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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intricate dynamics of trust and tension within university governance in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where the broader socio-political context – particularly student activism – profoundly influences university operations. Using the 'grammar of trust' framework, the article explores how student participation, as a core element of shared governance, presents both opportunities for democratic engagement and significant challenges, especially in politically charged environments. Through interviews with key stakeholders, including university council members and student leaders, the article uncovers issues surrounding the politicisation of university governance and emphasises the role of students in campus politics. It highlights the complexities introduced by political influences, advocating for proactive trust-building initiatives to navigate these challenges, mitigate conflicts, foster effective university governance, and contribute to broader societal progress.

Introduction

University governance, particularly in politically sensitive environments like Taiwan and Hong Kong, is profoundly influenced by the broader socio-political context. Since shared governance – involving collaborative decision-making processes among administrators, faculty staff, students, and external members – becomes a prevalent concept in these higher education systems, student participation has become a core element, purportedly driving institutional change, promoting democratic values, and holding administrations accountable. However, student activism also introduces tensions, especially when it challenges existing power structures. Student representatives pushing political agendas can lead to the politicisation of university governance, resulting in conflicts. These dynamics underscore the need for trust as a critical component in shared governance.

This article explores the nuanced dynamics of trust in university governance in Taiwan and Hong Kong, particularly in the context of student activism. Drawing on data from interviews with key stakeholders, the article reveals that tension and trust coexist and vary with the adoption of participatory governance, given the complexities introduced by political influences. Using Tierney's (2006) framework of the 'grammar of trust', the article advocates for proactive trust-building initiatives to enhance the effectiveness of university governance. Recognising the importance of trust and

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navigating the inherent tension involved in its cultivation is crucial for universities aiming to balance the demands of various stakeholders, especially in politically charged environments.

Trust, tension and shared governance in higher education

Shared governance in higher education refers to a collaborative decision-making process that involves various stakeholders, including students, faculty staff, administrators, and external members. This governance model aims to democratise university governance, fostering greater accountability and transparency. The concept is rooted in the belief that involving diverse perspectives leads to more effective and inclusive policies and practices at the institutional level.

Shared governance is considered essential for the success of modern universities, particularly in a marketised and competitive external environment (Taylor 2013). Referring to the UK model, Shattock (2013) notes that historically, universities operated under a bicameral system consisting of an academic body (the senate) and a governing body (the council). Traditionally, the senate, predominantly composed of academics, managed academic matters, while the council, with a majority of lay members, held supreme authority over administrative and financial affairs. However, over the past few decades, this governance structure has evolved significantly. The balance of power between these bodies has shifted, particularly with the rise of the New Public Management paradigm in the 1980s, which emphasised market-driven principles and external accountability. Given this shift, Taylor (2013) highlights the need for universities to adopt flexible cultures that can adapt to shifting external demands. He believes that the overall governance process benefits from both tension and trust between governing and academic bodies. In a governance model where responsibilities are shared through committees, coordinated by the university executive, maintaining a degree of constructive tension can ensure rigorous debate and diverse input. Simultaneously, fostering trust among stakeholders is crucial for effective collaboration, reducing conflict, and promoting a positive organisational culture.

Drawing on the example of an indigenous advisory council at a university in Ecuador, Wise and his associates (2020) further explore the concept of shared governance in higher education, highlighting how inclusive governance practices can enhance institutional resilience and responsiveness. They argue that effective shared governance requires not only structural mechanisms but also a cultural commitment to inclusivity and collaboration. In line with this conceptual framework, student participation in university governance is identified as a crucial aspect of shared governance. According to Lizzio and Wilson (2009), student participation in university governance is essential for enhancing the legitimacy of decision-making processes. Meanwhile, student participation on university boards brings fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, bridging the gap between administrative decisions and the student body (Lozano and Hughes 2017). Moreover, students who participate in governance feel a greater sense of efficacy, ownership, and responsibility towards their institutions. Thus, student participation in governance is not only a matter of democratic representation but also an educational process that fosters civic engagement and social responsibility (Owusu-Agyeman and Fourie-Malherbe 2021; Planas et al. 2013). In this regard, some research argues that universities are obligated to enhance their capacity, as well as that of the student associations, to ensure effective student participation and foster a culture of genuine democratic engagement within higher education institutions (Kennedy and Pek 2023; Rochford 2014).

However, the impact of student participation varies across contexts and is influenced by the broader political and socio-cultural environment (Klemencic 2014). This connection between university governance and socio-political contexts is exemplified by the rise of student activism. On the one hand, research notes that student activism can drive institutional change, promote democratic values, and hold university administrations and even governments accountable (Jacoby 2017; Luescher-Mamashela 2013). For example, examining student power from a global and comparative perspective, Klemencic (2014) indicates that student movements are integral to democratising higher education and have been a significant force in higher education policymaking at both the

institutional and national levels. Similarly, Lynch (2010) positions universities as crucial sites of student activism, fostering critical thinking and social change. She argues that universities have a responsibility to support student activism as part of their broader societal mission.

