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Unpacking the discourse surrounding the impact agenda in the Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise 2020

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Abstract

Research with economic utility and social value has been increasingly valued. Such an emphasis can be evidenced by the newly included assessment element of 'societal impact' in performance-based research funding (PBRF) schemes in different higher education systems around the world. This paper investigates how the non-academic impact is constructed and perceived in the Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2020, taking into account the local socio-cultural characteristics in the context of Hong Kong. Data sources include 13 impact case studies in the education panel submitted for the Hong Kong RAE 2020 and semi-structured interview with 17 education academics in Hong Kong. Findings revealed that the non-academic impact was constructed through a narrative pattern: (1) problem identification: tensions and synergies between local and international discourse; (2) problem resolution: prioritization of the evidence-based applied education research (with funding); (3) resolution dissemination: strategic employment of promotional genre. The paper discusses how decolonization, academic entrepreneurialism and collectivist culture have characterized the framing and understanding of the non-academic impact in the Hong Kong academia, contributing to the discourse on neoliberalism in higher education by providing a nuanced, local perspective on the impact agenda. Policy implications for a more localized and flexible impact agenda are also provided.

Keywords: societal/non-academic impact; Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise (RAE); decolonization; academic entrepreneurialism; collectivist culture.

1. Introduction

Higher education, which typically relies on government funding, is not immune to the widespread privatization and marketization seen in the broader socio-ideological context of the restructuring of the public sector in many countries (Tight 2019). One of the prominent reforms in higher education is the adoption of performance-based assessment funding schemes, which aligns with the managerial focus on measured outputs to achieve greater levels of accountability and effectiveness (Oancea 2019). The audits serve as a crucial neoliberal tool for research surveillance and productivity improvement (Mok 2009; Jarvis 2014; Broucker and De Wit 2015). Many countries and regions have implemented their own performance-based funding approaches to ensure academic excellence, such as the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (1986–08) and its successor, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the RAE in Hong Kong, the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) in New Zealand, and the Excellence in Research for Australia in Australia (Hicks 2012).

Over the past decade, the funding landscape has undergone significant changes, with an increasing emphasis being placed on research that exhibits social and economic value. This trend reflects a broader shift towards a more utilitarian perspective on knowledge (Gunn and Mintrom 2016). The emphasis is exemplified by the inclusion of a new assessment element—societal impact in many research assessment schemes. The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact evaluation, which has been in place since 2014, requires scholars to demonstrate the societal benefits of their research through impact case studies. Following the UK's model, the Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has taken steps to integrate an impact assessment component into its evaluation framework, beginning in 2021. In the forthcoming 2026 round, the weighting allocated to this impact agenda is slated to increase, rising from 15 to 20% (UGC 2023). The addition of societal impact as an assessment criterion and the planned increase in its weighting can be interpreted as a policy move designed to guide universities towards becoming providers of education and research aimed at addressing current societal challenges (Deem, Mok and Lucas 2008). This move also serves to instrumentalize academic outputs as a means of meeting the needs of a highly competitive and commercially-oriented knowledge economy (Leydesdorff 2006).

Most research on societal/non-academic impact agenda reveals that academics generally maintain an unfavourable perception of its implementation (McCowan 2018; Horta and Li 2023). The concerns mainly include (1) the narrowed definition of impact, (2) the resulting instrumentality of research, and (3) its reshaping effects on academics' perceptions, practices and identities. Firstly, the complex construct of impact has been perceived to be narrowed down to the assessment-defined societal impact that can be tracked, demonstrated and measured (Crabtree 2017; Wróblewska 2021). The confined definition of impact places academics in a challenging position, forcing them to reconsider the fundamental value of knowledge creation. The matter at hand is not whether the knowledge in question is valuable in and of itself, but rather whether it possesses currency in the market (Blackmore 2010).

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A second concern is that there appears to be a hierarchy of value in research, where endeavours involving industry partnerships and the creation of patentable products are viewed as more esteemed and privileged compared to research associated with public engagement (e.g. museum exhibit showcasing a cultural artifact) (Watermeyer and Hedgecoe 2016; Derrick 2018). This can be attributed to the challenge of providing tangible evidence that demonstrates the impact of public engagement activities (Brook 2018; Wilkinson 2019), which may lead to marginalizing those areas of pure research that are less amenable to measurement by simple metrics (Watermeyer and Chubb 2019). This bias towards certain types of research impact is particularly pronounced in fields like education, where the political need for evidence to inform practice and support policy implementation has largely enhanced the research-policy nexus (Oancea 2005; Alldred and Miller 2007). In the field of education, driven by the evidence-based movement, the research agenda has become increasingly shaped by the demands for practical, policy-relevant findings. In other words, the evidence base poses a direction for education research, shaping how research questions are framed as well as determining what types of education research can get funded (Cain and Allan 2017). O'Connell's (2019) analysis of the impact cases in the education unit of analysis (UoA) in the UK's REF 2014 confirms the policy hegemony in education research. Her study draws upon a document analysis of 46 higher education-related impact case studies and 14 interviews with academics in the field of higher education. The findings suggest that many education academics have become more conscious of the instrumentalized nature of research, gravitating towards more applied and policy practice originated research for its wider societal impact.

