection and support activism. It sees universities’ potential role as beyond temporary relocation for activists at risk to one that includes support for anti-colonial and liberation politics and for movement building.

3 The British Nationals (Overseas) visa route was implemented in January 2021 to allow BN(O) holders and their dependants to migrate to the UK. The scheme expanded its eligibility to allow those whose parents are BN(O) holders to apply independently from their parents in 2022. The UK government expected to receive 300,000 Hong Kong migrants in the first 5 years of the scheme.

The researchers reached out to 20 potential informants for interview based on the following inclusion criteria: their job or activism must gravitate towards scholar activism or student activism in the Social Movement of Hong Kong in 2014/2019. The sampling strategies aimed to maintain diversities in terms of informants' occupations, fields of study (for scholars), and forms of activism performed in 2014/2019. Out of the 20 informants approached, the researchers managed to recruit a sample of 13 participants who were mostly based in the UK at the time of interview. The high rejection rate in recruitment was attributable to concerns among activists about exposing themselves to risk. During the recruitment process, potential informants expressed deep concerns over the term 'human rights defenders' used in the information sheet, especially around the legality of their participation in this project under NSL. These concerns were most deeply felt by informants based in Hong Kong and Taiwan. With few exceptions, nearly all the potential Hong Kong-based informants chose to refrain from participating in this study. All potential informants from Taiwan refused to join the interview even though they agreed on the importance and significance of the study. Informants from Taiwan shared a similar fear to those who remained in Hong Kong that the interviews may violate the NSL. Potential informants in the UK further specified their concern about the use of data and data security in fear of NSL.

The final sample includes 13 academics, students, journalists and filmmakers. Most are Hongkongers and a few are non-Hongkonger scholars specialising in Hong Kong issues; among which, only two were based in Hong Kong at the time of interview: one informant was working at a Hong Kong university and the other had been just sacked by the university for allegedly engaged in political activism during the 2019 social movement. During interviews, informants were presented with the research questions and supported to speak freely on the challenges they faced in universities in Hong Kong and/or the UK and the approaches they considered effective (or ineffective) in protecting/supporting activists within the higher education sector. Interviews lasted about 1 hour each. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese or English, depending on the preferences of informants. Interviews were transcribed in English if necessary.

Given the sample restrictions, findings of this study cannot reflect the full spectrum of experiences that activists had with Hong Kong universities nor their strategies within the university system to protect space for political activism. Given the sample characteristics of this study, a sample that consists of mostly activists who have already left Hong Kong for the UK, findings focus more on the potential for universities in host countries of exile or diaspora activists to play a stronger role in supporting transnational activism.

Demographics

Because of risks associated with the NSL, informant identities have been removed in favour of pseudonyms. Some of the organizations, people, names of events and locations have also been masked or amended to minimize the threats posed to informants. The risk profiles and activism participated in by informants remains real to provide readers with a thorough understanding of the matters discussed. There were multiple times internal confidentiality was raised by informants, most notably when they made a statement criticizing the Hong Kong government, universities, or individuals, in order to avoid legal consequences under the NSL. The threat from the NSL and the use of pseudonyms came at a cost to the cohesiveness of some narratives, and an understatedness of the situation faced by the informants.

Participant	Pseudonym	Former status	Activism participated	Current status	Asylum seeker status	Location	Path to the UK
1	R	Social studies scholar	Sensitive research	Sacked by University	No	UK	Entered the UK with Leave Outside the Rules
2	V	Student	Protest co-organizer	Student	Yes	UK	Seek asylum in the UK
3	Leo	Student/Student leader	Student leader	Student	No	UK	BN(O) visa scheme
4	Stephan	Student	Frontline protestor	Student	Yes	UK	Seek asylum in the UK
5	MM	Health studies scholar		Health study scholar	No	HK	
6	Peter	Film-related business	Censored film production	In transition	No	UK	Entered the UK with Leave Outside the Rules
7	SW	Cultural study scholar	Sensitive speech	Contract renewal denied by University	No	UK	BN(O) visa scheme
8	Anne	Legal scholar		Legal scholar	No	UK	Moved to the UK before 2019
9	MC	Cultural study scholar	Sensitive speech	Sacked by University	No	HK	
10	Jean	Youth worker	Protecting the youth	Youth worker	No	UK	Entered the UK with Leave Outside the Rules
11	Sam	University staff	Protecting the youth	Jobless	No	UK	BN(O) visa scheme

