Empirical Article

Obstacles to Fostering Integration of Local and Non-Local Students in Hong Kong Universities amid Political Turmoil and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The internationalization of higher education has become a key policy within the global higher education sector. Yet a large body of literature suggests that simply having a diverse group of students does not guarantee meaningful intercultural engagement. This paper presents a qualitative study intended to gain a richer understanding of Hong Kong's higher education environment. In-depth interview

data were collected from students of different cultural backgrounds and from academic, non-academic, and managerial staff at three Hong Kong universities. The data collection period covered local political turmoil in Hong Kong as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Results indicate that, due to language barriers and potentially opposing political ideologies, all students faced challenges engaging with others who were culturally different from themselves. These findings can facilitate the development of an adaptable cross-institutional framework for meaningful intercultural learning.

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The internationalization of higher education is a global phenomenon. The definition of "internationalization" was initially updated to emphasize the concept's core purposes: improving the quality of education and contributing to society (Knight, 2004). The rationale for internationalization has since continued to evolve, as reflected by the following description:

> Internationalization is the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (De Wit, 2015)

In Hong Kong, internationalization is considered a driver of the region's appeal as "Asia's World City" with a unique blend of East and West (Cheng et al., 2016). The growing importance of a knowledge-based economy has spurred six reforms around local higher education. These reforms are intended to prepare graduates to address challenges arising from globalization while enhancing students' competitiveness and work readiness. In 2010, all publicly funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong were invited to review their activities "as a matter of urgency"; internationalization was ultimately endorsed as a strategy across these institutions (University Grants Council [UGC], 2010).

Governments around the world assign high priority to internationalization in their education policies, recognizing the need to enhance international

competitiveness by nurturing an educated and highly skilled workforce with global attributes to meet the challenges of globalization (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Tsuruta, 2013; UGC, 2004). The Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (Vereniging Hogescholen) and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (2018) specifically suggested that internationalization contributes to three aims of higher education: socialization, personality development, and qualification.

The literature on social and academic acculturation has identified a lack of social support, limited contact with locals, and perceived discrimination as the main barriers to smooth intercultural interaction. Even students who share a broad Confucian cultural heritage can perceive themselves as holding distinct cultural identities depending on their place of origin (e.g., Hong Kong or mainland China) (Yu et al., 2019). Therefore, promoting interaction between local and international students represents a mission that universities/schools should actively pursue. Fostering intercultural engagement between domestic and international students has been suggested as vital to nurturing students' intercultural competency, establishing reciprocal cultural relations, and enhancing individuals' employability in today's globalized world (Deardorff, 2006; Kudo et al., 2017; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018). Yet some studies have shown that without well-planned institutional strategies, the interaction between domestic and international students rarely results in meaningful intercultural learning (Gareis, 2012; Trice, 2004). Additionally, scholars must consider innovative ways to facilitate productive intercultural engagement (Thomas et al., 2018).

In an education context, intercultural interaction is a two-way process that requires adaptation from both local and non-local students (Leask, 2009). Most relevant research has focused on the acculturative challenges that non-local students encounter while studying in Hong Kong (Vyas & Yu, 2018; Yu et al., 2019). Few studies have examined adjustment problems among local students on such culturally diverse campuses. The present study thus sought to reveal the unique obstacles that local and non-local students face when studying in Hong Kong. Data collection spanned the period prior to local political turmoil in 2019 and continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Results indicate that current practices can be refined to improve interactions between local and non-local students. Political turmoil and student protests further underscore the

importance of this work: findings could inform the development of an action framework relevant to curricular and co-curricular settings in terms of intercultural learning, which could also be applied in settings outside Hong Kong.

Literature Review

Simply having a group of students with diverse backgrounds does not necessarily render one's education or even a global campus. An essential part of a global education is the inclusion of international students in communities and classes (British Council, 2014). The world's educational patterns have tended to narrow following the COVID-19 outbreak (Mok et al., 2021). Under these circumstances, educators and policymakers must consider a series of strategies (e.g., internationalization at home and internationalization of the curriculum) and decide how to embed these techniques into a "new normal" in higher education settings (Tesar, 2020).

