

# The role of university leaders in a political crisis: Students' perspectives from Hong Kong

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## Abstract

University students actively participated in the 2019 Hong Kong protests. In this context, the students expected that their universities would support their political stance. Drawing on data from interviews with student leaders, this article documents and examines students' expectations for their university heads, how they interacted and negotiated with university management and how university leaders variously responded to the students' expectations during the social movement. Noting the difficulties in reconciling conflicts over the positioning of the university amid strong political polarisation and social divisions in the society, this article argues that university leaders can only passively adapt to political unrest, and that such passive adaptation exemplifies university's vulnerability to political crises.

## KEYWORDS

Hong Kong, political crisis, protests, student activism, university leadership

## Abstract

大學生積極參與 2019 年的香港抗議活動。在此情況下，學生們希望他們的大學能夠支持他們的政治立場。本文根據對學生領袖的訪談紀實，記錄並探討學生對大學校長的期望，他們如何與大學管理層互動和談判，以及大學領導者如何在社會運動中對學生的期望做出不同的回應。本文指出，在強烈的政治兩

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極化和社會分化的背景下，大學領導者難以調和有關大學定位的衝突，他們只能被動地回應政治動盪，而這種被動回應則體現了大學在政治危機中的脆弱性。

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

University students actively participated in the 2019 Hong Kong protests against an extradition bill that was criticised for undermining the city's rule of law. While class boycotts took place at universities across the territory, the campuses of a few universities became battlegrounds for protestors and police in some of the most intense clashes seen during the social movement. During these chaotic times, students as well as other university stakeholders had different expectations of their presidents.

Considering the theoretical approaches taken in the analyses of the rise of student activism in Hong Kong and drawing on data from interviews with 26 student leaders, this article reveals and examines students' expectations for their university presidents, the negotiation process between the students and the university management and the ways in which the university management responded to the students' expectations during the protest movement. The article suggests that though the university leaders attempted to stay politically neutral in the course of the crisis and some of them attempted to accommodate their students' expectations during the social movement, their conflicts with the students are somewhat inevitable due to disparate understandings of the role of the university. Furthermore, noting how the universities revised their reactions and attitudes after the end of the social movement, this article reveals the difficulties in reconciling conflicts over the positioning of the university amid strong political polarisation and social divisions in the society and argues that university leaders can only passively adapt to political crises.

## 2 | (DE)POLITICISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

Hong Kong's education has long been portrayed as *depoliticised*, as it was detached from the goal of nation building during the colonial period (Fairbrother, 2003; Jackson & O'Leary, 2019; Wong & So, 2020). Such an ideology of depoliticisation was encouraged by the colonial government to cultivate political apathy to British authority and China, therefore suppressing perceptions of an illegitimate colonial government (Fairbrother, 2003). Consequently, universities were defined as conservatising institutions for promoting social efficiency, facilitating social mobility and producing the ruling elite to support British colonial rule in Hong Kong (Lin, 2009). Moreover, Confucian heritage, which implicitly rejected the idea of challenging social and political authority, has played a role in shaping people's mentality. As Morris and Vickers (2015) explained, 'the British saw a conservative brand of Confucianism, invoking the ancients to stress the virtues of political quiescence and subservience to benevolent rulers, as the best sedative for a restive populace' (p. 313). Thus, though student activism was observed in the territory during the 1960s and 1970s (Leung, 2000), higher education was largely depoliticised in Hong Kong throughout the colonial era.

Neoliberal governance emerged in Hong Kong during the late colonial period and intensified after the handover. As a result, there was the rise of managerialism, which emphasised performance and competition and significantly shaped the development of higher education in post-colonial Hong Kong (Postiglione & Jung, 2017). This emphasis on neoliberal and managerial values and practices made Hong Kong's higher education reforms different from those in some Confucian heritage societies, such as Taiwan and South Korea, where higher education policies were significantly shaped by political democratisation. In contrast, Hong Kong's reforms were underpinned

by developmental logic. They thus were detached from social innovation and political engagement and remain depoliticised (Lo, 2010; Wong & So, 2020). In other words, the neoliberal policies reiterate the conservative perspective on the nature of higher education.

This conservative, depoliticised model of higher education substantially characterised the logic for governance and crisis management in Hong Kong's higher education. For example, throughout the 2014 Occupy Central movement, university management adopted a strategy of being politically neutral, with which 'universities sought to walk a tightrope between open support for the actions of students and appearing to side with the authorities' (Macfarlane, 2017, p. 150). Following the same logic, the heads of public universities in the territory announced a statement, noting that providing a political solution to the social unrest is beyond the scope of what universities can do during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. We will return to this incident later.