Thirdly, the impact agenda has far-reaching implications for academics' research and publishing trajectories (see a review in Horta and Li 2023). A considerable portion of research has contended that the prevalence of competitive accountability as a work ethic, coupled with a propensity towards individualistic and career-oriented behaviours, may result in academics being subjected to the dictates of research assessment (e.g. Watermeyer and Hedgecoe 2016; Chubb, Watermeyer and Wakeling 2020). Watermeyer and Tomlinson (2022) present a notable deviation from the prevailing trend by demonstrating that academics involved in impact case submissions are primarily motivated by the desire to advance knowledge and create a positive impact on society, rather than being motivated by financial gain or material interests.

In sum, literature on the effects of research assessments and the newly included impact agenda has often portrayed a shift in the organization of academics from a collegial scholarly community to 'an army of knowledge laborers' (Boden and Epstein 2006: 225) and a transformation in the role of universities from critical institutions of learning to 'service-providers' (Watermeyer 2014: 360) in the neoliberal landscape of academia. However, according to a growing line of thought (Deem 2001; Marginson 2014; Tight 2019), the neoliberal critique may have predicted an escalation in the academy's subordination to global neoliberal values, while oversimplifying the negative effects of neoliberalism in higher education. These scholars contend that the impact of global neoliberal forces varies across different contexts, and therefore warrant careful examination. Responding to this call, this study focuses on the 'non-academic impact' of education research in the Hong Kong RAE 2020, aiming to contribute to the international literature of neoliberalism in higher education by foregrounding the local socio-cultural features in the Hong Kong academia. The present study is framed by the following research questions:

1) How is the 'non-academic impact' of education research constructed in the impact case studies submitted for the Hong Kong RAE 2020?
2) How do education academics perceive the non-academic impact in the Hong Kong RAE 2020?

2. Context: societal impact in the Hong Kong academia

The introduction of the RAE in Hong Kong in the 1990s was part of a broader public sector reform aimed at promoting 'public accountability' and 'value for money' in public institutions. Central to these changes were the neoliberal ideologies of managerialism and economic rationalism, which emphasized efficiency, competition, effectiveness, economy, and excellence. In line with these neoliberal principles, the RAE system was established to enhance the competitiveness of Hong Kong's higher education (Mok 2005; Currie 2008). This policy move significantly enhanced the government's supervision and direction of universities' research activities.

Following the transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997, the RAE system was retained in Hong Kong's tertiary sector and has since placed mounting pressure on publicly-funded universities. Six iterations of the RAE have been conducted in Hong Kong, in 1993, 1996, 1999, 2006, 2014, and 2020 respectively. The RAE 2020 in Hong Kong, modelled after the UK's REF 2014, evaluates universities' submissions based on research outputs (70%), impact (15%), and environment (15%). Impact is a newly included agenda, which requires a submission on the socio-economic impact of research in the forms of an impact template and impact case study. In the forthcoming 2026 round of the Hong Kong RAE, the significance attached to impact agenda has been augmented, with its weighting increased to 20% of the overall evaluation. It is worth mentioning that UK's REF, which serves as a model for Hong Kong's RAE, has taken an even more pronounced step in this direction. In the most recent REF 2021 exercise, the weighting allocated to the impact assessment criterion was raised to 25% of the total evaluation.

Impact is defined as 'the demonstrable contributions, beneficial effects, valuable changes or advantages that research qualitatively brings to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life whether locally, regionally or internationally; and that are beyond academia' (UGC 2018a: 18). This impact agenda does not engage all eligible academics. The stipulated number of impact case studies required is ∼1 per 15 academic staff members within each unit of submission. The format includes the following elements (UGC 2018a: 20–21, 41):

1) Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)
2) Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
3) References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)
4) Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)
5) Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

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The impact of research is assessed in terms of its reach and significance. In the education panel, reach is defined as ‘the extent and diversity of the communities, individuals, and organisations that have benefitted or been positively affected from the impact with particular concern for the extent of impact in identified communities of need.’; significance is defined as ‘the degree of beneficial effects to policies, practices, perspectives or awareness of organisations, communities or individuals, constructive change to the quality or cost of educational practice’ (UGC 2018b: 15). The ratings are assigned based on five categories: 4* (outstanding impact), 3* (considerable impacts), 2* (some impacts), 1* (limited impacts) and unclassified.

The existing literature on the impact of Hong Kong RAE has revealed substantial performative pressure confronting the eight UGC-funded universities in securing government funding (Li and Li 2023); and such pressure has been inevitably transmitted to individual scholars through the expectations and requirements linked to tenure and promotion (Currie 2008; Li and Li 2021). It is important to note that RAE is only part of the escalating imperatives of performance assessment under diverse ranking regimes in Hong Kong. In this constantly evolving environment, the higher education sector in Hong Kong has long been recognized for its adaptability (Mok 2001; Newby 2015; Postiglione and Jung 2017), with academics demonstrating high levels of resilience and practicality (Horta et al. 2019) in the hyper-performative context (Macfarlane 2021). The result of such adaptability and pragmatism is the privileging of international standards, such as publications in top-tier SSCI journals and international research (Currie 2008; Li and Li 2022). This can be seen as a pilgrimage to the West, a recolonization process where the academic norms and standards of the West are prioritized over local or regional perspectives (Yang, Xie and Wen 2019).