Participant	Pseudonym	Former status	Activism participated	Current status	Asylum seeker status	Location	Path to the UK
12	Eve				No	UK	Moved to the UK before 2019
13	Jessica	Student/ Journalist	Reporting on Hong Kong protests in the UK	Journalist	No	UK	Student Visa before 2019

Protecting space for political and social activism

This analysis will present the experiences of Hong Kong activists, students, academics and journalists who had been active in the recent social movements and left the city for the UK. Based on the analysis of these experiences, the case study offers insights into the understanding of, and the needs for, specific protection, highlighting the potential roles of UK universities in supporting Hong Kong activists. This particular focus echoes with the recent debates on social remittances and transnational activism, raising questions about what host countries can do to empower political refugees and activists in exile to continue the fight for democracy. We are aware of the problems of having a homogenous and essentially positive understanding of Hong Kong pro-democracy movements and recognise the need for addressing intra-movement stigma that perpetuate gender and racial inequality as well as colonial nostalgia (Li, 2020), but this will not be the focus of this paper.

1. Protecting space for social activism in Hong Kong and the UK

Academics and students have been central to Hong Kong’s social movement mobilization. Many academics have used their research and reputation to function as norm entrepreneurs, to lead local conversations that contribute to discourses or discursive shifts on a range of social/political issues and formulate consensus for action. These include the future of the democratic movement, Hong Kong identities (Ip, 2019), citizens’ trust of the government, and public opinions and sentiment on government policies (Lee et al., 2019; Lee, 2020; Yuen et al., 2021). The visibility of academics might appear lower in 2019 because the movement acquired a more anonymous profile, but their participation was crucial at various points in 2019.⁴ Student associations, such as Scholarism and later Demosisto as well as the Hong Kong Federation of Students, were the major driving forces in the Umbrella Movement (2014); meanwhile, students’ self-organising in the 2019 protests was a common sight with most of those arrested during the Chinese University and Polytechnic University sieges being students (Siu and Lum, 2019; Sum, Magramo and Ng, 2019).

⁴ An example would be Brian Fong, one of the first who stormed into the legislative council complex, an event that is often seen as the beginning of the radical and valiant turn in the 2019 protest movement. News article on that watershed moment of the 2019 movement can be seen here: <https://worldnewsday.org/it-wasnt-violence-for-violences-sake/>

1.1 Academic activism⁵: Freedom of speech and academic freedom in Hong Kong.

R, an academic at risk who carried out politically sensitive research in Hong Kong during the 2019 protest movement, attested that freedom of speech and academic freedom in Hong Kong have been under attack in recent years. R compared his experience with that in 2014 saying:

'The difference between 2014 and 2019 is that you might have 100 academics speaking up then but a very small handful to do the same now ... There were people doing polling research in 2014, so I wasn't too bothered to get involved. They used funding from the university to do the research, and you don't need to be fearful (of consequences). You could be pretty sure about obtaining ethical approval. However, in 2019, you need to get a senior member of staff to create a facade to cover up your data collection [of politically sensitive data]'

The state capture of Hong Kong higher education by the Chinese authorities is accompanied by subtle and less subtle forms of repression of academics and police raids of the student unions at Hong Kong universities (SAR, 2021). Recently, many academic books related to Hong Kong history, Hong Kong social movements and the Tiananmen Square Massacre have been banned under the NSL (HKFP, 2022). At least three book publishers who had displayed books about the democracy protest of 2019 in previous book fairs were excluded from the Hong Kong annual book fair 2022 without any explanation from the government (SUM, L.-K, 2022). Evidence from our interviews confirms increasing control of the authorities over higher education, research activities and publications.