On the other hand, student activism can also create tensions and conflicts, particularly when it challenges existing power structures and governance models. For instance, Altbach and Cohen (1990) provide a historical perspective on American student activism, detailing how activism in the 1960s and 1970s focused on broad social issues such as civil rights and anti-war protests. They argue that although the nature of activism has changed, its core purpose remains to challenge and transform existing power structures, thereby heightening tensions on campus and beyond. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) also argues that students tend to prioritise their immediate concerns or those of their peers over the broader needs of the institution. Student activism can lead to the politicisation of university governance, with student representatives potentially pushing political agendas rather than focusing on academic and administrative governance. These behaviours not only undermine the effectiveness of student participation in governance but also cause conflicts and tensions within university governance.

Amid the emergence of tensions in university governance within the context of student activism, this article examines shared university governance in Taiwan and Hong Kong, with a focus on student participation, through the lens of trust. Trust is regarded as a fundamental condition for social interaction, highlighting its role in reducing social complexity, fostering human cooperation, and lowering transactional costs, while acknowledging the necessity of incorporating elements of negation and critical distancing in certain contexts (Uggla 2013; Uggla, Reuter, and Wijkström 2013). Thus, despite recognising the need for a certain degree of tension between council members and university administrators, trust remains a fundamental component of effective shared university governance (Shattock 2013; Taylor 2013).

According to Tierney (2006), trust involves stakeholders' confidence in the competence, honesty, openness, reliability, and benevolence of those making decisions, and building and maintaining trust among faculty staff, administrators, and students is crucial for sustaining higher education as a public good. Tierney (2008, 30–40) argues that trust is critical to the organisational culture in higher education, particularly in the context of shared decision-making. To elucidate the concept of trust and its significance within academic organisations, he identifies nine frames of trust (Tierney 2006, 44–57): *repeated interaction*, where trust builds through ongoing interactions that shape perceptions of trustworthiness over time, developing a sense of familiarity and predictability that can lead to trust; *a dynamic process*, where trust evolves and changes over time, resolving uncertainty in social interactions and facilitating outcomes despite incomplete information. Trust acts as a bridge to achieve social cohesion and desired results.

Trust is also seen as *an end* in itself, serving specific goals within relationships and contributing to social capital. It develops through relationships that may not have immediate functional outcomes, enhancing the overall social fabric. Trust can be viewed as *an exchange*, involving reciprocal actions and benefits. It operates on a mutual basis, with parties engaging in relationships that foster trustworthiness. This exchange is not static but evolves through interactions, requiring commitment from both sides.

Another frame of trust involves using *faith*, which incorporates belief in others' integrity and intentions. Trust can be conceptualised as a form of faith in others, encompassing psychological orientations and beliefs. This faith is conditional and variable, particularly in human relationships, rather than absolute. Trust also involves *taking risks*, requiring vulnerability in the face of uncertainty. Since it cannot be demanded, individuals must choose to trust, accepting the possibility of disappointment or betrayal.

Trust also relies on the *ability* to meet commitments, which varies based on individual histories and sociocultural contexts. Factors such as age, race, and gender can influence one's capacity to trust. *A rational choice* frame suggests trust as a calculation of potential risks and rewards, viewing it as a decision based on expectations and incentives. In this frame, trust emerges from structured social relationships where individuals assess risks and benefits. Finally, trust is shaped by

cultural construction, emphasising the role of cultural norms and values. It is a socially constructed phenomenon, influenced by cultural and historical contexts, and adapts to different situations and interpersonal dynamics.

Based on Tierney's (2006) conceptual framework, Vidovich and Currie (2011) explore the concept of trust in the context of Australian higher education, analysing how managerial reforms influenced trust relationships across the sector. They highlight the complex dynamics of trust and mistrust, arguing that fostering a culture of trust requires balancing regulatory frameworks with autonomy and open communication. Similarly, other research addresses the issues of trust in university governance with a focus on the relationship between parties (such as state and university) within the contexts of managerialism and neoliberalism (see Croucher and Davis 2018; Komljenovic 2019; Lewicka 2022 for example). This article adopts these conceptual elements to examine how trust (and tension) influences shared governance practices in universities, particularly in politically sensitive environments like Taiwan and Hong Kong, and how student activism shapes these dynamics.

Student activism in Taiwan and Hong Kong

Political activism and social movements

The colonial histories of Taiwan and Hong Kong have indelibly shaped their political, social, and cultural landscapes, laying the backdrop for contemporary political activism. In Taiwan, Japanese colonial rule introduced modernisation and development at the cost of cultural assimilation and loss of freedom and autonomy. Conversely, British rule in Hong Kong established a capitalist economy and legal system but limited political freedoms and participation (Ho 2019). These colonial experiences fostered distinct identities and resistance movements that continue to influence political activism.