Educational Benefits and Challenges of Intercultural Engagement

The internationalization of students' learning experiences is crucial to personal development in a globalized world; it provides opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction that can improve learning outcomes (e.g., subject-based knowledge and skills), enhance employability, and develop global graduate attributes (e.g., values and life skills, including international and intercultural competencies) (Hill & Viragos, 2020). Meaningful intercultural student engagement has been shown to have positive effects on university students' general education, personal development, science and technology learning, vocational preparation, and diversity competence (Hu & Kuh, 2003).

At the same time, intercultural engagement may result in student divergence and occasionally conflicting ideas. Despite the roles of such engagement in cultivating complex moral reasoning skills as well as intercultural competence, intercultural engagement is not always a spontaneous or productive process (Grayson, 2008). Research conducted over years within various universities and national contexts has shown that it can be challenging for local and international students to have meaningful intercultural interaction (Leask & Carroll, 2011). Research suggested that actively participating in the activities or programme outside of students' major is likely to promote intercultural learning (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). Moreover, negative intercultural interaction may

increase discomfort during classroom discussions and reduce the quality of students' learning experiences (Harrison & Peacock, 2010). Other problems include perceptions of discrimination and dissatisfaction with participation levels. These issues may raise tension between local and non-local students, thereby inhibiting positive engagement (Moon, 2016). Some scholars have observed low levels of interaction between local and non-local students: local students may be unwilling to embrace diversity in the student community, while non-local students experience stress due to negative experiences when interacting with local students (Moon, 2016; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018).

Intercultural Interaction Between Local and Non-Local Students in Hong Kong

The literature highlights several issues that non-local students, including those from mainland China, may encounter while studying in Hong Kong: acculturative challenges arising from language barriers, sociocultural differences, political ideological differences, perceived alienation, and distinct teaching and learning styles (Vyas & Yu, 2018; Yu & Wright, 2017). Perceived discrimination provoked by political tensions over the "One Country, Two Systems" policy has also been identified as a challenge in recent decades (Vyas & Yu, 2018). Min and Chau (2012) found that even students with similar Chinese ideological and cultural background could face language and cultural barriers. The Occupy Movement in 2014 and local political turmoil triggered by the Hong Kong government's introduction of the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill in 2019 has magnified the tension between Hong Kong and mainland students. Following the pro-democracy uprising, intercultural activities were further impeded by COVID-19 as universities halted in-person teaching and learning. Intercultural interaction on Hong Kong university campuses has become both increasingly important and challenging in the wake of these events.

Higher education institutions in Hong Kong and elsewhere are striving to cultivate students' global mindsets and to develop global graduate attributes by adopting numerous internationalization plans (UGC, 2020). Schools are implementing an array of strategic actions, such as modifying admission requirements for non-local students, offering scholarships, internationalizing the teaching curriculum, devising innovative and inclusive pedagogies, providing

international internship opportunities, and recruiting renowned overseas scholars (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2019).

Social Movement in Hong Kong (2019-2020)

The Government of the Special Administrative Region, P.R.C. intended to introduce the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019 (Legislative Council 2019) The key aspect of the "Extradition Bill" is to legalize transfers of criminal fugitives who are wanted from Taiwan, Mainland China, and Macau. This Bill greatly influences Hong Kong society, because the existing laws enacted before the handover in July 1997 prohibit extradition to mainland China.

The origin of the social unrest was to against the Extradition Bill, it has gradually changed into a movement with the slogan of "Five demands, not one less" because their demands were not fully addressed by the Government. Additionally, weak identification with the Chinese national identity (Public Opinion Poll, The University of Hong Kong 2019a), economic strains (Oxfam 2018), and lack of upward mobility (Shek and Siu, 2019b) may amplify the dissatisfied emotions during the social movement. In 2020, the promulgation of The National Security Law began to profoundly impact Hong Kong's future, accelerating the holistic integration with Hong Kong and mainland China (Cai, 2021).