In sum, there is a depoliticised dimension of higher education development, which was intertwined with British colonial political imperatives during the colonial period and existed as the extension of the neoliberal mode of governance after the handover in Hong Kong.

However, researchers began to display a growing interest in the rise of student activism in Hong Kong as student-led social movements re-emerged and became prevalent in the territory in the 2010s. This literature emphasised the significant role of students in social movements, thereby illustrating the *politicisation* of higher education. For example, Wang (2017) asserts the importance of student groups as social networks in mobilising support of different social groups and sectors in the 2012 Anti-Moral and National Education Movement, focusing on Scholarship as well as the Hong Kong Federation of Students, the two student groups that led the 2014 Occupy Central Movement. She further argues that, since the 2012 Anti-Moral and National Education crisis, student groups have constituted an emerging political force that played an indispensable role in various political incidents in Hong Kong, including the 2014 Occupy Central Movement and the 2016 Legislative Council election (p. 142; see also Chan, 2013; Veg, 2017). This analysis is relevant in terms of demonstrating the emergence of student political activism in post-handover Hong Kong, which not only characterises the politics of the city but also the operational management of Hong Kong universities in recent years (Law, 2019; Lo, 2021). To illustrate the politicisation of universities, Macfarlane (2017) documents that 'university campuses were awash with the visible symbols of protest: mainly banners and placards in support of Occupy Central' and that many protestors and sympathisers were undergraduate local students (p. 150).

Some research further suggests a connection between the content of education (at both school and university levels) and students' participation in political activities. Fung and Lui (2017), for example, report that the students' learning of liberal studies in secondary education promotes their socio-political awareness and reinforces their sense of a dichotomy between their local and national identities, despite disproving that the liberal studies curriculum instigates students' participation in protests (see also Fung & Su, 2016). Li and Finkenauer (2021) also note that the liberal environment at universities (i.e. loose enforcement of university rules) is a reason for acceptance of use of violence against police during protests. Moreover, while the emphasis on critical thinking in the current curriculum encourages students to be critical of social and political issues, it can also reinforce political polarisation, as students would tend to follow their pre-existing opinion, given the lack of content knowledge and being overconfident of their beliefs (Lau, 2019).

Meanwhile, other research tends to associate the rise of political activism on university campuses with that in wider society. A key line of argument made in this literature is that Hong Kong people have a dual, hybrid identity, which refers to a combination of 'a "Chineseness" located mainly in ethno-cultural qualities and a "Hongkongeseness" rooted in civic attributes' (Morris & Vickers, 2015, p. 305). Such a dual sense of identity results in an ambivalent citizenship that 'is intertwined with the city's historical legacy of British colonisation, its geopolitical and cultural ties to mainland China, its transfer from British to Chinese sovereignty' (Pan, 2021, p. 948, citing Tu, 1991; Vickers, 2003). Consequently, within the context of growing dissatisfactions with and distrust of the Hong Kong government, particularly among young people, the government's attempt of promoting nationalistic identity and nationalistic education was seen as Chinese nationalistic indoctrination

and was in conflict with Hong Kong's local civic values. And, 'citizenship culture embedded in Hong Kong universities is torn between young Hongkongers' preference for localism and government officials' nationalistic orientation' (Pan, 2021, p. 960). These research findings highlight the significance of territorial identity in promoting university students' social-political participation (Fong, 2022) and forming solidarity in the 2019 protests (Lee, 2020). They also explain how student activism was driven by the localists' philosophy and demands (Chow et al., 2020; Lo, 2020). These localist characteristics distinguish student activism in Hong Kong from that in some other places (e.g. the UK and Chile), where student protests emerged primarily against neoliberal reforms in higher education (Brook, 2017). The localist characteristics also resonate with Wong and So's (2020) argument that Hong Kong's citizenship was politicised in the process of synchronising the city's development with that of China. Such analyses of citizenship in Hong Kong at the campus and societal levels are broadly in line with Altbach's (1989) argument that the development of campus politics is closely linked with the wider social and political situations.

The two parallel dimensions—depoliticisation and politicisation—of higher education development in Hong Kong outline a dispute over the roles of the university, which offers a distinctive way to characterise the negotiation process between the students and the university management and explain the responses of the university management to the students' expectations during the protest movement.