Indeed, existing studies have suggested the RAE’s focus on world-class excellence promoted a performance-driven culture that contributed to the undervaluing of local scholarship, manifesting a process of recolonization within academia (Currie 2008). Specifically, the RAE, before the introduction of the impact agenda, has fundamentally reshaped the research landscape, favouring global dimensions of academic impact and productivity, such as publishing in prestigious international journals, while somewhat neglecting and undervaluing the local dimensions of faculty work, such as engaging with practitioners through publishing in non-academic publication outlets (Li and Li 2022). Research conceptualizes this preference for global dimensions as a manifestation of Western hegemony and a form of recolonization in higher education (Deem, Mok and Lucas 2008; Lin 2009), perpetuating colonial control and dominance (Tan 2023). Therefore, the adoption of PBRF can be seen as an institutionalization of such Western hegemony.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Hong Kong academics are simply deprived of academic freedom and passively subjugated themselves to those managerial values and associated colonial control underpinning the assessment regimes. Academic freedom can manifest in various forms, depending on the specific contexts (Marginson 2014). By referring to their disciplinary culture and research integrity, some Hong Kong academics were reported to exercise academic freedom to display a range of covert forms of resistance against the RAE system, including ‘criticisms behind the curtain of conformity’, ‘cautious acceptance with substantial reservations’, ‘no reaction as an expression of muted dissatisfaction’, and ‘defence without rupture’ (Li and Li 2021).

Relatedly, the cultural repertoire of collectivism, rooted in Confucian moralistic values, provides another avenue for Hong Kong academics of Chinese descent to exercise their academic freedom. As Petersen and Currie (2008) observed, this cultural framework allowed the Hong Kong academics to voluntarily curb critique of university policies and generate research that was beneficial for their institutions and society. This act of invoking collectivist values as a basis for academic freedom represents a form of academic decolonization, where Hong Kong’s scholars actively reclaim their intellectual autonomy and assert the legitimacy of local scholarship.

The introduction of the impact agenda in the Hong Kong RAE 2020, foregrounding the socio-economic impact of research within the local context, can be interpreted as an attempt to strike a balance between the demands of performance assessment modelled after the UK exercise and the preservation of local academic traditions and priorities in Hong Kong. On this basis, the post-colonial approach to internationalization has been underscored as a crucial factor in elucidating the responsive engagement of Hong Kong academia with the research regimes.

As there appears to be a dearth of scholarly attention paid to the recently introduced concept of societal impact within the Hong Kong academic community, the present study seeks to make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the Hong Kong RAE 2020, with a focus on the impact agenda. In particular, the study takes into consideration the Western values that permeates academia in Hong Kong and the cultural values that are embedded in traditional Chinese culture to foreground the local contextual features within the broader neoliberal landscape (Marginson and Yang 2022; Yang 2022).

3. Methods

This paper draws data from a larger project that has investigated the effects of the RAE 2020 policy on academic work and research management in higher education in Hong Kong. This paper reports how the ‘societal impact’ of education research is constructed in the impact case studies submitted for the Hong Kong RAE 2020 and perceived by education academics in Hong Kong. The study aims to yield a contextualized understanding (Flyvbjerg 2006) of how the socio-economic impact agenda is responded to in the Hong Kong academia, featured by tightening audits and neoliberal and managerial reforms.

Different types of data were collected and analysed to different extents to address the two research questions. Firstly, semi-structured interview was conducted with 17 RAE-eligible academics in the field of education from three UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong from November 2019 to March 2021 (see Table 1). The study employed a purposive snowball sampling approach to maximize the ‘variation of a small sample’ and information richness (Patton, 2002: 125). This strategic sampling technique enabled this study to invite academics with diverse administrative roles (e.g. Dean of Faculty, Department Head), research fields, career stages, and academic ranks in the Hong Kong context, who were able to provide a wide range of scholarly experiences related to the RAE exercises. Of the participants, eight were of Chinese descent (including Hong Kong), while the remaining nine were international scholars. The international participants have worked in Hong Kong for a

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Table 1. Participant information

Participant	Gender	Academic rank	Research field
P1	Male	Professor	International education
P2	Female	Professor	Higher education
P3	Male	Professor	Comparative education
P4	Male	Professor	Comparative education
P5	Male	Professor	Language and literacy development
P6	Male	Professor	Higher education
P7	Male	Associate professor	Higher education
P8	Male	Associate professor	Language and literacy development
P9	Female	Associate professor	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education
P10	Female	Associate professor	Language and literacy development
P11	Male	Assistant professor	International education
P12	Male	Assistant professor	Teaching and teacher education
P13	Female	Assistant professor	Teaching and teacher education
P14	Male	Assistant professor	Teaching and teacher education
P15	Male	Assistant professor	Higher education
P16	Female	Assistant professor	Higher education
P17	Male	Assistant professor	Higher education

significant period of time, which allowed them to gain familiarity with the local academic landscape. We have decided not to reveal the specific institution information, administrative roles or nationalities due to ethical concerns. Doing so could potentially allow readers familiar with the Hong Kong context to easily identify the participants, which would go against principles of maintaining participant confidentiality.

The interviews covered three topics: perceptions of the RAE 2020 impact policy, including its policy framework and administrative processes, the potential synergies and tensions between the RAE impact agenda and their perceived non-academic impact of their research, and experiences in dealing with the impact policy, including the preparation and writing process involved in submitting impact cases. To avoid leading questions, queries pertaining to the potential impact of cultural underpinnings on the practices of the participants were not explicitly posed. Notably, some participants (of Chinese descent) spontaneously invoked concepts that were indicative of traditional Chinese cultural values, such as ‘collectivism’ and ‘contributing to the society’, when discussing their perceptions of impact. The interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin Chinese and ranged from 45 min to 1 h, with the average duration being ∼50 min. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim.