When academics were identified as subversive by the government, university mechanisms were mobilised to isolate the targeted academics from their local and international peers, to increase the legal and political consequence for advancing 'sensitive research', and to undermine their credibility in mobilising people. R experienced withdrawal of publication funding by the university, termination of their employment contract, as well as doxing (their personal information was leaked on a website set up by the ex-chief executive of the Hong Kong government with the offer of a reward for more of their information), and complaints issued by political opportunists. Amidst all these challenges, R indicated they received no support from the university.

The effectiveness of academic activists depends on their social capital as much as their academic and research abilities in providing information/data and conducting analyses that help support the movement. R in particular mentioned how the loss of an academic position had led to the loss of social capital needed for engaging with diverse groups of protesters and their supporters. It also created further disruption, not merely to their academic career but also to their ability to bridge resource and knowledge gaps across different social movement groups (the linkage or provision of support to sensitive scholars and research may potentially violate the NSL).

Safeguarding the space for freedom of speech and academic freedom for Hong Kong academic activists is fundamental to supporting democracy in Hong Kong. Universities in the UK should consider

- Offering fellowship status to scholars at risk to mitigate interruptions to their careers and support them to publish, especially sensitive materials that they were unable to publish previously
- Providing access to legal advice for academic activists on their disclosure of criminal records that are political in nature, and the legal implications around publishing politically sensitive research
- Offering social networking activities for rebuilding disrupted academic networks which may have been severed in the repressive setting and through the migration process

⁵ **Academic activism** is here understood as follows: Linking up people, enhancing inter-group connections, feeding in information to the networks for staging the next steps for the movement, bottom-up knowledge building (being at the sites of protests) for better engagement and dissemination of knowledge back to the protest networks

1.2 Student activism in the UK: Freedom of Assembly and Association.

Hong Kong student groups based in the UK have been reconfiguring themselves after the implementation of the NSL. While some of them have overtly ‘disengaged’ from political activities, many have changed their strategies to remain politically active in the UK but in more covert ways.

The extraterritorial power of the NSL led Hong Kong student associations at UK universities to remove politically sensitive material, in both past and future reports and activity plans, and to restructure and ‘depoliticise’ the associations to avoid being targeted by Chinese authorities and pro-CCP students and academics.

‘It was 2019, the student union had a meeting to pass a motion related to police brutality in Hong Kong. The then student union president was Hongkonger... and this motion was made known to “little pinks” (pro-China camp), and then the student union members were surrounded, followed and threatened (by the little pinks). Some of them were doxed’ (Leo, student activist)

Operating below the radar of the pro-China camp and the Chinese authorities, some Hong Kong student associations managed to refocus themselves to engage with the emerging Hongkonger diaspora in the UK and continue their pro-democracy activism. Meanwhile, Hong Kong students who were planning to return to Hong Kong after their studies were more reluctant to organise or participate in any political activities that involved higher-profile pro-democracy figures in attendance.

The confidence and readiness that Hong Kong students have for continuing with their political activism in the UK depends on their migration status (e.g. there is more stability if you are on BNO visa status and less so if you are asylum seekers) and whether their long-term plans require them to go back to Hong Kong. In addition to these, reassurance from senior management of students’ rights to freedom of assembly and speech is crucial, in addition to students’ abilities to directly contact a designated member of staff in the event of harassment due to activism or political activities.