### 3 | RESEARCH BACKGROUND

#### 3.1 | Higher education in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has 20 degree-awarding higher education institutions, of which eight are funded by the government through the University Grants Committee. This size of the higher education system resulted from two rounds of expansion before and after the handover. After decades of expansion, Hong Kong's higher education has entered the post-massification stage.

Like many other systems, this massification of higher education was accompanied by neoliberal reforms, which promoted marketisation and managerialism in the system. The neoliberal reforms not only brought about a public-private mix in higher education but also endorsed an entrepreneurial and managerial ethos of governance in the system (Lo & Tang, 2017). In this context, international standing and global ranking have been increasingly important in the sector, as international competition, which was associated with inter-institutional competition for resources within the system, was used to make universities publicly accountable (Mok & Cheung, 2011). More importantly, this managerial ethos is in line with the depoliticised model and largely reflects the mentality of the management of Hong Kong universities (Law, 2019; Lo, 2021).

However, the relationships between politics and higher education have evolved since the transition period (roughly from 1984 to 1997). On the one hand, Britain attempted to maintain its post-1997 interests; on the other hand, China was proactive in developing and reinforcing its connection to Hong Kong's higher education (Law, 1997). Later, external political pressure on universities grew and was exposed in several incidents (see Law, 2017; Lo, 2018; Morris, 2010 for details). As these incidents substantially influenced the internal governance of universities, they exemplified the idea of politicisation of higher education. Overall, the post-1997 political circumstance redefined the state-university relationship in Hong Kong (Burn, 2020).

#### 3.2 | Overview of the 2019 Hong Kong protests

There were a series of large-scale protests, which are known as the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in Hong Kong. The immediate cause of the movement is the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR)

government's plan for changes to legislation, which would allow for criminal suspects to be extradited to the Chinese mainland, in February 2019. The protests began in March and grew from around 10,000 to hundreds of thousands in June.

In early July, protestors stormed into the Legislative Council Building to call for the withdrawal of the extradition bill. Shortly afterwards, Chief Executive Carrie Lam invited student representatives from the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Science and Technology to a closed-door meeting to hear their opinions, as young people, especially university students, were considered to be at the core of the protests. However, the meeting did not take place, as the student leaders from eight major universities replied that they would only meet the Chief Executive in public and if the government gave into all the five demands made by the protestors.

As protests continued in the city, violence used by protestors and police escalated in August. Despite withdrawal of the extradition bill in September, protestors refused to end their actions, as they had broadened their agenda to demand greater democracy and an inquiry into alleged police brutality. In September and October, class boycotts took place in schools and universities, and university students had dialogues with their presidents in the hope that their universities would support their stance and actions.

In November, the campuses of several universities were occupied and vandalised to different degrees. Violent clashes between protestors and police occurred at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, as protestors occupied the campuses of the two universities for the purposes of blocking the nearby railway, highway and tunnel. Universities in the territory closed their campuses, given the heightened tensions and gritty violence.

Due to the spread of COVID-19, the protest movement saw a period of relative calm after January 2020. To suppress the social unrest, the Chinese central government introduced the Hong Kong national security law in June 2020. The legislation ultimately suppressed the protests (see Lo et al., 2021 for further details about the developments of the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement).

The Anti-Extradition Bill Movement is defined as leaderless in the sense that there were no prominent figureheads. However, the intense clashes that occurred on university campuses reinforced people's impression that university students played an active role in the protests. As Purbrick (2019) reports, 'the protest movement has been sustained by the energy of school and university students, but also radicalised by the violence of a minority of them that has the tacit support of the majority' (p. 474). He further highlights the role of young people and students in planning and implementing the protests and vandalism through anonymous communication in social media (pp. 474–475; see also Shek, 2020), although he acknowledges that the protests 'have been leaderless and more organic than organised' (p. 474). The impression that university students played an active role in the protests is evidenced in the fact that about 40% of the people arrested by the police in the course of the protests were students (International Police Association, 2020). The active participation of students in the social movement and the incidents on university campuses constitute the research focus of the current study that is on the interplay between campus life at universities and the political crisis.