Theoretical Lenses

Intercultural integration is intended to foster a culturally diverse learning environment on campus, which may include both formal and informal programs. This study adopted two concepts as theoretical lenses respectively. Beelen and Jones (2015) defined internationalization at home as '…the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments. It is also highlighted the importance of articulation and assessment of internationalized learning outcomes which allow such environment to be used for achieving meaningful intercultural learning (p.59). Meanwhile, Leask (2009) defined internationalization of curriculum as 'Internationalization of the curriculum is the incorporation of international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study

(p.209).' These two lenses are essential components of creating the meaningful intercultural engagement and also contributing to the internationalization of higher education. This study was based on the two lenses and identified the obstacles and challenges in the context of Hong Kong higher education setting.

Arguments have been discussed that the research on internationalization of higher education needs to be improved in terms of criticality (Mwangi et al., 2018). The situation is more complicated after the Hong Kong social movement in 2019, a new national security law has been imposed on Hong Kong by the mainland Chinese government, the introduction of this law tends to have a series of unforeseeable consequences as these intertwine with the internationalization agenda in Hong Kong's higher education sector (Zou et al., 2020). At the same time, COVID-19 is a new disruptive force to shape the new research possibilities in terms of internationalization of higher education (Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022). The above has laid a good foundation that allow us to understand the complexities and challenges for intercultural integration in the regional context.

Research Questions

In light of the known challenges with cultural inclusion in universities, particularly in Hong Kong, the following research questions guided this study:

1. From different stakeholders' perspectives, what are the main obstacles to the integration of local and non-local students in Hong Kong universities?

2. How have local political circumstances and the COVID-19 pandemic affected intercultural interaction in Hong Kong universities?

Research Method

We employed a qualitative method in this study, using in-depth interviews to reveal key challenges that local and non-local students (including mainland Chinese and international students) face to respectful intercultural engagement. Multiple stakeholders in Hong Kong's higher education sector were included. Specifically, we adopted a multiple-case study approach (Merriam, 1998) to investigate intercultural interaction in the field of higher education. Ethical approval was obtained from the corresponding universities prior to data collection. Fifty-six students from three universities participated in interviews between May 2018 and June 2020. Social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with participant's recruitment. Additionally, all project co-investigators from the three

universities were invited to participate in interviews (all had conducted at least one internationalization-related project at their respective universities). Thirty-six project co-investigators responded and participated in the first round of interviews; 21 project co-investigators took part in the second round. All interviews were semi-structured, and the interview protocols for students and staff consisted of a set of open-ended questions. The research team conducted hybrid individual and focus-group interviews with students due to social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were held either online or face-to-face as appropriate. Interview questions covered three areas: (1) to what extent those interviewed interacted with others from different cultures inside and outside the classroom; (2) challenges these students faced studying or socializing with others who were culturally and linguistically different from themselves; and (3) to what extent the local political turmoil and COVID-19 pandemic had affected their academic work and social activities. Staff interviews were conducted individually and included open-ended questions on the following topics: (1) obstacles to effective integration between local and non-local students; (2) the strategies staff had used to support student integration; and (3) how staff had altered their strategies to address challenges in a time of adversity.

The research team organized multiple interviews. Conversations ranged between 45 and 90 minutes depending on the number of participants. Interviews were carried out in the participants' preferred language to ensure that participants could express themselves openly and in detail in the language with which they were most comfortable. The research team translated non-English-language comments into English and read them back to students for verification. The research team took detailed notes during interviews and used back-up audio recording with participants' consent.