‘We have published an open letter asking the Vice-Chancellor to ensure that our freedom of speech is protected. If we are targeted, they should have the duty to protect us or at least to provide a channel for us to seek help from the university if we are attacked. When we met with the Vice-Chancellor, they told us that we could contact his secretary directly in any case of political harassment’ (Leo, student activist)

Universities’ security responses to potential on-campus verbal and physical conflicts, triggered by political difference, can also determine the sense of safety and the actual freedom of assembly. Clashes between Hong Kong students and Chinese groups on campuses have been more common since 2019. A number of reports have pinpointed that Hong Kong students are often intimidated by backers of CCP (Heaver, 2021), or the room for freedom of speech for Hong Kong students was closed down by Chinese students (Mannering, 2019), or even there were cases where Hong Kong students were physically assaulted (BBC, 2019). Creating separate timetables and spaces for conflicting political groups to express their political views has been cited as good practice:

‘In ABC [pseudonym] University, students set up a “boycott Israel society” and I felt that the University actually did something to protect them. Say there was a fair, and on day one of it the “boycott Israel society” appeared and the “Israel society” had to abstain; while on day two of the fair “Israel Society” appeared and then the “boycott Israel society” needed to abstain’ (Steven, student activist)

These responses would require some knowledge on the side of the university about how Chinese authorities are known to mobilise mainland Chinese students to stage counter protests against political activities supporting democracy and human rights in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Allen-Ebrahimian, 2018).

Box 1: The importance of Universities-Civil Society Collaboration

Filmmakers and artists of the city often relied on universities' support to disseminate their artistic work, particularly if these works might be considered by authorities to be political and 'sensitive'. Artwork or films that are critical of China and its influence on Hong Kong or those promoting localism and Hongkonger identity are increasingly censored by the Hong Kong government and banned in cinemas since 2014 (Yip, 2021; Ramzy and May, 2021). An informant from the film industry, Peter, produced a film that was eventually censored by commercial cinemas but was given opportunities for public screening at Hong Kong universities. The film went viral and triggered a lot of discussions on the future of freedom of speech in Hong Kong society. However, with the closing space for activism at universities, Peter also noticed deteriorating support from Hong Kong universities for independent film screenings.

'Newspaper X [A China-based newspaper and government mouthpiece] labelled the film as thought virus. All the commercial cinema chains immediately took down this film, and only the civil society stood in to organize community screening, including screening events at universities ... it was 2015 ... all the university screenings took place in the largest halls available on campus, and every screening was full. Universities never stopped the film back then or offered any opinions ... it felt free. In 2017/18, I was invited to a student event alongside two politicians but the promotional materials never mentioned our names and the event turned out to be a closed door event. It was totally different after 2019. For example, all the post-screening talks were terminated, and some of my documentary films screened at universities became very small and internal facing. Some documentaries are related to the Anti-Extradition Law movement. Maybe they thought it was too sensitive or risky? The political environment has changed.' (Peter)

After fleeing Hong Kong for the UK, Peter successfully joined the first Hong Kong Film Festival with the support of a UK university. The experience was both rewarding and alarming: He thought there was more space at UK universities to explore China's intervention in education and freedom of speech in Hong Kong, whereas the distrust and fear instilled among Hongkongers by police violence and repression seemed to have impeded student-led screening activities. Peter said in the interview,

'My observation is that politically sensitive films can be screened at UK universities if the events are led by teachers/professors. I did contact student groups but they seemed to be more reserved than I thought. I heard it was because there were so many mainland Chinese students, and students groups were very careful when it came to sensitive topics related to China-Hong Kong relationship. Even some students were involved in organising, they wouldn't want to be named. I thought it was unhealthy and ironic ... with a free system here (in the UK) but CCP can still use their influence on resources and students to spread the fear.'

One of the interventions that Peter thought could be useful for protecting the space for 'art-ivism' at UK universities was to set up an independent human rights filmmaker/artist honorary position that allows sharing of university resources e.g. venues and student networks, to promote critical conversations on the democratic future of Hong Kong. He also suggested the need for universities' open support for human rights advocacy rather than the current non-interventionist approach to on-campus human rights activism. For example, he appreciated the way a UK university proactively provided venues, technical supports, and expert advice to the Hong Kong film festival to shine a light on Hong Kong's vibrancy and creativity at a time of upheaval.