Post-war periods in both societies saw the emergence of movements advocating for civil rights, democracy, and self-determination. In Taiwan, the lifting of martial law in 1987 catalysed a wave of activism focusing on democratisation, environmental protection, and social justice. Hong Kong's activism, while historically focused on labour rights and social issues, intensified in the 1980s and 1990s in response to the impending handover of sovereignty to Mainland China, with a growing emphasis on preserving autonomy and civil liberties (Liao, Wu, and Chen 2020).

Social movements that emerged in the 2010s in Taiwan and Hong Kong embodied burgeoning activism against the backdrop of Mainland China's expanding influence over the two societies (Ho, Huang, and Lin 2020; Lam 2020; Rowen 2020). The China factor also sets student activism in Taiwan and Hong Kong apart from that in other regions, such as Chile, South Korea, and the UK, where student protests have primarily arisen in response to neoliberal reforms in higher education (Brooks 2017; Shin, Kim, and Choi 2014). These movements, rooted in deep-seated discontent with existing political structures, showcased the transformative power of civic engagement and mobilisation (Ho 2019; Liao, Wu, and Chen 2020).

In Taiwan, the 2014 Sunflower Movement emerged as a formidable challenge to what was perceived as opaque governance and the overreach inherent in cross-strait agreements with Mainland China, notably against the backdrop of increasing economic and political ties encouraged by Beijing. This movement was a direct expression of apprehension toward Mainland China's influence, fearing that closer ties could undermine Taiwan's political autonomy and democratic integrity. As a result, Taiwan's movement bolstered civic participation and renewed its political landscape, influencing subsequent electoral politics (Themelis and Hsu 2021).

In Hong Kong, the Occupy Central Movement (also known as the Umbrella Movement) in 2014 and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2019 manifested the demand for further democratisation and were protests against 'mainlandisation' post-handover. The protests and occupations challenged the premise of the 'One Country, Two Systems' framework and resulted

in Beijing's tightening grip, exemplified by the introduction of the national security laws afterward (Vickers and Morris 2022). Consequently, Hong Kong's political landscape has transformed, marked by increased limitations on civil society and the constriction of party politics.

The role of university students and its implications for university governance

University students have played a pivotal role in political activism and social movements in both Taiwan and Hong Kong. Their involvement has been central not only to mobilisation efforts but also to the ideological framing and leadership of these movements.

In Taiwan, the Sunflower Movement was predominantly student-led, with students organising sit-ins, rallies, and occupying the Legislative Yuan for 23 days to protest the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement with Mainland China. This movement highlighted the power of student activism in shaping public discourse and influencing political decisions. The students' ability to mobilise large numbers, use social media effectively, and maintain non-violent discipline was crucial in garnering widespread public support and international attention (Hsiao and Wan 2017). The movement led to a significant increase in youth political engagement and contributed to the electoral successes of more progressive, pro-independence parties in subsequent elections.

Similarly, in Hong Kong, students have been at the forefront of major protests. The Occupy Central Movement in 2014 began with student strikes organised by groups such as the Hong Kong Federation of Students and Scholarism. These student groups demanded genuine universal suffrage and democratic reforms. The movement saw students erecting barricades and occupying major streets in Hong Kong for 79 days. Their protest tactics and the use of the umbrella as a symbol garnered significant global media attention and had an influence on other movements worldwide (Ho and Wan 2023).

The 2019 Anti-Extradition Movement again saw significant student involvement. This movement was marked by more decentralised and leaderless organising tactics, with students playing some roles in the planning and execution of protests. Universities became sites of intense political activities, with student unions organising class boycotts and demonstrations (Lo and Auld 2024). The movement's escalation led to severe clashes with the police, and the subsequent imposition of the national security law has dramatically altered the political and social environments in Hong Kong, particularly affecting freedoms on campuses and beyond (Vickers and Morris 2022).

These movements illustrate the crucial role that students play in driving political and social change. Their participation has been characterised by innovative strategies and a deep commitment to political principles (Veg 2017; Wang 2020). Given the connection between broader political circumstances and campus politics and cultures, and the increasing student participation in university governance (Altbach 1989; Klemencic and Park 2018), it is reasonable to assert that the rise of student activism significantly impacts higher education in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where varying degrees of shared governance have been implemented. In Taiwan, with the emergence of participatory democracy in society, a decentralised and democratic model has been adopted in university governance since the early 2000s, with representatives of faculty members and students joining the university council. The council, composed of senior management, academic and non-academic staff, and student representatives, makes decisions on major university affairs, although the government continues to play a significant role in the financial and personnel matters of universities, particularly public ones (Chan and Yang 2018; Chan, Yang, and Lo 2023; Lo 2010). In Hong Kong, modelling the British system, institutional autonomy is considered a fundamental principle of universities in the city. They operate under a bicameral system consisting of a senate and a council, with faculty members and student representatives participating in both bodies (Lo 2020; 2023a).