## 4 | METHODS

This article draws on interview data collected as part of a wider study, of which the focus is to explore the role of student organisations and leaders in shaping protest narratives and mobilising students in the 2019 protests. This focus is based on the understanding that campus politics fosters students' social-political engagement. Specifically, campus politics allows students to construct and perform their political self, accumulate their politically relevant cultural and social capital and form relevant networks (Amin, 2002; Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012; Harris, 2012; Hensby, 2014; Loader et al., 2015). Thus, the study used this understanding to elucidate expansive links between politics at the campus level and that at the societal level.

The data collection followed a multiple case study design, which identified a university as the main case and included several other universities as satellite cases. The main case university was selected because it was a protest site where intense clashes occurred. In addition, the last few years have witnessed the emergence of pro-independence localism on university campuses. The main case university is considered a typical case in which incidents advocating Hong Kong independence happened. The incidents typically show how the university is relevant to the issues within the broader context where political activism is extended to university campuses. Meanwhile, incorporating the satellite cases gave us a sense of conditions on other university campuses in the territory.

We adopted a purposive snowballing sampling approach to invite 26 student leaders, of whom nine were from the main case and 17 from 10 other universities. We targeted students who held executive positions in student organisations, as they were actively involved in campus politics through their formal participation in university governance. We began our interviewee recruitment by purposefully selecting representatives from student organisations of several sample universities through our existing network. Then, a snowball sampling technique was employed to extend our network and recruit individual interviewees from other universities. Interviews lasted from around 45 to 120 minutes and were conducted from August to September 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the interviews were conducted online.

The 26 student leaders interviewed varied in their levels of involvement in campus life and social movements. Four were directly involved in the dialogues with the president at the main case university, while several had little active participation in the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. Overall, all the interviewees had comprehensive observations of campus life and some insider knowledge. To preserve interviewees' anonymity, all interview extracts presented within our discussion are without attribution.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded to construct a chronology of student leaders' interactions with their universities. Specifically, the preliminary data coding identifies the phrases, sentences and paragraphs that depict campus culture, student attitude towards the authorities and their participation in the protests. Further categories were then developed through clustering the codes into broader themes or threads that align with the timeline of the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement.

As the protests had lasted for some months, the interactions between student leaders and presidents varied across different time points. Thus, the data analysis aimed to provide a chronological account of the events that generated a thick description of changing (re)actions and attitudes of student leaders and university management in the 2019 protest movement, thereby illustrating the complex campus politics in Hong Kong universities.

The study presented in this article employed a qualitative approach, following an interpretivist tradition. By design, the study did not aim to achieve the generalisability of the findings. As the study focused on the student leaders who tended to support the protest movement, it was unlikely to offer a comprehensive mix of students' perspectives. Nevertheless, we chose to report the perspectives of the student leaders because they played a dominant role in representing students to communicate with the university management during the protest movement. Their attitudes towards and expectations for their university heads thus are helpful to illuminate the inherent conflicts between the two sides and to elucidate why the dialogues did not have a significant effect on ending the political crisis.

## 5 | INTERACTIONS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITY LEADERS: IN PURSUIT OF MUTUAL TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING

This section offers a chronological account of the interactions between student leaders and university management during the protest movement.

## 5.1 | Rise of the protest movement on university campuses

According to our interviewees, the Extradition Bill did not draw public attention as well as that of students during the period between February and May 2019. However, the situation began to heat up in June, as two large protests took place during the month. Our interviewees indicated that university students became passionate from this point and were actively involved in various forms of publicity for the movement.

In July, the Chief Executive invited student leaders to a meeting. Our interviewees stated that they rejected the meeting, as they thought that this was only a propaganda show. Furthermore, given the leaderless nature of the movement, they believed they did not represent protesters and were not leaders of the movement.

By September, the protest movement had increasingly penetrated campus life. Nevertheless, our interviewees indicated that they failed to mobilise the students to join the class boycott, and that the students only joined the boycott for 1 or 2 days rather than the 2 weeks they declared. One interviewee felt it reflected something fundamental, stating that they realised they 'could not mobilise that many people in this age' and that from that point on they realised the movement should be leaderless. Another interviewee believed that this revealed a kind of radicalisation in which students tend to support and employ extreme activities to pursue their political objectives:

I realise that now the students are more willing to participate in activities that are more intense. This is very different from the past when the more intense the activities were, the less students would be willing to join. Now, the more intense the activity was, the more students would join.

She asserted that the radicalisation is a reflection of the vandalism perceived in the wider society. In this context of the prevalence of radical advocacy, the students used graffiti to express political views and caused some damage on campuses. However, our interviewees indicated that the university management showed a high degree of tolerance for the publicity of the students, even though there were politically sensitive messages:

They did not immediately impose punishment or required us to leave. Their reactions were not assertive. But they would monitor how we behaved to avoid unacceptable situations. They also requested the student union to mobilise the students to clean up the campus.