Judgemental and snowball sampling methods were used for student recruitment (Leppink, 2019). Thirty-eight nominated students across the three universities participated in focus groups, each containing three to five participants. Another 18 students were interviewed individually due to unavailability during the designated focus-group time slots. The full student sample included 21 local students from Hong Kong, 16 from mainland China, and 19 who were international. Students were studying a range of academic disciplines including the basic sciences, business, engineering, health sciences, and linguistics; most were

undergraduates. Thirty-six project co-investigators representing the basic sciences, business, engineering, health sciences, and linguistics across the three universities also were interviewed.

Data Analysis

The research team transcribed all interviews and prepared corresponding notes. Resultant data were coded and interpreted via thematic analysis, a fundamental method often used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experiences, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Four members of the research team read the notes prior to data encoding, during which two members encoded the data and another two reviewed the coded data and emerging themes.

Results

Data analysis uncovered a range of factors that influenced the attitudes and behavior of local Hong Kong, mainland Chinese, and international students towards each other. Relevant aspects included political ideological differences, perceived discrimination, attitudes towards cultural differences, and linguistic differences. Each of these themes is explained below:

Political Ideological Differences

Interviews revealed that all student groups held their own perceptions and beliefs about political issues. Students from mainland China often considered their studies in Hong Kong to be a steppingstone for overseas education; they focused on academics and strove to earn high grades to promote their subsequent studies and career development. As one of the project co-investigators stated in the interview, mainland students are typically reluctant to discuss political issues; however, these students are generally more proactive than those from Hong Kong in seeking academic assistance from teachers. By contrast, the Hong Kong students are largely concerned with political freedom. Some local students participated in numerous local protest activities during the sample period and deemed political freedom as important as other topics, including their academic work and career prospects.

Mainland students shared that they would not converse with others, particularly Hong Kong students, about political issues concerning mainland China

and Hong Kong. Unlike local students' involvement in related social movements, mainland students possessed distinct perceptions of pertinent political issues. One mainland student who had returned to Shenzhen, China due to the political turmoil in Hong Kong explained:

> From my personal point of view, most Hong Kong students talk about the local pro-democracy and [the slogan] "Five demands, not one less." (Because of peer pressure, they probably do not have political intentions to achieve anything. Most of their understanding is binary, and they may easily make the wrong decision.

Hong Kong students expressed in interviews that they avoided politically charged topics in class. However, they stated that they would not make new mainland friends after political unrest, as they did not know whether these peers held different political views. They admitted that "the local political turmoil further increased their interactive distance from mainland Chinese students."

One mainland student reported that the local political turmoil had influenced his interaction with local students as follows:

> As a teaching assistant who has experience interacting with local undergraduate students, I think they are quite humble and eager to learn. I do not believe some Hong Kong students are violent protesters. I never imagined what they did in November 2019. I felt there was an invisible barrier between me and Hong Kong students. I cannot describe this kind of feeling.

A few mainland students further suggested that the local political turmoil had heavily impeded social integration. Most of these students had been forced to return to the mainland, and residential housing was under siege. They recalled needing to minimize social interaction to protect themselves. The circumstances only worsened following the second major COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, when all essential face-to-face activities were suspended and students and staff at local universities transitioned to working/studying from home. Nearly all overseas initiatives also ceased due to the pandemic.

Project co-investigators opined that local students' involvement in protests reflected these students' negative attitudes towards embracing differences. One co-investigator said that "instead of hearing and knowing about different political

views, [students] fought against each other and did not really embrace any cultural/political differences."

Both Hong Kong and mainland students reported having negatively stereotyped each other to some extent due to the adverse effects of social media and recent political activities. Some mainland students remarked that Hong Kong students seemed to be "free riders" (i.e., benefiting from others' academic effort without contributing their own), often thought in a non-linear fashion, and worked spontaneously; most Hong Kong students held part-time jobs during school and sometimes ignored some of their tasks during group projects. Meanwhile, many mainland students with a student visa did not work. They often paid high tuition to study in Hong Kong and thus devoted much of their attention to school.