The rise of student activism in both Taiwan and Hong Kong reveals the close interplay between political participation and higher education, particularly how universities are viewed by students as platforms for advocating their political stances. Their participation in university governance is considered an opportunity to model participatory behaviour and thus activate student peers' concern

for social issues (Lo and Auld 2024; Themelis and Hsu 2021). As a result, university governance structures have been particularly tested by student activism, with university leaders needing to balance demands from different stakeholders in higher education. These dynamics reflect various understandings of the role of universities within specific political and socio-cultural contexts (Lo 2023a). In this sense, understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending contemporary university governance, especially in politically sensitive environments, thereby justifying the current study.

Research methods

This study is part of a larger project comparing university governance in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. This article reports on analyses of 19 and 21 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2018–2019 with council members from four and seven universities in Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively, selected through purposive sampling. In both regions, interview participants were selected for their active involvement and expertise in university governance and included faculty and student council members, and senior management (ex-officio members). The sample from Hong Kong also included external lay members, ensuring that most membership categories were represented.[1]

The interviews explored experiences of serving on the council, power relations among council members, and influences of the wider socio-political situation on universities. Specifically, the interview questions focused on the participation of council members and negotiations among them in governance matters, including financial, staffing, and substantive issues. They were also asked for examples of cooperation and/or negotiation with other actors in university governance related to the wider cultural and political environment. Interviews with student representatives also examined their roles in student organisations, interactions with university authorities, and their perspectives on social movements (specifically the 2014 Sunflower Movement and Occupy Central Movement) and other political issues. To address the aims of this article, the analysis focuses on the impacts of political changes, characterised by the rise of student activism, on the coordination and allocation of power in university governance.

To exemplify the impacts of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Movement on university governance in Hong Kong, the analyses are supplemented with student accounts drawn from a wider study exploring the role of student organisations and leaders in shaping protest narratives and mobilising students in the protests. These interviews with 26 student leaders (who held executive positions in student organisations) from eleven universities were conducted in 2020. The student leaders varied in their levels of involvement in campus life and social movements. Some were directly involved in various on-campus activities related to the movement, such as dialogues with the university president, while others had less active participation in the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement. Overall, the interviewees provided comprehensive observations of campus life in the context of student activism and possessed insider knowledge. These interviews explored student attitudes towards authorities and the role of student organisations and leaders in shaping protest narratives and mobilising students. The interview questions covered two main areas: student leaders' experiences with university governance and campus culture, and their views on key social issues. These perspectives are relevant as student leaders are co-opted into different governing bodies of their universities, sharing various degrees of power within the governance structure.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 min. Most interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 were held face-to-face, while those in 2020 took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, Cantonese, or English, and were translated and transcribed when necessary. The coding process was carried out using NVivo software, which facilitated the systematic organisation and management of the data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and assigned code names based on the interviewees' roles. Preliminary coding involved identifying phrases, sentences, and paragraphs relevant to key concepts such as university autonomy, academic freedom, social harmony, and respect for authority and seniority. These initial codes were then consolidated

into broader themes, such as shared university governance, student activism, and the socio-political events of both regions.

The thematic analysis across both Taiwan and Hong Kong involved familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis focused on identifying perceptions of the impacts of political unrest and student activism on university governance in both Taiwan and Hong Kong. It aimed to explore how structural transformations and political activism shape the organisation and distribution of power within university governance. By integrating insights from both regions, the study provided a nuanced portrayal of the contemporary state of university governance, highlighting the role of student activism and the broader socio-political environment.

University governance in the era of student activism[2]

Politicalisation of university governance

Politicisation is seen as a direct consequence of student activism, where the wider political environment has influenced university governance and created tensions within universities (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). Interviewees in this study acknowledged these impacts within their institutions, acknowledging the connections between student council members with external politics. For example, a senior management member from Taiwan criticised:

> I feel that some students have become somewhat secularised. Why do students interfere in these matters? In Taiwan, I personally feel that many students are accumulating their political capital. They see this as an opportunity to practice protesting, as they aspire to become activists in the future. This is an important practice for them. (TWUC16)

A student council member added:

> Some of those who join the student unions aim to enter politics in the future. They hope to shine during their student years, so sometimes they are not solving problems but trying to attract attention. (TWUC10)

These excerpts reveal how political ambitions and external influences can shape the actions of student representatives. Senior management from Hong Kong shared similar criticism:

> Today's political environment is complicated. Everything is politicised. As university is a micro-public, students are affected and the issues of university governance become politicised too. I think politics shouldn't be brought into university campuses. Universities are places for nurturing scholarship. It's unfortunate to make university politicalised because of the changes in the external environment. (HKUC12)