Another interviewee added:

The university respected the voice of the students. They won't clean the publicity materials that were not shown in accordance with the rules of the democracy wall. They were aware of the political sensitivity. But they would avoid triggering the students' emotions. They would ask the student unions to handle (the unregulated display of the publicity materials).

Nevertheless, our interviewees noted that such a high degree of tolerance was due to the lesson to be learnt from previous conflicts between the university and the students, and that such tolerance of the display of the publicity materials only appeared in September–October. The university started to clean the materials and became more intolerant by November.

The interviewees' theory of events is significant in illustrating how the campus culture mirrors the wider society. Whereas the student organisations had advocated more traditional forms of protest in the form of the strike, the lack of interest suggests a disaffection with these methods. This exemplifies radicalisation as observed in wider society. The interviewees' accounts also highlight the growing tension between students, who tended to support and employ extreme activities to pursue their political objectives, and university management, who tolerated but were dissatisfied with the more radical form of expression (Lo, 2021). These accounts can be paired

with the increasing disapproval of the government seen in the process of civic engagement in the society (Cheung et al., 2021). In other words, the setting the students perceived in the wider society was entering campus life and culture.

## 5.2 | Dialogues with the presidents

During the process of the boycotts, relationships between student organisations and university management were becoming increasingly strained. Many interviewees felt their expectations for the presidents were not being met. One interviewee claimed that the university president refused to communicate and always responded to student requests reluctantly. The interviewee claimed that they tried the soft way (being very polite) and hard way (surrounding the president's office and breaking glass), whereupon the president ran away. She felt that the president only relied on emails to communicate, but that the students wanted the president to support their stance and be more humanised. An interviewee noted that the university management was very angry with the damages made on the campus. Another interviewee at another university further noted that, although the use of graffiti (which was known as 'decorating the campuses' by students) to express political views caused some damage on the campus, the students were unhappy that the management seemed more concerned about the facilities than the students.

While our interviewees had indicated that previously there was a degree of trust between the students and the management, as the social movement entered the campus, both sides were sensitive and showed firm stances. Interviewees believed that such reactions caused damage to the mutual trust. One interviewee recalled an incident towards the end of September, when university management had been objecting to the increasing use of graffiti to express political views on campus. As the students refused to back down, management bypassed a mutual agreement with the student union regarding the retrieval of CCTV, requesting footage from the security contractor without notifying the union. The interviewee noted that both sides refused to give ground, with the result being that the relationship between the unions and management had been greatly damaged. University management and assigned security staff were perceived by students as indifferent and even antagonistic to their concerns.

The same interviewee noted that the dialogues with the president saw a shift in attitudes on both sides. Feeling increasing pressure in the wider society, in particular the standoff with the HKSAR government and police confrontations, students wanted to gain support from the university and expected their presidents to show public responsibility in times of conflicts and chaos. In response, student representatives at a sampled university were required to play a mediating role between senior management and student activists:

Frankly, we (the student union) didn't particularly want to meet the president. We all know that if we need help, we shouldn't spend time on meeting the president. But the students felt that the university did nothing. This was because many things happened behind the scenes. We won't speak up when we provide support to the arrested students. The students didn't know what the university had done. Thus, there was a gap. The students wanted the university to do something, and thought that the president, as a public figure, had the responsibility to speak up. As we realised the expectation from the students, we followed what they wanted and therefore urged the president to meet the students. That's why there were the meetings.

Although the student unions were required to represent students to negotiate with the presidents, interviewees noted that they personally did not really want to meet with them. They anticipated that the presidents would share their views in a bureaucratic and top-down manner.



### 5.3 | Expectations of dialogues and university management

Although interviewees acknowledged that there were communications and discussions behind the scenes, one noted that those who were not privy to discussions would feel that the management was quite unconcerned. Interviewees consistently associated the problems on campus with inadequate communication with university management. One interviewee highlighted the lack of open communication and condemnation of students:

When the movement began, the president kept quiet. Then, we realised that he joined the statements made by the eight university presidents. Some wording of the statement, like no confrontation and no violence, made us uncomfortable. The students might think we couldn't meet you (the president), and now you said something that was provocative. So we needed to meet you to condemn you. This is one of the reasons for why the students wanted the meetings.