An open-coding thematic analysis was conducted to the interview transcripts to generate descriptive codes that represented the academics’ perceptions of and experiences with the RAE impact agenda. After a process of ‘selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming’ (Miles and Huberman 1994: 10), similar descriptive codes and concepts were then grouped into broader themes. The coding process was iterative and the transcripts underwent multiple rounds of coding and re-coding, with the aim of achieving a satisfactory level of coding completeness and accuracy. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis, including (1) synergies and tensions between local and international discourse, (2) instrumentalization of research, and (3) promotional narrative. In the analysis and reporting, rich and thick description of the research setting, sampling, data collection procedures and participant characteristics were provided to enable the readers to assess the transferability of the case to their own contexts (Merriam 1998). Moreover, the study employed methodological triangulation to corroborate the insights gleaned from the interviews (Miles and Huberman 1994). Specifically, this study integrated multiple data sources, including impact case studies, relevant institutional documents, and policy materials. This data triangulation enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the overall qualitative findings by enabling cross-validation of the emergent themes and interpretations.

Secondly, engagement with impact case study documents provides an effective means of exploring the institutional beliefs that underpin the definition of good impact, as evidenced in the texts (Li and Yang 2017). Thirteen education research impact case studies, which were submitted to Panel 13 Education, Unit of Assessment 41 (including curriculum and instruction, education administration and policy and other education) for the RAE 2020 impact assessment, were collected as a major dataset of this study. All case studies were published on the 30 June 2021 (Table 2).

Move analysis (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993) was employed to examine how non-academic impact was constructed and represented in the case studies. ‘A move in genre analysis is a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse’ (Swales 2004: 228). The move analysis followed a recursive explorative process. The research began with a close reading of the 13 impact case studies to gain an initial understanding of the texts, their structure, and overall purpose (i.e. convincing the reviewers of the reach and significance of the research impact). After this broad overview, the local function of each textual component was examined to see how it related to the case study’s overarching goal and contributed strategically to advancing that goal. Next, the functions of each individual information units were marked and labelled, which ultimately formed the basis for identifying a narrative pattern of three major moves: problem identification—problem resolution—resolution dissemination. The narrative pattern observed was found to be of a restricted nature, serving the main purpose of convincing the reviewers of the research’s significance and wide reach (Bandola-Gill and Smith 2022). This pattern was similar to the one identified in Wróblewska’s (2021) study, which examined impact case studies in linguistics for the UK REF: situation—problem—response—evaluation—further corroboration.

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Table 2. Impact case study submitted by university.

HEI (no.)	Case study title
City University of Hong Kong 01 (CityU01)	Creative and positive education with evidence-based effective outcomes: national and regional impacts on policies, school teachers and educational practitioners
Hong Kong Baptist University 01 (HKBU01)	Instigating a paradigm shift in English Language education in Hong Kong
The Chinese University of Hong Kong 01 (CUHK01)	Building a leadership development blueprint in Hong Kong (HK) in the school-based management era
CUHK02	International student assessment and monitoring of basic education
CUHK03	Enhancing social and behavioral skills through an evidence-based and innovative intervention for autism: robot for autism behavioral intervention program (RABI)
The University of Hong Kong 01 (HKU01)	Documenting early child development in East Asia and the Pacific: from evidence to impact
HKU02	Shadow education: Nature, implications and policy development
HKU03	Transforming 21st-century skills development and assessment in higher education and beyond
HKU04	Over-the-counter hearing aids: Improving life experience
The Education University of Hong Kong 01 (EdUHK01)	Promoting parenting practices that foster positive development in kindergarten children in Hong Kong
EdUHK02	Boosting equal access to quality education through blended learning
EdUHK03	The inclusion of green skills into policy, TVET teaching and learning in the Asia-Pacific region
EdUHK04	Establishing free quality kindergarten education

After an iterative comparison of the two sets of data (impact case studies and interview data) (Strauss and Corbin 1990), it was found that the three overarching themes emerging from the interview accounts corroborated the narrative pattern of problem identification—problem resolution—resolution dissemination and provided some further elaborations. *Problem identification* was found to be closely linked to the interplay between local and international discourse, while *problem resolution* was constructed through evidence-based applied research (instrumentalization of research). *Resolution dissemination* employed a promotional genre. Linguistic aspects of the promotional elements and their deployment to enhance the reach and significance of impact was demonstrated at both the structural and lexico-grammatical levels (Hyland 2009). Key characteristics of each narrative element was further analysed; and themes were checked and modified across the whole set of data for consistency (Miles and Huberman 1994).

4. Findings

The overarching communicative objective of impact case studies submitted by universities was to persuade panel reviewers of the reach and significance of the research impact, with the aim of achieving higher performance in the RAE 2020. It was found that a narrative pattern was constructed to accomplish this communicative goal: problem identification—problem resolution—resolution dissemination. Effective problem identification was crucial for communicating the significance of issues and developing appropriate strategies and solutions. Problem resolution was an essential part of creating positive change and advancing knowledge and understanding in a wide range of fields and disciplines. Resolution dissemination constituted the final stage in the process of promoting research impact to a broader audience. The dissemination planning should be an integral and deliberate component of the research process, rather than an afterthought.

4.1 Problem identification: synergies and tensions between local and international discourse

Problem identification involved recognizing and defining the nature and scope of a problem or an issue. It was mainly constructed through the underpinning research that evaluated and positioned certain initiatives or practices as problematic and thus proposing a rationale for further investigation. Such research articulates the importance of these problems, e.g. how the problem was connected to larger socio-economic issues or emphasizing the urgency of the situation.