Further criticism was directed by another senior administrator at the approach of student council members:

> Unfortunately, many student council members and student representatives in various committees didn't seriously investigate the issues and seek opinions from their peers … It's common that they interpret the issues emotionally. (HKUC11)

However, a student council member from Taiwan defended their position:[3]

> Most faculty members usually choose to align with the administration, perhaps because of related future opportunities. Therefore, students have very limited influence in campus politics. Essentially, they don't really care about students' opinions. Unless students initiate a significant protest, the university might only respond due to external pressure. So, I wouldn't describe the administrative approach as democratic. (Since students are a minority in the council), they have enough numbers to completely ignore students' opinions. (TWUC07)

This defence is confirmed by a faculty council member who noted:

> Some faculty members often voice many opinions within their departments, but when it comes to university council meetings, they don't dare to speak up. (TWUC11)

Another faculty council member explained:

> I believe the main issue is the power structure that remains in place. For instance, when you are up for promotion, the decision is made by those higher in rank. Unless someone decides they don't care about getting promoted and feels free to speak their mind without fear of offending others, people generally still hold back. (TWUC13)

A student council member indicated a collaborative relationship between student and faculty members in such a politicised setting:

> Compared to the staff, we (students) actually have no burdens. We can say whatever we want without worrying because we are elected by the students, and the university can't do anything to us. Sometimes, after meetings, staff members come to us and point out problems they have noticed in the university, asking us to propose improvements. (TWUC10)

Another student council member added that students need to use external force in this governance setting:

> Senior administrators obviously made a mistake but refuse to admit it, so we will make it newsworthy. (TWUC09)

They believed that using external forces is necessary because students are a minority in the council, despite comprising the majority of the university community:

> I still believe this is a manifestation of democracy in Taiwan … We use the power of the media, and in the context of campus autonomy and university independence, this isn't the kind of autonomy and independence we desire. Whose democracy is this? In a university with 50,000 people, like (my university): 32,000 of them are students, creating an unequal structure. To balance this inequality, we need external forces. Therefore, I still consider this to be campus democracy, and it makes the campus even more democratic. (TWUC09)

They further explained that, given their minority status on the council, student representatives needed to actively lobby other council members if they wished to advance their agenda. Another student council member, who is also the student union president of the university, echoed:

> Even if the student union uses the power of the media to apply pressure, it does not necessarily affect the university's autonomy. University autonomy is granted to universities by the constitution. However, university management should not use this autonomy as an excuse to ignore other perspectives. This is how we, the student union, see it. (TWUC18)

These excerpts substantially reveal the politicisation of university governance alongside the democratisation of the wider society, characterised by democratic participation, in Taiwan (Chan and Yang 2018; Law 2002).

Such a strong connection between university governance and the broader political circumstances is endorsed by student leaders from Hong Kong:

> Our goal is to enhance students' sense of belonging to Hong Kong. That's why we encourage students to discuss the future of Hong Kong. (HKSL21)

> Since 1989, there has been a tradition that student unions, especially that of (their university): actively participated in social movements. (HKSL09)

On this basis, the role of the student unions is further elaborated:

> The student union has three main tasks. The first is student affairs such as organising activities, and welfare for students. Second, there are some university policies. We have to deal with issues relating to teaching, campus environment, catering and so on. The third is involving social issues. We speak on behalf of our fellow students and organise activities in cooperation with other universities to speak up about social issues. (HKSL23)

However, a student leader noted the importance of balancing the student union's role between societal politics and university governance:

> Student union is not just about the politics at the societal level. It's also about the daily operation of the university. Representing students' voice when there were unreasonable situations. Being the executive of the student unions gave me lot of responsibilities, because more people would pay attention to my performance. (HKSL10)

Despite recognising the influence of the broader political environment on university governance, Hong Kong interviewees did not mention students' intentions of gaining political capital. A faculty council member suggested that Hong Kong's situation is not comparable to that of Taiwan, as the broader society in the city lacks the democratic processes seen on the island:

> Taiwan's strength lies in the fact that everything is about elections, and everything is transparent. The whole situation may seem chaotic, but in a way, it is a beautiful democratic system. You could say that Taiwan is the ugliest democracy, but it also demonstrates the most accountable form of democracy. (HKUC03)

The differences in the political systems and atmospheres of Taiwan and Hong Kong influence attitudes towards transparency and accountability in university governance, thereby affecting the relationships of trust between council members, which is discussed in the next section.