Mainland students shared in interviews that "some Hong Kong local students formed their own social communities after having political disputes with their mainland peers. Very few students actually held stereotypes." Hong Kong students remarked that negative impressions hindered the formation of mixed groups. They also mentioned that they preferred to collaborate with their local counterparts due to poor experiences working with mainland students in the past; for example, Hong Kong students suggested that peers from mainland China did not abide by standard operating procedures during group work. One Hong Kong student said: "Hong Kong students are less proactive about engaging in intercultural interactions, especially when they are heavily influenced by the negative stereotypes about mainland Chinese students conveyed by the mainstream media." Several Hong Kong students who had studied in mainland China on exchange agreed that certain local media outlets in Hong Kong tended to amplify negative aspects of mainland China. Some Hong Kong students even resisted using Chinese mobile applications due to personal privacy concerns.

Most Hong Kong students indicated that their interactions with mainland students largely involved the completion of group assignments as required by their teachers; the two groups seldom socialized about topics unrelated to academics. Some Hong Kong students reported that recent local political upheaval had exacerbated this situation. For instance, one student said:

> After the local political upheaval, I have worked with the mainland students solely on academic-related tasks and am not interested in talking with them about any political issues. There seems to be a greater

interactive distance with mainland students after local political unrest. I will not proactively make new friends from the mainland.

One mainland student echoed this sentiment, explaining:

It is somehow hard to get into the social community with Hong Kong students as they are more interested in interacting with their own community rather than the non-local students' community; the situation is getting worse with the local political turmoil.

Attitudes Towards Culturally Different Peers (Academic Curriculum Programs)

Student interviews revealed that Hong Kong students generally recognized the benefits of a diverse university experience and exposure to information that they would not have learned locally. However, these students discussed rarely having the time and energy to engage in intercultural activities for reasons ranging from tight study schedules and part-time jobs to being unable to meet students on campus. The following is a typical comment from Hong Kong students:

We are somewhat in our comfort zone with friends speaking the same language. Instead of making more friends, [students] would rather maintain their friendships with old friends. We do not want to step out of it. We do not want to put too much effort into making any unnecessary changes.

Some project co-investigators commented during interviews that they occasionally sensed a degree of reluctance from Hong Kong students when collaborating with non-local students, particularly in classes of more than 40. Co-investigators also shared that Hong Kong students exhibited a growing tendency to remain within their own small spaces, keeping to their own cultural-linguistic groups out of convenience. Some mainland students found it difficult to mingle with Hong Kong students who often turned down invitations out of hand. A mainland student commented:

Before studying at a Hong Kong university, I thought that Hong Kong students would be open-minded and outgoing; actually, they are very shy when I interact with them. There are limited opportunities to talk to them in class because they like to stay in their own community.

Although most Hong Kong students appeared to socialize and cooperate with their own group, others welcomed mainland students who excelled

academically. One local student commented that mainland students who come to Hong Kong to study tend to be academically strong, adding:

> I would like to work closely with [mainland students] on group work so that I can earn a higher GPA in my final grade.

Similar to Hong Kong students, those from the mainland tended to work within their own cultural sub-groups. One student mentioned that working with peers who share the same language, cultural background, and working style was more efficient. Mainland students allocated most of their time and effort to their studies; many felt obligated to earn high grades to then further their education overseas after graduation. In particular, some mainland students confessed that they were unaware of the importance of internationalization, which did not play a critical role in their plans for the future. Although some international students want to cultivate friendships with other student cohorts, language barriers can hinder them from doing so. International students in this study were also concerned about their final grades being negatively affected by groupmates' limited English proficiency (i.e., among students from Hong Kong and mainland China).

Project co-investigators described some mainland Chinese students' typical learning approaches:

> Students always request to be grouped together so that they can speak Putonghua [Standard Chinese] for topics involving terminology. They will also buy the Chinese editions of textbooks and supplement with English versions. They simply want to find ways to make life easier. They only see Hong Kong as a steppingstone to an overseas life. For most mainland students, they just want to finish their studies as soon as possible and leave the city.