Noteworthy was that many problems (i.e. research gaps) in the submitted impact case studies were associated with the synergies between international and local discourse. Case studies used terms such as 'cultural differences', 'culturally appropriate', 'international standard', 'Western studies', and 'local customs' to highlight the significance of the local adoption, implementation and implication in the global context. In other words, international discourse provided a space for local actors to raise awareness of their indigenous issues and concerns, and to connect with others who are encountering similar challenges across the world. In the meantime, local discourse was employed as a lens to enrich and contextualize the international literature by adding diverse voices and perspectives. For example, HKU01 on early child development (ECD) in East Asia and the Pacific described that the majority of knowledge regarding ECD was derived from high-income Western societies. It pointed out that the Western tools for assessing ECD may not be valid in low- and middle-income countries due to cultural differences in both the constructs to be assessed and the assessment techniques. Similarly, EdUHK 01 on parenting practices for kindergarten children in Hong Kong was described as a paradigm shift from parenting guidance based on Western studies to one that emphasized the use of local research, customs and ideas.

Such a strategy of wrapping up locality in the global perspective to foreground the need to address the problem were corroborated in the interview data. Most academics expressed their commitment to striking a balance between local relevance and global implications in the field of education. For instance, P16 provided two specific examples to explicate how to graft local elements onto the international discourse. Firstly, descriptions of the Chinese college entrance examination system, which would hardly concern the international readers, should be packaged using more internationally recognized themes—'university access' and 'student diversity'.

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Secondly, the research on university tuition fees and student loans were typical US-related issues, associated with the privatization of higher education, which were not relevant to the readers in Hong Kong or Europe. International themes and discourse, such as 'education inequality' and 'social justice' should be deployed to maximize the impact of these stories.

Apart from the synergies, tensions between the local and international discourse were also voiced out by many academics (e.g. P4, P5, P6, P8, P13, P15, P16). Specifically, they expressed apprehension over the ambiguity between international research and the international significance of research. Several participants raised concerns regarding the criteria for the underpinning research in the impact case studies, which stipulated that it should be at least equivalent to 2* (indicating international recognition). These participants expressed wariness that the reviewers may inadvertently privilege international or Western research over local Hong Kong research when assessing quality. As P5 stated, the parochial context was once an issue for him earlier in his career and then he decided to gravitate towards more international research.

> I often did work in Hong Kong schools earlier in my career. The international readership are not very interested in Hong Kong schools and you have to spend a lot of time and energy in your paper explaining the Hong Kong context. And then they don't understand why in Hong Kong or China we do certain things. […] So eventually, I slowly give up work in Hong Kong schools. I do my research in higher education in the university. Actually this research is based on the award-winning teachers. I can go and observe their class, and sometimes they are British or American or Middle Eastern. Therefore, the parochial and contextual thing is removed. (P5)

This example evidenced that the assumption of international research as superior to local research could significantly influence research trajectories and agendas of the academics.

4.2 Problem resolution: prioritization of the evidence-based applied education research (with funding)

Once the problem has been identified, the next move was to propose a resolution to address it. Problem resolution referred to the process of analysing and understanding the problem, developing potential solutions, implementing and refining the solutions in order to achieve a desired outcome.

In the 13 impact case studies, resolutions were characterized by two types of underpinning research: (1) evidence-based conceptual frameworks and (2) practical tools, which were related to policy justification, technology generation, improvement of education programmes and professional development. It should be noted that funding was usually referenced with exact number and the authoritative funding body, attesting to the credibility of the research. For example, CUHK01 described a government-commissioned research project to develop programmes for school principals (HK$600,000, funded by the UGC). A framework of seven responsibility dimensions undertaken by Hong Kong school principals was established, including 'strategic direction and policy environment, external communication and connection, quality assurance and accountability, teaching, learning and curriculum, staff management, resource management, and leaders and teacher growth and development'. This framework served the research foundation of a variety of training programmes that catered for the diversified needs of school managers in Hong Kong. Similarly, EdUHK02 described the development of an eight-dimension framework for institutions to adopt blended learning using information and communication technologies. A self-assessment tool was developed based on the framework to conduct needs and situation analysis of the existing state of blended learning (HK$426,000, funded by UNESCO Asia-Pacific). This tool created opportunities for marginalized communities to enhance students' literacy and self-learning skills and contributed to closing the urban-rural education quality gap.

As corroborated by many academics (e.g. P3, P4, P5, P7, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17), such evidence-based applied research (with funding), was increasingly encouraged and accredited in the university. In one of the sampled universities, the performance review started to embed knowledge transfer/exchange and impact case as a component of the annual evaluation for faculty members holding the ranks of associate professor and professor, starting from 2017. This assessment element was assigned a weightage ranging from 5% to 15%, thereby linking the societal impact of research with high-stakes decisions regarding promotion (Li 2022).

Most academics agreed that by emphasizing the socioeconomic value, the research could be ensured to be relevant, impactful, and beneficial to the community and society at large. They argued that education research inherently adopts a pragmatic approach towards applications, with the goal of generating positive impacts on communities and society. For instance, as P8, P9, P10 and P12 shared, evaluating the effectiveness of an innovative teaching approach necessitates its implementation in real classrooms as a crucial research step, with the findings being leveraged to enhance students' learning outcomes. Additionally, they emphasized the significance of delivering research outcomes in a format that is comprehensible and actionable for policymakers, practitioners, and the general public. P14's advocacy for knowledge exchange with practitioners serves as a noteworthy example.