Trust and lack of it

Diverse perspectives on transparency in university governance reveal the varying trust dynamics between Taiwan and Hong Kong. A faculty council member from Taiwan highlighted an issue where students would livestream council meetings using their mobile phones, without consent from other members:

> I don't necessarily see it as wrong; however, mutual respect is crucial. At the very least, the university president presiding over the meeting should be informed of the live broadcast. (TWUC17)

Another faculty council member from a different university commented on the live streaming situation:

> We cannot refuse to be broadcasted because they are student representatives. As they wish to make this public, refusal is not an option … I believe in transparency in all matters. If something cannot be made public, then there is likely an issue. However, I don't fully support unrestricted live streaming because it sometimes encourages the use of impolite or irrational language, potentially fostering promotional or antagonistic effects. This is where I disagree. I believe if live streaming is to occur, it should be done transparently by the university. (TWUC14)

Contrarily, a student council member from the same university explained their stance:

> If footage can be edited and may not accurately reflect the council meeting's discussion process, then why can't students livestream it without editing? Therefore, this year, we took the stance that students should livestream council meetings. As soon as we sit down, the livestream begins. (TWUC18)

This example of transparency essentially reveals the lack of trust, despite the acceptance or tolerance of live streaming practices.

Conversely, interviewees from Hong Kong typically report the use of closed-door settings as a means of building trust. A faculty council member noted:

> In informal settings, behind closed doors, there might be a group of council members who feel like this and a certain group who feel like that. There might be tensions, but I don't see them in formal settings. It is performative. (HKUC16)

Another faculty council member from a different university elaborated on this preference for closed-door discussions:

> You know, one of the things is we don't want (negative news) about the university to get into the newspapers. So how do we keep this quiet? That's the major consideration, for anything which is potentially damaging. (HKUC01)

They further noted that the council chair criticised the university staff's trade union for leaking the internal information about the university to the media and said, 'this is not the kind of debate we want to see in the local press'. This stance is echoed by a senior management member who emphasised the importance of maintaining the university's reputation and avoiding radical student activism on campus (HKUC14).

Meanwhile, a student leader noted the radicalisation of student activism in the context of the rise of pro-independence movements in Hong Kong:

> 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. (HKSL25)

In this context, the student leader recalled a clash a few years earlier between students and the university when students displayed a sensitive political banner. They noted that 'eventually, we knew the bottom line the university management would accept after communication' (HKSL25). This incident led the university management to become more willing to communicate with student organisations and more tolerant of student activities, particularly during the Anti-Extradition movement (Lo and Auld 2024).

Thus, despite university management's negative perception of student activism, student leaders from Hong Kong indicated a degree of trust and respect between themselves and university management. For instance, one student leader (HKSL22) mentioned avoiding conflicts with the university. Another student leader (HKSL21) expressed respect for university management's role in policy scrutiny, although other interviewees (HKSL09; HKSL10) characterised the management as conservative and bureaucratic. Notably, closed-door dialogues between students and university management during the 2019 protest movement fostered improved relationships and mutual trust, despite the challenges encountered during that period (see Lo and Auld 2024 for details).

These perspectives illustrate the intricate relationship between transparency, trust (or its lack) and university governance practices across Taiwan and Hong Kong. Student leaders' roles further elucidate these dynamics, as discussed in the following section.

Reflections on the roles of student leaders

Literature suggests that the democratisation of universities aligns with broader societal democracy, empowering students to influence university operations, campus life, and even broader society through representative processes. This fosters a campus culture characterised by interest representation, elections, bargaining, and majority decisions, reflecting a connection between campus dynamics and realpolitik (Crossley and Ibrahim 2012; Hensby 2014; Olsen 2007). A student council member, who is also the student union president, from a leading university in Taiwan identified their role aligning with this assumption, emphasising their influence over broader society:

> The decisions made by (our university) today would influence other universities to follow suit. Other university student unions don't have as much resistance as (our university's) student union to resist the university's decisions. So, many times we have this sense of responsibility; it lets us know that if we don't make this decision today—even though we can, but choose not to—other student unions won't even be able to resist. This responsibility compels us to take action. This kind of thinking makes us feel that (our university) holds a unique status. We are not just a university; we are Taiwan's university. Like the student union president of (our university): who is recognised as Taiwan's student union president by everyone, our statements and actions may influence other universities. (TWUC18)

However, another student council member from the same university felt that their roles as the student leaders are not sufficiently respected by faculty members:

> Teachers often feel treating students like 'juveniles' is unavoidable: 'So you 18/19-year-old kids, you still need to study obediently' … They may harbour these thoughts privately, and we can sense it: 'I have a PhD!' This internal dialogue reveals their perspective. When they profess, 'Ah! We respect you; you can speak freely!' I perceive a sense of hypocrisy. (TWUC09)

This perception of students as immature representatives, rather than fully capable participants in governance, contributes to distrust between students and faculty, suggesting that some tensions may arise from deeply ingrained cultural attitudes that prioritise hierarchy and respect for seniority. This perception identifies a trust gap between students and faculty members, although some faculty

members are recognised for their openness and support of student stances on various issues (TWUC09). Importantly, these perceptions reveal a sense of elitism that is questioned by a student council member from a less prestigious university:

> During the Sunflower Movement, people took to the streets to protest, but many may not have been clear on their exact reasons for protesting. I believe the public is easily influenced, and this issue impacts matters like campus autonomy and student self-governance. At times, I find the actions of those at leading universities to be inappropriate. Perhaps, they struggle to grasp the perspectives of students beneath them. (TWUC10)

In Hong Kong, student interviewees generally avoided identifying themselves as leaders. For example, a student leader noted, 'we are representatives. This is how we position ourselves' (HKSL21). Another interviewee expressed discomfort with being perceived by university management as someone who could mobilise and control students, which they felt was a misleading characterisation (HKSL25). Regarding their collaborative relationship with the university, a student leader felt they were treated as a helpful liaison responsible for conveying university policies to students and representing student voices to university management (HKSL23). They noted that university management members who were more familiar with student affairs were more willing to engage in open communication. Another interviewee observed that teachers and professors demonstrate supportive attitudes and a strong civic awareness toward students, although the willingness and ability of senior management to engage with students could be influenced by their experiences and personalities (HKSL26).

Importantly, student leaders stressed that unlike the 2014 Occupy Central/ Umbrella Movement, they did not play a leading role in the 2019 social movement. An interviewee reflected:

> Frankly, we positioned ourselves as the leader at the beginning of the summer holiday. But when we attempted to call for class-boycott, we realised that it was difficult to play such a leading role or a mobiliser. We could not mobilise that many people in this age. Perhaps, at the beginning, we still followed the situation in 2014. But, we failed to mobilise the students to join the class boycott. Although we claimed that there were two weeks of strike, the students only joined the boycott for one or two days. Then, we recognised that (the movement) should be bottom-up rather than top-down. (HKSL25)

Overall, the student leaders considered themselves to be representatives, largely playing a supporting role, with students increasingly turning to them for assistance as the protests escalated throughout the year. They noted that participating in student unions allowed them to connect with like-minded students and engage more deeply in social movements, while noting the leaderless and bottom-up approach characteristic of the 2019 social movement. A student leader elaborated:

> Being leaderless was the general situation. But there were some small leaders. We acted as a very small leader in (our university): because we needed coordination in some operations. It is the case that we are a well-established organisation, the biggest platform in (our university). It is like the situations in other sectors. There are trade unions and political parties who acted as small leaders too. In this social movement, there were different small leaders, but not a central leader. (HKSL23)

These excerpts not only illustrate evolving strategies within social movements (Cheng 2020; Fong 2023) but also navigate complex relationships of trust among student leaders, faculty staff, university management, and the broader student population amidst changing social dynamics and student activism.

Building trust amid tension

This article examines the dynamics of shared university governance in Taiwan and Hong Kong amid student activism, highlighting the interplay of trust and tension. Alongside the assumption about the importance of trust in healthy university governance, Tierney's (2006) framework, described as a 'grammar of trust', illuminates several essential dimensions and dynamics of trust-building within universities.

Following Tierney's (2006) framework, *repeated interactions* facilitated by shared governance can contribute to the development of trust. Participatory university governances enable stakeholders, including students and faculty staff, to consistently engage with university administrators, thereby creating a stable foundation for trust to flourish. However, the findings suggest that interactions within a politicised setting, characterised by complexity and uncertainty, can also result in conflicts and tensions. This aligns with the concept of trust as *a dynamic process* where complexity can either diminish or augment. Predictable expectations between parties can be established through this process. Conversely, a lack of trust amplifies uncertainty and complexity. Thus, these dynamics underscore the importance of continuous engagement policies that extend beyond crisis management (Fortunato, Gigliotti, and Ruben 2018; Moerschell and Novak 2020). This finding aligns with the argument that communication plays a crucial role in sustaining participatory governance. The central role of communication as an engagement strategy is essential, particularly during crises, where transparent and continuous dialogues can help mitigate uncertainty and re-establish trust. Proactive communication between university stakeholders, including students and university management, is vital to ensuring a shared understanding of the crisis situation (Fortunato, Gigliotti, and Ruben 2018). In other words, persistent and proactive engagement through participatory governance can cultivate a culture of trust, mitigating perceived risks associated with social complexity. However, as the findings indicate, the effectiveness of communication can be constrained by the socio-political atmosphere that universities face, highlighting their vulnerability. Thus, while communication may enhance mutual understanding, it does not always resolve underlying issues, especially when institutions acknowledge their limited capacity to address broader socio-political challenges (Lo and Auld 2024).

Furthermore, trust is identified as both a process and *an end*. The act of trusting itself generates more trust, creating a virtuous cycle. Therefore, taking the initiative to trust, particularly by avoiding negative descriptors and labels (as illustrated by the examples of livestreaming and faculty members' labelling of students' leadership roles in Taiwan), is crucial (also see Lo and Auld 2024). This proactive stance can mitigate the destructive impacts of mistrust and foster a more positive and cooperative atmosphere.