Mainland students believed that disputes during academic projects largely resulted from poor cross-cultural communication. These students seemed to view culturally mixed groups as destructive and aimed to avoid potential cultural confrontation. Meanwhile, both Hong Kong and mainland Chinese students perceived international students as being eager to work with them, such as by forming groups with others in class. Most international students indeed expressed being keen to interact with other cohorts in their new environment. Regarding in-class behavior, one co-investigator pointed out that international students generally preferred to present on behalf of their groups because they were concerned that

they might receive lower marks if groupmates presented who were less proficient in English.

Attitudes Towards Culturally Different Peers (Extracurricular Activities and Programs)

Apart from academic endeavors, various extracurricular activities were intended to facilitate socialization among student groups to foster cultural interaction on campus. Findings revealed that both mainland and international students solely participated in extracurricular activities aimed at non-local students. Some mainland and international students nevertheless noted that they initially joined extracurricular activities organized by Hong Kong students. However, they had no interest in taking part in similar activities after their first experiences; most of the activities, particularly those organized by hall residents and societies, were conducted exclusively in Cantonese, a language that they did not understand. Regarding intergroup interaction, a mainland student commented: "Discussion among Hong Kong, mainland Chinese, and international students is not common as they only get along with their own groups most of the time, probably due to the different lifestyles." Most students cited language barriers and cultural differences as major obstacles to mingling with other cultures. Students' attitudes towards cultural differences appeared to be the main constraint to constructive cross-cultural engagement, as mainland students suggested.

Several project co-investigators commented that Hong Kong students might need support to broaden their horizons. These students tend to be less eager to participate in cross-cultural activities or to interact with non-local students for reasons including a lack of cultural awareness, insufficient exposure to internationalization, a heavy academic workload, a part-time job, and shyness. One project co-investigator remarked that students' attitudes toward cultural differences represented the key issue to be addressed in order to promote respectful cross-cultural engagement among local and non-local students. He further indicated:

Whole-person development, particularly on cross-cultural leadership, is a key approach to develop students' competencies, including how to take care of themselves and others, build up a community, integrate with others, adapt to different cultures and lifestyles, and embrace diversity among individuals.

Challenges with Language Differences (In Class)

Students and teachers both reported language differences as a substantial hindrance to the academic and social integration of local and non-local students. In Hong Kong, pre-university education (i.e., grades K–12) can be taught in English and Chinese; schools have different language policies. Not all Hong Kong local students had used English as their main language in the K–12 period. Although local language education policies seek to ensure that local students will be biliterate and trilingual, local students for whom Chinese was the medium of instruction during pre-university education often struggle to adapt to using English at their university. Non-local students, including those from mainland China, also have varying English proficiency due to different language-learning requirements throughout pre-university education. Non-local students hail from distinct linguistic backgrounds as well; some speak their local dialects in everyday life.

Students and project co-investigators observed a lack of proficiency in expressing complex ideas in English and limited confidence in using English when Hong Kong and mainland students interacted in academic settings. For example, Hong Kong students tended to use Cantonese when seeking to clarify and expand on their ideas during class discussions. One Hong Kong student stated:

> English was used in a group project involving three Hong Kong students and one international student from Korea. Sometimes, we used Cantonese when we needed to delve deeper into the aspects of meaning and to generate new ideas and then translated them back to English.

An international student from Kazakhstan said:

> Five Hong Kong students and I worked together for a group assignment on a company law subject. The Hong Kong students used Cantonese for work, sometimes switching back to English. I think that it is hard for local Hong Kong students to speak and communicate using English at a near-native level.