The above example further evokes interviewee expectations relating to the stance of the president, regarding both political and ethical issues that concerned the students. An interviewee felt that since the university president is a figurehead that represents students' values, the university view should be equal to students' view. Expectations to support the localist stance, and rising intolerance, was captured by one interviewee, who further underlined the importance of student leaders in facilitating the dialogues and acting as a mediator:

There was an open dialogue with the president. The students were very angry (in the meeting). They would use foul language no matter what the president said. Then, a Mainland Chinese student took a photo and left the room. The students were outraged, asking why the president didn't stop the Mainland student. The host lost control of the situation. Some students kept yelling, while some were waiting to ask the president questions. In that situation, (a student leader) took a microphone and spoke to the students. Perhaps, the students were wary of professors and the senior management. Meanwhile, the university would think the student union and the students were on the same side, and thus what we (the student union) said would be more convincing to the students... The escalating situation cooled down.

Aside from the strong localist sentiment we have identified within the campus culture, the portrayal of this incident conveyed the strong sense among students that the university management was not on their side, and the impact on their trust and willingness to speak openly. Perceptions of the president's status were consistently mentioned with regard to expectations. One interviewee stated that the university president is a social elite who should have a conscience, and that they should at least support the students' stance:

Our expectation of the president includes two parts: real actions supporting the arrested students; stances indicating his opinions on the Five Demands.

One interviewee felt that the universities' attempt to play a very neutral role meant that they seemed indifferent to student emotions. Another felt that it was acceptable for the president to be neutral and suggested his stance seemed inconsistent due to practical concerns, but felt the president is also an educator who should inspire the students:

We expected the president would speak up to support the social movement. But in my opinion, being neutral or keeping quiet is fine... But the president is an educator too. Education means to help students know and think about political issues.

This was echoed by another interviewee:

Hong Kong is falling apart, and is full of injustice. We think the president should have a clear stance on this situation. He shouldn't hide himself. He is an educator and should have a clear stance. That's why we wanted him to indicate his stance.

She continued:

Much had happened to us (the students). Some students were injured, and some were arrested. Should the president express his concerns (over what happened)? At least, he should show up.

An interviewee understood that the management needed to be ambiguous in terms of their political stance, but similarly thought the university should proactively provide legal support to others who were arrested. This was strengthened by the perception that the presidents had sufficient power to help the students if they chose:

When the students face unfair conditions, should you give them a hand? I recollected that when a student of another university was arrested, his president wrote a letter stating that the student should be fairly treated. Then the student could leave the police station quickly. So, you can see that the president can help. So, we wondered whether the president had exercised his power and position to help his students.

The idea that university management should act as a middleman between the HKSAR government and students, and that they had the authority and capacity to protect students' rights and interests was also mentioned by interviewees at other universities. The strong belief among interviewees that students were encountering unjust conditions in the wider setting reflects the protest narrative and conflict frame concerning their portrayal as rioters. Failing to proactively provide support was taken as tacit approval of the HKSAR government and police actions. This, of course, was further exacerbated by open condemnations of protesters by university presidents during the earlier phases of the movement. Interviewees who emphasised the necessity of having a clear standpoint on what is right and wrong primarily referred to moral responsibility rather than political orientation, citing the president's duty to protect students against harm.

## 5.4 | Outcome of dialogues

During early dialogues and interactions in late August 2019, interviewees at a sampled university suggested that the president had refused to take a stance and did not express an intention to communicate with students further. One interviewee felt that a similar approach was initially adopted at the beginning of the second dialogues in October but stated that once the live camera was switched off and the social media left the scene, students were in a state of emotional breakdown and knelt in front of the president. It is apparent that the manner of the dialogues was important to the students, and one interviewee indicated they were very happy about how the management handled the students' request:

The president's tone was very peaceful. The president supported the students to express their views peacefully.

The students were also satisfied that their views were acted upon. One interviewee noted that the president had kept open direct private communication afterwards, and that his attitude towards students changed greatly, providing

assistance and greater tolerance to student protesters (including graffiti on campus) and publicly expressing views on sensitive issues such as allegations of police violence:

The final result (of the meeting) was a 180-degree turn. We, of course, accepted it. It was better than what we expected. We expected that we would meet him (the president) a few times and he would coolly reiterate what he said, like providing more support and so on. Ultimately, he was willing to wholeheartedly know his students. This is a good thing. His actions are much more impactful than our requests... This (the result) is much better than our expectation.