2. Protection of safe space and activists' wellbeing

Informants of this case study had all experienced traumatic events in the recent social movement activism, including being on the receiving end of physical violence from police and vigilante groups, or witnessing such events. These events often had an impact on Hong Kong activists' **sense of safety and security**. Added to this is the unprotected disclosure of their asylum-seeking status while in the

UK, which by definition will be an indication of NSL violation. Displaying their temporary ID as asylum seekers for everyday purposes (getting their keycard, purchasing alcohol in the supermarket etc.) and the lack of clear protocol for handling disclosure of criminal records in programme or job applications at the university all escalated informants' anxiety of being charged under the Hong Kong NSL.

'I already qualify as a threatened scholar with the approval from many relevant organisations such as CARA and Scholars at Risk. I felt like my identity as such is very much confirmed, but when it came to the university setting they often asked if I had criminal records. I must be honest about these things, but as you know my criminal record was caused by political prosecution (verified by CARA and Scholars at Risk). The problem for me is not about whether I should be honest or not, but whether I would be put at risk (by disclosing this piece of information). Simply, who is going to read my application?' (R, social studies scholar)

In the study, Hong Kong asylum seekers, and especially those under the threat of NSL, suggested the need to offer an alternative ID document for everyday purposes that does not display migration status, and for having universities to establish a clear protocol for handling criminal records resulting from government repression.

Most of the informants raised the need for **protecting their general well-being beyond physical safety**, including financial, housing, mental and educational wellbeing. Fleeing an oppressive regime can cause a great deal of disruption to one's life. These abrupt transitions often deprive activists of the opportunity to transfer personal funds from the home country to the new place of settlement. With HSBC being co-opted by the Chinese authorities to freeze assets of political arrestees (APPG on Hong Kong & Fight with Freedom Stand with Hong Kong, 2022), many Hong Kong activists, students and academics were worried that seeking financial support from families and friends through banks in Hong Kong, such as HSBC, might implicate their loved ones as having committed an NSL violation. These concerns therefore led to a deepening of the housing and financial challenges experienced by Hong Kong activists, students, academics and journalists. Those struggling most in this regard appear to be students and early career academics without many personal assets and who avoid seeking financial support from friends and family in Hong Kong.

At the university level in the UK, financial and housing challenges are often addressed by providing targeted scholarships to students and academics at risk; however, not all scholarships for asylum seekers or students/academics at risk cover accommodation and living costs or provide stable and safe housing options. In some UK nations, such as Scotland, home fees are applied to asylum seekers while in other cases international fees are applied according to informants V and Stephen. The uncapped and often sky-high international fees can potentially drive Hong Kong students and academic activists deeper into debt while they are waiting for their refugee status to be confirmed.

'I have managed to gather enough funds for the first installment (of tuition fees), but not the second one. (The funds) ... were not transferred to me directly but someone safe (from political persecution) to keep the money for me. I absolutely have concern over the safety of those who help me. I have been working part time and transferring my salary to this friend's account before it gets transferred back to me... but... how many part-time jobs do I need to get twenty thousand pounds?' (Steven, student protestor)

In addition to a more comprehensive scholarship package that covers both accommodation and living expenses, it is equally important to maintain confidentiality of asylum seeking/refugee status so that activist students and academics can rebuild some normality in their new life in the UK.

'The university has not told people from the "living support" (living subsidy given to scholarship awardees)" my (asylum seeking) status or disclosed my information ... not even to the academic advisor. I can then enjoy a normal life as an ordinary student' (V, student protester).