> If you look at my profile, I try to publish practitioner articles [because practitioners usually would not read very academic journals]. They must be zero-star or one-star. This is my insistence as this is the only way that you can really share knowledge with the teachers around the world. (P14)

Interestingly, P9 brought up the notion of 'collectivism' and suggested that her collectivist mindset motivated her to support faculty's directives on knowledge transfer from research to practice, which she believed would improve the faculty's reputation and contribute to the university's success. As she remarked, 'I strive to be a good citizen and believe that supporting our dean's request and contributing to the university is a commendable endeavour'.

However, what concerned many academics were the power dynamics underpinning the high-stakes assessment and top-down management, which might result in a homogenization of understanding of the best 'impactful research'. It was generally believed that research associated with policy justification/implication and technology development were prioritized. As P12 stated:

> I notice that the university now starts to pay attention to knowledge transfer and establish funds and projects to

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> promote it. Sometimes people can just go to the extreme and turn this into a very weird situation. So it's like you have to have an output product, develop an app or have a concrete specific product that can be commercialised and advertised to the public. […] I do think my research has practical value. I believe I'm doing something interesting and meaningful in my classroom. However, this is knowledge transfer in my eyes but not from the management people's perspective. (P12)

The tension between the university's emphasis on knowledge transfer and academics' perception of what constitutes as such reflected the changing landscape of higher education, where there is a growing demand for explicit, measurable, and demonstrable outputs.

4.3 Resolution dissemination: promotional discourse

Resolution dissemination was the process of communicating and exchanging the details and benefits of the solution and knowledge, underpinned by research, to the intended audience beyond academia.

Regarding the dissemination channels, it was found that government officials and policy-makers, research reports, papers and consultancy were the most commonly utilized channels for knowledge exchange. In some case studies, researchers were nominated to roles with policy-making functions, facilitating the dissemination process (e.g. UNESCO Chair in Comparative Education in HKU02, Alliance convenor in EdUHK04) or commissioned to undertake government research (e.g. CUHK01, HKU01). For practitioners, dissemination channels for dissemination mainly included professional development sessions, intervention training sessions, and training programmes. For instance, the research frameworks and instruments on 21st-century skills (i.e. 'holistic competency') were communicated to practitioners in Hong Kong, Australia, Malaysia and Thailand through training sessions and workshops (HKU03). Conferences, talks, seminars, and workshops were widely recognized channels for knowledge exchange. Media also served an important pathway to raise public awareness. For example, in EdUHK01, the academics used the media to raise awareness on parenting, e.g. release of articles on Facebook page, publication as a regular columnist in Ming Pao (a local newspaper), collaborative production of videos with social media companies.

Most participant academics recognized the value of promoting their research to non-academic audiences as a means of leveraging their work to benefit the society at large. By engaging with practitioners and other stakeholders, they could gain valuable insights and feedback, ensuring that their research was addressing the real-world needs and challenges of the communities they aimed to serve.

From a discursive perspective, the dissemination of resolutions could be viewed as a promotional genre that advocates for the reach and significance of the impact case studies. At the structural level, the concept of 'reach' was constructed by two main components: 'number reached' (such as attendance statistics, citations, views/circulation) and 'who was reached' (as indicated by the prominence of the individuals reached). 'Significance' was demonstrated through participants' experience (such as the uptake of innovative methods, performance), participants' perceived effectiveness (as evidenced by the survey of attitudes, changes in mindset/behaviours), and experts' acclaim (as demonstrated by the funding, awards, recorded changes to policy). At the lexico-grammatical level, three types of hyping terms (Hyland and Jiang 2024) were commonly identified as being deployed to promote the impact and impress the reviewers. The first type was certainty, which emphasized the importance of the statement, such as 'significant' and 'important'. For example,

> Together the three projects have a very ***significant*** impact on English Language education in three ways: (1) policy change; (2) curriculum change; (3) pedagogical practices. (HKBU01)

> These findings have been taken as ***important*** references by the HKSAR Government, subject experts and educators in evaluating education policies and practices. (CUHK02)

The second type was novelty, which emphasized the originality of the claim, such as 'first' and 'innovative'. The third type was potential, which highlighted the possible future value of something, such as "potential". For example,

> The initial study [R1] was the ***first*** to consider the ***potential*** value of over-the-counter hearing aids, widely used low-cost devices that form part of a shadow, non-clinical entry point into hearing health care. (HKU04)

The promotional discourse, both at the structural and lexico-grammatical levels, was strategically employed to build trust, establish credibility, and effectively convey a compelling message that communicated the reach and significance of the research impact. The ultimate purpose was to impress the panel reviewer and secure a favourable evaluation.

The deliberate use of promotional language, aimed at creating a positive impression of the research and its impact, was viewed by the academics with somewhat ambiguous attitudes. On the one hand, some academics (e.g. P1, P2, P3, P5, P9) recognized the necessity of such language for effectively communicating the value and significance of their work to a wider audience. As P5 contended, 'I should be able to do this. […] I am an experienced professor. So this is my job'. On the other hand, some academics (e.g. P4, P11, P13, P14), felt uncomfortable with the pressure to advertise their research to impress non-academic audiences and the potential for this pressure to undermine the integrity of the research. Moreover, the promotional discourse led them to reconsider their identity as a scholar, questioning whether they have to work as a seller, moulding their research into a product (i.e. assessment tools, training workshops), collaborating with companies and institutions, and 'sell[ing]' their research in the hyper-performative environment.

5 Discussion

51 Traces of recolonization fragments and decolonization attempts

The impact case studies and interview data examined in this research reveal intriguing insights into a complex dynamic between the remnants of colonial influence and emerging efforts towards decolonization within the academic landscape in Hong Kong.