The closed-door dialogue helped improve the relationship (between the students and the university). Afterwards, the university provided us with more support. It also affected the university's attitude. I think this is determining... If there was not a private talk but only an open dialogue, basically the relationship would have broken... After the private talk, we knew both were suffering. While you had your problems, they had their worries.

Our interviewees' narratives illustrate how the wider setting had begun to influence campus life and culture, including student attitudes towards the authorities, signified in the growing tension with university management. The firm stances on both sides damaged prior trust, with differences arising from more radical forms of protest entering the campus and a feeling that presidents were not sufficiently concerned for student welfare, which was their moral responsibility. This nurtured a sense that they were implicitly supporting police actions and blame for tensions was designated with the president. While many understood the necessity of maintaining a neutral political stance, they were stronger on what they perceived to be the ethical imperative of protecting students from harm, and proactively providing support.

Although interviewees recognised the difficulties facing the management and felt that it was also a duty of students to show consideration, such expectations of the student population had not featured prominently prior to the dialogues. A moral of the interviewees' narrative accounts is provided in the suggestion that the result of the dialogue was not only greater support from the president for students' political stance, but also a greater degree of understanding from the students. This perspective was also mentioned by an interviewee:

I am not sure whether or not he (the president) used the word "appreciate", but he recognised that the students wanted to contribute to the goodness of the society. This (recognition) was well received by the students. I recollected that he condemned violence at the latter part, but he also recognised the students' intention of serving the society. This is very different to the government's account, which portrays you (the students) as rioters at the outset.

She thus claimed that this recognition gave strong support to the students, and significantly enhanced the students' sense of belonging to the university.

## 6 | UNIVERSITY LEADERS' RESPONSE TO THE POLITICAL CRISIS: INSISTING ON NEUTRALITY

A clear expectation for the university presidents is exemplified in the narratives of the student leaders interviewed in this study. They expected that the university presidents would support their stance, even if they acknowledged the need for the universities to remain politically neutral or ambiguous. While some interviewees appeared to view such an expectation as a tactic to apply pressure on the university management as well as the HKSAR government, some other interviewees understood the expectation as a matter of principle—because of

their belief that it was associated with the notions of the university as an educational institution and as an institution that supports social change. This belief resonates with the theorisation of university as an institution for promoting civic engagement. According to this theoretical concept, one of the main purposes of higher education is to equip university graduates for contributing positively to the processes of change in society (Boland, 2011). Thus, universities need to facilitate civic interest and participation among their students through transformation of their organisational settings and activities (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021).

Moreover, the student leaders also expected that the universities would proactively provide support to students, especially the arrested ones, as they believed that the presidents had the authority and capacity to protect students' rights and interests. Such belief led to their claim about the president's moral duty to protect students against harm.

These expectations justified the dialogues between the presidents and the students at certain universities, though the university management might also see the dialogues as their crisis management and communication that primarily aimed to protect their universities' reputation (Lo, 2021; Moerschell & Novak, 2020). According to our interviewees, there was a greater degree of trust and understanding on both sides, after open dialogues were initiated on some campuses. Consequently, while some university leaders attempted to accommodate their students' expectations, student attitudes towards the management improved.

However, despite a certain degree of mutual understanding between university management and students, university leaders insisted on not taking a political stance. They maintained their strategy of being politically neutral, which was adopted during the 2014 Occupy Central Movement (Macfarlane, 2017), although there were variations in the extent to which universities accommodated students and tolerated protest activities on campuses during the 2019 protests. The attitude of university leaders towards the political crisis is further articulated in a joint statement by the heads of major universities released during the peak of the protest movement:

The past week has seen a rapid escalation of violence and confrontation throughout Hong Kong: several universities are now under protestors' control; on-campus hazardous materials have been taken; staff and students have left campus out of fear for their personal safety. These events are challenging our universities in the most fundamental way.

No political viewpoint gives a licence to damage property, employ physical threats or use violence against individuals. It is regrettable that societal disagreement has led to university campuses becoming major political battlefields, and that the government response has so far not been effective. However, any demand that universities can simply fix the problem is disconnected from reality: These complicated and challenging situations neither originate from the Universities, nor can they be resolved through University disciplinary processes. They are reflections of Hong Kong-wide disagreement, and the government must take the lead with swift and concrete action to resolve this political deadlock and to restore safety and public order now (Kou et al., 2019, webpage).