Mainland student groups reportedly found it difficult to adapt to English as the medium of instruction; they had used Putonghua throughout their studies in mainland China. They saw language as the primary challenge when integrating with others academically. A mainland student illustrated this point:

> Most Hong Kong students are happy to help me interpret what they said using English and Putonghua. However, I have found it is not easy to

engage and deliver my own ideas smoothly in English, and that is why I want to learn Cantonese.

One international student from the Philippines explained:

I like interacting with local Hong Kong and mainland students but feel a bit excluded due to the use of different languages. We need someone to translate or communicate using simple English words with both local Hong Kong and mainland students.

As an exception, an international student from Malaysia remarked that language was not a problem; this student would use multiple languages including English, Cantonese, and Putonghua to communicate with others.

Challenges with Language Differences (Outside Class)

Language differences also impeded the development of relationships outside the classroom. Both mainland and international students reported that they did not engage in certain extracurricular and on-campus activities due to language differences. These students' proficiency in Cantonese – the prominent dialect in Hong Kong – influenced their integration into the local student community. Cantonese- and non-Cantonese-speaking students from mainland China expressed diverse opinions about interacting with Hong Kong students. Those who spoke Cantonese felt more comfortable; as one student said: "If you communicate with Hong Kong students in Cantonese, you will feel a sense of belonging to the local students' community."

Students acknowledged Cantonese proficiency as crucial to respectful engagement with Hong Kong students on campus. Some mainland students recalled having attempted to improve their conversational proficiency (e.g., by learning Cantonese slang), such as by watching local movies and participating in cross-cultural activities in student residence halls. However, these activities were not always successful. One mainland student commented:

When I first participated in a hall activity, it was held in Cantonese. I felt excluded. It was hard for me to participate in the activity as others spoke Cantonese, which I could not understand. As such, [some mainland students] do not participate in hall activities anymore.

An international student also mentioned feeling excluded, as most hall activities were not held in English. A student from Kazakhstan commented that residence hall–organized events could potentially be helpful but that only large events (where

English was the primary language) were targeted towards international students. Other events were generally in Cantonese; therefore, mainland and international students could not easily participate due to the language barrier.

Discussion

Multiple factors influenced academic and social interactions among Hong Kong, mainland Chinese, and international students during a period of political unrest in Hong Kong. Aspects previously found to affect the interactions between cultural groups on campus and in class (e.g., communication challenges due to language differences; attitudes towards cultural others) applied during this study as well. However, the socio-political turmoil that erupted in Hong Kong at the time of this study highlighted political ideological differences while the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the impacts of these factors.

Political Ideological Differences

Findings revealed that wide gaps in political views between local and mainland students led to less social engagement among students. Mainland students' attitudes towards politics caused them to avoid disputes on political issues and to maintain interpersonal distance from local students. Awareness of patriotism in China initially began to rise following the promulgation of Marxist-Leninist ideology, which precipitated the expansion of associated educational curricula and activities (Ding, 1994). National education, which was introduced in 1997 in Hong Kong, was not deployed smoothly due to conflict between the British colonial curriculum structure before 1997 and the overall ideology of national education. Nearly a decade later, in April 2016, some young politicians from the pro-democracy camp promoted the "Resolution for Hong Kong's Future" and adopted "internal self-determination" and "permanent self-government" as slogans (Cheng, 2016). Empirical research substantiates the peripheral rise of nationalism in Hong Kong; scholars have also documented a strong positive relationship between consciousness of Hong Kong's autonomy and eagerness around localist mobilization under the identity of "Hong Kongers" (Fong, 2017). Disparate political ideologies may therefore be a critical factor in the limited academic and social integration between local and non-local students.