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On the one hand, the generic features observed in these case studies, such as the exhibited narrative pattern and promotional discourse, mirror those found in the UK counterparts (e.g. Bandola-Gill and Smith 2022; Wróblewska 2021; Hyland and Jiang 2024). These similarities can be seen as further evidence of the traces of recolonization, an observation that is not entirely surprising. The Hong Kong RAE follows the UK model one round behind, adopting the same impact case study template and assessment criteria. Additionally, the strong presence of UK-affiliated international scholars on the assessment panels further underscores the influential role of the former colonial power in shaping the expectations and preferences that Hong Kong academics sought to align with (Li and Li 2022). This dynamic has contributed to the replication of generic features observed in the impact case studies across these two contexts.

On the other hand, the introduction of the impact agenda within the Hong Kong RAE can be viewed as a catalyst for decolonizing the research landscape. As mentioned earlier, the RAE's emphasis on world-class excellence has promoted a performance-driven culture that undervalues local scholarship, leading to a process of recolonization within Hong Kong's higher education sector by favouring global academic impact and productivity over local engagement (Currie 2008; Deem, Mok and Lucas 2008; Lin 2009; Li and Li 2022; Tan 2023). Considering these conceptualizations about recolonialization, the findings regarding academics' efforts to strike a balance between local relevance and global implications in their research go beyond exploring synergies between local and international discourses. By highlighting the societal implications of research, the impact agenda recognizes and values locally focused applied research. In doing so, it challenges the dominance of Western paradigms and fosters a more localized and contextually relevant approach to knowledge production. Through this lens, the impact agenda becomes a catalyst for decolonizing the research agenda in higher education. Undertaken within the framework of the impact agenda, the endeavours made by academics reveals the role of research in driving societal development and emphasize the significance of addressing social needs and achieving social impacts through research that is tailored to the specific requirements and circumstances of the local context. The prevalence of the impact agenda can thus be understood as a corrective response to the previous bias towards Western scholarship (Lo and Liu 2021).

It should be noted that the decolonization attempts observed in the present study may have been amplified by the distinct disciplinary characteristics of the education academics, who possessed expertise in areas like higher education, comparative education, STEM education, and teaching and teacher education. Firstly, education researchers tend to have a ground-level understanding of the local educational, social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are situated. This deep situatedness within specific communities and institutional settings allows them to recognize the intricate, dynamic interplay between global trends, national policies, and local dynamics. They are acutely aware of how international influences are mediated, resisted, and transformed at the local level (Marginson and Rhoades 2002). Secondly, education academics often collaborate closely and build trusting relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers, students, families, community organizations and policymakers. This regular, recursive engagement with diverse stakeholder groups at the local level reinforces the need for education researchers to be attentive, responsive, and accountable to the needs and concerns of the communities they serve. The inherently contextualized and locally embedded nature of educational practices and knowledge production norms (Tusting 2018) have contributed to education researchers' heightened awareness to the synergies between the global imperatives and grassroots priorities, as well as a profound sense of social responsibility towards addressing pressing social issues and local needs through their scholarly work. Understanding this disciplinary context is crucial for situating the findings within the broader landscape of higher education assessment frameworks and their implications for knowledge production and societal impact.

5.2 Intensification of academic entrepreneurialism

Literature frames research assessment as part of the neoliberal regime in higher education, characterized by managerialism (e.g. Deem et al. 2007; Tight 2019; Dougherty and Natow 2020). It represents a shift towards assessment regimes that rely on metrics and competition, serving as mechanisms for ensuring academic and institutional compliance. This context creates a conducive environment for the emergence of academic entrepreneurialism.

The findings of the present study confirm the intensification of academic entrepreneurialism, involving the commercialization of research, with universities actively seeking to transfer their intellectual property and research outcomes into practice as well as the marketplace. Specifically, the findings highlight that academics feel the need to advertise their research to impress non-academic audiences. Consequently, academics are required to adopt the role of sellers who collaborate with industry partners and transform their research into applicable and marketable products, promoting and disseminating their work within the hyper-competitive and results-oriented environment (Watermeyer and Tomlinson 2018).

This trend aligns with the conceptualization of 'the self as enterprise' as academics reidentify themselves through knowledge transfer and industry partnerships amidst the prevalence of the impact agenda. The conceptualization emphasizes the notion of the 'enterprising self' and underscores the importance of utilizing an entrepreneurial mindset, competence, and self-entrepreneurship to innovate for the future (Tang 2018; Tang and Zhang 2022). Within this context, academics actively seek collaborations and partnerships that can amplify the non-academic impact of their work (Dang 2018), despite the presence of questions and resistance.

By embracing the impact agenda, universities cultivate an ecosystem that nurtures and supports academic entrepreneurship. Moreover, the emphasis on social impact encourages academics to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and consider the practical applications of their profession (Tang 2018). In other words, the alignment between the impact agenda and academic entrepreneurship enables academics to justify their prioritization of applied studies and their use of promotional discourse aimed at impressing non-academic stakeholders.

5.3 Signs of collectivist culture

One major criticism of the impact agenda in research assessment is that it poses a significant threat to academic autonomy and freedom. According to this criticism, the emphasis on achieving socially beneficial changes can undermine the

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subjective intellectual interests of academics, limiting their freedom to pursue research in their chosen fields (Martin 2011; Macfarlane 2021). As a result, the framework of thinking among academics becomes increasingly constrained by public accountability, prioritizing output and impact over the traditional approach of 'curiosity-driven' or 'blue skies' research, which has long been considered an inherent and valuable aspect of the academic field (McCowan 2018; Smith et al. 2020).