Two messages are observed in the statement. First, the presidents believed that, instead of the universities, the government should play a prominent role in resolving the political crisis. They also regretted that university campuses became political battlefields. This shows that they do not agree with the notion of the university as a site for politics (Ho & Wan, 2021). This disagreement explains their conflicts with the students who perceive universities as their primary platforms to promote their political ideas and achieve their political objectives (Lo, 2021).

This message denotes the disparate understandings of the role of the university between the presidents and the students, and thus defines their inherent conflicts. From students' perspective, universities are important training sites to equip them to be active citizens with more civic engagement, better political awareness and a stronger commitment to social change. From university leaders' perspective, the university is an institution that promotes social efficiency, rather than accelerating political empowerment. In this regard, students who are

politically radical are considered to be bad (Lo, 2021), and ‘a “good” student is... a rational and a law-abiding citizen whose vocation is to study and get top marks’ (Koh, 2018, p. 162). Seen through the prism of the dichotomisation of politicisation and depoliticisation, this dispute substantially articulates the two parallel dimensions of higher education development in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, the message, which emphasised the limited role universities could play in resolving the political deadlock, implied the centrality of the complex socio-political context where the crisis emerged and the universities were situated. In other words, although the universities were deeply influenced by the political crisis, they were incapable of making an effective response. Such incapacity exemplifies the vulnerability of university in the wider context of socio-political issues (Fortunato et al., 2018).

Second, the presidents denied that universities are the origin of the social movement, and that university disciplinary processes are effective solutions to the political crisis. This message can be seen as a denial of claiming education as the cause of student activism (Jackson & O’Leary, 2019; Lau, 2019) and an allusion to the claim about the rise of student activism as an extension of political activism emerged within the wider socio-political context (Morris & Vickers, 2015; Pan, 2021).

This message seems to have been overridden by the HKSAR government and the university leaders themselves, as the subject of liberal studies in secondary education was renamed and massively revamped and several universities decided to cut ties with their student unions amid a tense political atmosphere. The decision to cut ties with student unions was due to some student union members being involved in controversial political activities during and after the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. As the student union members were alleged to have committed misconduct and were punished, the university leaders seem to have accepted that lack of discipline on university campuses is a cause of radical student activism in the territory (Li & Finkenauer, 2021). They thus enforce strict discipline at their universities.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The case study presented in this article aims to enhance understanding of the 2019 political crisis, focusing on the link between university campus life and students’ political participation. In fact, the simultaneous operation of narratives across the campus and societal levels emerged strongly in interviewees’ accounts of the protest movement, in which deep core beliefs that had permeated segments of the society over time were ignited by social and political events, and which aligned to varying degrees with the prevailing campus culture and beliefs of our individual interviewees.

However, the purpose of our analysis of these narratives was not to identify what is objectively ‘true’, but rather to illuminate how these conflict frames acted as a barrier to communication, given that the breakdown in communication between students (and the youth more generally) and the authorities and the concomitant rise of a social movement advocating radicalism is at the core of the political crisis. Thus, we approached our interviewees’ accounts as a ‘bundle of narratives’, developing their theory of events that included beliefs and agendas, diagnosis of problems and portrayal of varying characters, focusing on their attitudes towards and communication with university management. In explaining these narratives, this article has suggested that disparate understandings of the role of the university and the cause of student activism are likely to be important—as are the reasons for which conflicts between students and university management have been emerged and campus environment has been reconfigured in response to the changed socio-political circumstances in Hong Kong.

Lastly, this case of political crisis resonates with the argument for ‘the centrality of communication’ in crisis management in university settings (Fortunato et al., 2018; see also Moerschell & Novak, 2020), as communication (i.e. the dialogues between the students and the university management) was adopted as a priority by both sides in the development of the crisis. However, despite the fact that the dialogues enhanced mutual understanding

between the students and the university management, this specific case seems to have disapproved of the theoretical assumption that university management's proactive communication with university community facilitates effective crisis management (Fortunato et al., 2018). Instead, the university leaders stressed their limited role in resolving the political deadlock, thereby articulating their inability to manage the crisis. In this regard, this case reflects the vulnerability of university in a time of political crisis.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

William Yat Wai Lo: Methodology; Investigation; Writing—original draft; Writing—review & editing; Project administration; Formal analysis; Supervision; Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Data curation. Euan Auld: Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Writing—original draft; Methodology; Formal analysis; Project administration; Supervision.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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