Regaining hope and some moments of joy in life are crucial for promoting mental wellbeing of activist students and academics, but not many UK universities are prepared to play a more proactive role in protecting the social wellbeing of students/scholars-at-risk. Unanimously, informants agreed that there was a lack of support from the university to address mental health issues., Counselling services available at the universities and on the NHS are not prepared for political trauma or depression caused by political violence.

'It's quite hard to access the university's counselling services especially when it comes to Scottish universities that we have very strict covid prevention measures throughout the whole year, and there was not even one single slot available for booking although it is promised to be available for all students on the university's website' (personal communication with V, student protester)

Educational and social disruptions are sometimes exacerbated by the bureaucracy of scholarship applications. Examples are universities requesting true copies of exiled students' and academics' public examination results, university transcripts, and reference letters from their former university teachers or senior members of staff. When the universities in Hong Kong are increasingly controlled by the Chinese authorities, for example with pro-government figures sitting in the University Councils and the handpicked Chief Executive as the Chancellor of all universities in Hong Kong (SCMP, 2015), academics in Hong Kong may expose themselves to risk by agreeing to provide a reference letter for an exiled student or academic.

Some UK universities were aware of the risks borne by students for getting official copies of public examination results or transcripts and supported students to find alternative acceptable documents.

'My university actually did it so well.... they (Wider Participation) asked if they could help me to read through my transcript documents, and I told them that I could only offer the unofficial copy. They basically reassured me that I shouldn't risk anything to go asking the previous university for the true copy.' (V, student protester)

Exiled academics, according to interviews, did not seem to receive any concession or reasonable adjustments from the UK universities to address their difficulty in obtaining academic references to enable them to resume academic activities. R told us their former Hong Kong colleagues had been instructed by senior management not to offer references to political 'criminals', and it had always been the most challenging part in their job-seeking process in the UK.

Opportunities for Hong Kong activist students and academics to continue with their education and research and rebuild a life in the UK therefore vary with the availability, accessibility and comprehensibility of targeted scholarships, the priority they are given in the scholarship selection process, the university's sensitivity and preparedness for protecting their asylum seeking/refugee status, as well as the amount of support offered by the university in soliciting academic transcripts and employment references.

3. Protection of space for learning and knowledge production

Post the 2019 social movement and during the pandemic, Hong Kong students studying online at UK universities reported becoming hypervigilant when discussing political issues in virtual classrooms. Keeping the online learning space safe when students might be joining from all over the world and having their cameras off was particularly challenging. Hong Kong students studying social and political science, human rights studies, journalism, international relations and cultural studies inevitably felt restricted in terms of how much and what political views they felt safe sharing. Recording of online materials, made accessible to all students, also caused further concern because of the potential for content to be transferred to Chinese/Hong Kong authorities and used to intimidate, threaten, arrest etc.

Some universities in the UK responded quickly to mitigate these threats. For example, Oxford University stopped recording lectures and classroom conversations, and provided mechanisms for enhancing anonymity in presentation and paper submission (Wintour, 2020). However, these good practices are not shared across universities in the UK which has led many Hong Kong students, who may well have participated in street protests and have important views, to self-censor in the seminar room.

Activist academics settling in the UK often want to resume their research and continue to use research knowledge to support Hong Kong or UK-based activism. Those with high political profiles might register with CARA as scholars-at-risk. CARA has established partnerships with UK universities for supporting scholars at risk, including keeping an up-to-date database of scholarships and fellowships available and advising them on connecting with academia in the UK. Registering with CARA, however, can be a complex and lengthy process. The lack of financial and legal support from CARA can sometimes make the wait more gruelling.

Publishing politically sensitive data can be also challenging as it may violate the National Security Law in Hong Kong. Hence, in some cases, academics chose to publish materials anonymously in order to avoid receiving direct threats and to minimise risk. However, anonymous publications result in academics' work going unacknowledged, and thus negatively affect career progression. It is also unclear if UK universities provide any legal protection for academics who are charged under the NSL for publishing material considered sensitive. Similarly, there is no shared university practice identified to support academics who are being harassed or threatened for publishing material that the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities categorize as 'anti-China'. This typically includes, for example, research on police violence during Hong Kong's street protests, human rights violations by the HKSAR government, and material around Hong Kong independence and localism.