However, a notable theme that emerged in the present study is the notion of 'collectivism'. Participants expressed their views on how being a good citizen and promoting collectivist values can align with and support the initiative of knowledge transfer from research to practice. This perspective challenges the argument that the impact agenda undermines academic autonomy and freedom. It suggests that the concepts of being a good citizen and contributing to the collective can coexist with academic pursuits.

When considering the context of Hong Kong, research reports that Hong Kong academics of Chinese descent view academic freedom as a foreign value. While they support and uphold academic freedom, they also note that its exercise is balanced by Chinese traditional values (Currie, Petersen and Mok 2006). This emphasis on cultural tradition provides a lens through which to distinguish collectivism in the Chinese context from that in the Western tradition. In the Western tradition of scientific research, collectivism relies on independence and autonomy from external control. Under these conditions, scientists are expected to act for the benefit of the common scientific community rather than personal gain, and researchers are encouraged to share their findings freely for the benefit of all (Macfarlane 2023; Macfarlane and Yeung 2024). In contrast, collectivism in academia with the Chinese context is based on the acceptance of state interference, given the Chinese tradition of a blurred boundary between the bureaucracy and academia. This perspective is rooted in traditional Chinese notions of 'public as openness, fairness, righteousness, and legality' and 'private as secrecy, selfishness, personal desires, and illegality' (Huang 2005). These collectivist values underscore 'the responsibility of the person in authority to use their power wisely in the collective interest' (Zha 2011: 464) and require knowledge to be demonstrated through action for the public good (Hayhoe 2011: 17). In this sense, these values differentiate academic freedom in the Sinci world from Western academic freedom, which is defined as a form of negative freedom, typically interpreted as 'freedom from coercion by the state' (Marginson 2014: 31). In the Sinci contexts, freedom is not framed as a form of independence but is perceived as a competence-based realization process that integrates 'knowledge, aspirations, and values', equipping individuals to 'choose the good' (ze shan). In this Confucian ideal of freedom, emphasis lies in holding onto goodness firmly and translating it into practices (see Li 2014 for details). This realizing approach to freedom, especially the idea of turning the good into practices, morally inclines intellectuals to contribute to the provision of public good and the advancement of public interests. Embracing this perspective, academic freedom (or, as described by Hayhoe (2011), intellectual freedom) is seen as a positive freedom, enabling individuals to 'cause, create and enact', while meeting the state's criteria, thereby enhancing productivity (Zha 2011; Marginson 2014).

This cultural perspective sheds light on how the collectivist values expressed by participants in the study may align with a broader cultural context, where academic freedom is understood and practiced within the framework of traditional Chinese values. Specifically, asserting collectivism within the Chinese context provides a cultural interpretation of the participants' emphasis on being good citizens in upholding the impact agenda, revealing the plausible influence of Chinese philosophical heritage on the mindset of academics in Hong Kong. It is also aligned with the Chinese approach to the outcomes of higher education, which emphasizes the overlapping nature of public and private domains (Marginson and Yang 2022).

6 Conclusion

This study reveals that the discourse surrounding the impact agenda in Hong Kong RAE 2020 can be interpreted as a narrative construct. This narrative comprised three distinct components: (1) the identification of problems, which was associated with the interplay between local and international discourse; (2) the resolution of problems, which was dominated by the evidence-based applied education research with funding; and (3) the dissemination of resolutions through a strategic utilization of promotional genre. Drawing on the concepts of decolonization and academic entrepreneurship, this study argues that the impact agenda constitutes a policy initiative that fosters a more localized and contextually relevant approach to knowledge production, countering the hegemony of Western paradigms; and establishes an impact culture wherein universities seek to commercialize research outcomes and transfer intellectual property into practice and the marketplace, and academics prioritize and promote evidence-based applied studies. Additionally, the study reveals signs of collectivist culture that aligns with the initiative of knowledge transfer from research to practice, disputing the contention that the impact agenda undermines academic autonomy and freedom and promoting a commitment to public affairs and collective values in Hong Kong's academic setting. The nuanced and indigenous understanding of the impact agenda offers a valuable contribution to the discourse on neoliberalism in higher education.

While the findings, based on an analysis of 13 impact case studies and 17 interviews with education academics, are not intended to be extrapolated to other academic settings, they do offer valuable insights and implications that can inform university leaders and policy-makers in this area. The implementation of the impact agenda represents a significant development in the academic landscape, with a laudable aim of promoting greater engagement between universities and the wider society. However, the impact agenda must be carefully considered to ensure that it does not undermine academic autonomy and creativity, or reinforce existing power imbalances in the knowledge production process. In this regard, the collectivist culture, marked by social responsibility and community values in Hong Kong's academic setting, may provide a useful lens for revisiting the understanding and implementation of the impact agenda. The collectivist culture underscores the importance of acknowledging and appreciating the contribution of academics who engage in impact-oriented research, through provision of academic recognition and constructive feedback on their submitted case studies (Watermeyer and Tomlinson 2022). Such recognition and

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feedback can help foster a culture of impact within academia, where research autonomy is strengthened, and academics are motivated and supported to undertake research that addresses the needs of society. This, in turn, can facilitate the production of knowledge that is contextually relevant, socially responsive, and contributes to the decolonization of research agendas in higher education, promoting an approach to knowledge production that is more equitable and inclusive, and reflective of diverse cultural perspectives and experiences.

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