Tierney (2006) further noted that trust is *an exchange*, emphasising that trust relationships are not single events and that reciprocity is a critical aspect. In other words, building trust relationships involves multiple exchanges over extended periods of interaction (Vidovich and Currie 2011). The trust between students and university management observed in Hong Kong exemplifies such a process. However, the leaderless or polycentric nature of student activism introduces uncertainty about whether the same parties involved in negotiations will continue to interact (Cheng 2020; Fong 2023). Moreover, the short office terms of student leaders in student unions and the immediate interests of students as consumers restrict long-term perspectives on university development (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). These constraints on student participation resonate with the idea that trust is conditional, based on the competence of those involved and the organisation's ability to maintain reciprocal relationships over time (Tierney 2008).

Trust involves having *faith* that the other party will fulfil their part of the agreement, inherently carrying *risk* since expectations may not always be met. Tierney (2006) indicates that establishing and honouring agreements, beginning with small, manageable commitments, significantly enhances trust. This strategy aligns with the concept of universities as 'mini-publics' (Kennedy and Pek 2023), where small-scale agreements can pave the way for broader trust-building efforts. In a university setting, the concept of mini-publics could provide a way to include more diverse student voices, promote thoughtful deliberation, and provide considered input into university decisions, thereby strengthening the institution's overall deliberative capacity (Cornelius-Bell, Bell, and Dollinger 2023; Patrick 2024). Beginning with modest agreements also helps to minimise potential damage, managing risk and nurturing a conducive environment for trust to develop gradually. This incremental approach promotes the gradual acquisition of trust over time, acknowledging that trust is not innate, but *an ability* learned through experience. As Tierney (2008) notes, trust is learned

over time through socialisation processes and experiences within an organisation. These ideas reassert the significance of shared governance, where staff members and students participate in various governing bodies of their universities, sharing degrees of power within the governance structure. By seeking agreements on various matters, this approach fosters progress in building trust. However, the findings of mistrust, particularly regarding faculty members' perceptions of students as immature representatives, reveal the importance of individual agency and the need for fostering a more inclusive environment where students are recognised as legitimate stakeholders in governance processes.

The cultural dimension of trust is significant, operating both as *a rational choice* and as a process of *cultural construction*. This dual perspective highlights that while individuals may align with trust for pragmatic reasons, they also contribute to the development of a shared culture that underpins their interactions (Loader et al. 2015). However, the findings reveal that divergent values and pragmatic concerns among students (who often prioritise liberty and political influences), faculty staff (who may endorse diverse political values and prioritise seniority), and university management (who typically lean conservative and emphasise stability) can present challenges in cultivating this shared culture. This underscores the importance of university leadership in bridging these differences through communication, small agreements, and an incremental approach to fostering trust relationships (Tierney 2008).

Conclusion

This study reveals the intricate interplay between the broader political environments and university governance in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The pervasive politicisation of university governance, characterised by student activism, has intensified tensions and underscored the necessity of building trust within the participatory governance framework. Trust, as illustrated by the 'grammar of trust' framework, is essential for navigating these tensions and fostering a cooperative academic environment. The study contributes to the literature by extending the discussion of shared governance in higher education within politically sensitive contexts (Lo 2023a; Lo and Auld 2024) and demonstrating the critical role of trust as a condition for managing tensions in university governance.

Given the rapid and ongoing political changes in these societies, the findings may not capture the latest political circumstances and resulting developments in university governance.[4] However, the current study's findings carry broader implications, emphasising that sustained engagement and proactive trust-building measures are crucial for mitigating the complexities introduced by political influences. By examining the tensions in governance activities, this study suggests that trust not only fosters cooperation but also enhances institutional resilience in the face of political challenges.

Fostering a shared culture of trust enables universities to better manage the inherent tensions and uncertainties arising from political dynamics, while also promoting student participation and empowerment. This approach enhances the effectiveness of university governance and cultivates a more inclusive, democratic organisational culture, ultimately contributing to broader societal stability and progress (Cornelius-Bell, Bell, and Dollinger 2023; Patrick 2024).

Future research could explore how rapidly shifting political landscapes continue to influence university governance and assess the significance of these findings in other politically sensitive regions. In conclusion, recognising the importance of trust and the risks involved in its cultivation is crucial for universities seeking to balance the demands of various stakeholders, particularly in politically sensitive environments.

Notes

1. The study's sample does not include non-academic staff representatives in university councils in Taiwan.
2. This section incorporates some interview data adapted from Lo (2023a, 2023b).

3. This article uses gender-neutral presentation of the interviewees.
4. The political circumstances and atmosphere in Hong Kong have significantly changed since 2020, with student activism being restricted (Lo 2023b).

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