Sustaining and developing the professional and social networks of exiled academics is key to the continuation of their pro-democracy activism.

'My circle was created and nurtured in 2014. Hidden in it were a couple of international links and some pro-democracy forces, so that when it came to the 2019 protest movement, before the end of 2019 when covid hit, we had already done a lot [of research] to ensure Hong Kong's situation was known by the international community. We tried to use scientific methods to document what had been happening in Hong Kong and published the reality on international platforms. This is what happened between 2014-2018. That was how in 2019 we had all the networks and resources needed to get international attention.' (MM, health study scholar).

Similar to MM's experience, R found their research most useful when the evidence could be taken up by different self-organising communities of protesters, either for questioning the legitimacy of the authorities or gaining international attention for putting pressure on the Hong Kong government. UK universities and their alumni can therefore play a potentially important role in connecting social activists from different contexts and providing a safe space for knowledge exchange and social networking.

With trust in the university systems eroding in Hong Kong, activist students and academics, as well as journalists and filmmakers, seek assurances from UK universities that they are committed to human rights, and that they support democracy, freedom of speech, and the rights to assembly and political association.

Concluding remarks

This Hong Kong case study sets out the circumstances and challenges to the work of human rights defenders/activists in an increasingly authoritarian environment, and where China's power has grown significantly on the world stage. The case describes total state capture of higher education institutions in the home country and how a powerful state can extend their control to another country through student and staff mobilisation. The rise of China and its influence, as well as UK universities' dependence on China for student income, offers us an opportunity to explore how UK universities can continue defending human rights and support student and scholar-activism where they face limited conditions for mobilization and activism. Informants in this research welcomed a combination of both direct and targeted, and indirect and non-China/Hong Kong specific, interventions by universities. The latter is considered both helpful and less controversial.

Direct and targeted support for Hong Kong student/academic activists would involve measures to protect their anonymity when speaking in class and completing assignments on human rights issues in Hong Kong and China. Departments with a high number of Hong Kong and Chinese students, especially social and political sciences, will need to ensure staff members are trained to understand potential social and personal consequences (e.g. being doxed and bullied outside the classroom) for students who speak up against China's human rights violations in classroom settings. Examples of good practice include the following:

- Seminar teachers could inform students in advanced of politically sensitive topics and create a separate and safe space for discussion.
- Extra measures for protecting anonymity during submission of assignments.
- Protecting the university campus as a space for free speech, activism and student assembly. Campus security will need to be briefed on the likelihood of counter protests during any protests or stands taken against human rights violations by China.

In relation to indirect and non-China/Hong Kong specific interventions, higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK will need to step up their support for students/academics at risk and other human rights defenders. Beyond financial support (e.g. provision of scholarships), findings suggest a **whole-person approach to supporting human rights defenders/activists** and recommend UK universities build infrastructure and services for addressing mental health issues, social isolation, and loss of social networks and educational opportunities incurred by having to flee their homes. Additional resources, on top of full scholarships, include stable and safe housing, legal advice, specialised counselling services, and wellbeing support and networking opportunities (such as mentorship programmes and networking related social events).

UK universities should stand up against any threat to basic human rights and freedom of expression. Having universities publish **open statements on supporting human rights** and laying out basic principles for on-campus advocacy for human rights issues can significantly mitigate the effect of China's repression on Hong Kong human rights defenders and activists. Open support will boost activists' confidence to engage and contribute to the classroom and open discussion, knowledge exchange, and research on politically sensitive and human rights issues. It can further empower students, staff and visiting scholars from societies experiencing repression to speak up on human rights violations and continue their activism in the UK as a host country.

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