The present study especially shed light on political ideological differences within Hong Kong's higher education landscape. Social movements in recent years

and the COVID-19 pandemic may have hampered social interaction between Hong Kong and mainland students. Regarding perceived discrimination, this study's findings align with earlier work on stereotypes about international students in the Western higher education system (Hanassab, 2006; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001). Yet the rationale behind such stereotypes in Hong Kong differed from that in other countries: negative perceptions of mainland Chinese were elevated by public sentiment against the rise in the number of migrants from mainland China since 2003. Ongoing conflict could also be attributed to the opposing political ideologies that mainland students encountered as well as growing tension in the Hong Kong and mainland media (Yu & Zhang, 2016). Internationalization is largely perceived in conflict-ridden societies as interactions between opposing groups who are not necessarily from different countries (Yemini, 2017). The current study mirrors this trend. Hong Kong's higher education sector affords Hong Kong students opportunities to interact with their "cultural others." Elsewhere, some student groups are pursuing universal values to shape intergroup relations (e.g., in Israel) and believe that it is possible to enhance intercultural engagement by adopting the concept of "global citizenship" (Green & Mertova, 2016) as the expected outcome of internationalization in socially conflicted societies (Goldstein et al., 2019).

Attitudes Towards Cultural Differences

Results showed that Hong Kong students typically responded passively to forming multicultural groups in academic environments; many formed mono-cultural groups with local peers. This finding is in line with prior research (Bhoomiah, 2009). Most mainland students focused on performing well academically but were relatively unfamiliar with the notion of internationalization. The majority of international students faced obstacles related to language barriers and insufficient institutional support when interacting with local students. Guidance around cultural adaptation thus seems indispensable (Ward & Zarate, 2015).

Language Differences

Ample research has examined language in relation to international students' acculturation. The literature has also emphasized the importance of English language proficiency for international students in English-speaking Western countries, particularly in facilitating these students' psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Yu, 2010). Beyond proficiency in the language of

instruction, fluency in the host dialect is paramount to easing international students' interaction with locals as well as their adaptation in everyday life (Yu et al., 2019). The current study showed that most Hong Kong students speak Cantonese during extracurricular and social activities despite being able to communicate with other students in English and Putonghua. In line with prior intercultural research, language was found to affect project collaboration and teamwork in numerous ways, including in terms of mutual understanding and collaboration (Nunamaker et al., 2009). Language proficiency can also influence students' group participation and engagement (e.g., by affecting each team member's contributions).

Implications and Conclusion

Implications

This study unveils the current situation and obstacles hindering local and non-local students' integration in Hong Kong universities. Results also address ongoing shifts in students' experiences and attitudes throughout a time of social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators should reflect on how university stakeholders can improve the intercultural engagement system based on these circumstances in Hong Kong. This work demonstrates that meaningful intercultural engagement is not automatic in the absence of a deliberate framework that includes a strategic combination of curricular and co-curricular practices (Leask, 2009).

This study's findings could lay the foundation for a cross-institutional framework within Hong Kong universities, which would have meaningful implications at student, departmental, institutional, and societal levels. Such a framework could guide educational policymakers' embedding of internationalization into institutional strategic plans. Additionally, an associated framework could consider intercultural learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to offer useful insight for other regions grappling with social-ideological differences.

Based on the proposed framework, more elaborate institutional support is needed to promote students' intercultural learning. Our findings identified social-ideological differences as a unique reason for social and academic exclusion in

Hong Kong. To tackle this form of estrangement between local and non-local students, institutions could implement pre-arrival training sessions that provide overviews of relevant concerns (e.g., cultural differences, ideological differences, and attitudinal differences towards academic and daily life) that may influence students' educational journeys. Intercultural experts can facilitate these sessions. As language appears to be the main barrier to intercultural learning, some sessions should be delivered in non-local students' native tongue to ensure understanding and eliminate the pressure associated with communicating in an unfamiliar language. Different university departments can also staff "intercultural consultants." For example, bilingual/trilingual consultants could work in the English language learning center, counsellors could help students navigate potential intercultural problems at the university counselling center, and intercultural mentor–mentee programs could be offered in the student development center. These measures will make institutions more responsive to non-local students, so these enrolees will not need to confront unfamiliar cultures alone.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Persistent uncertainty about Hong Kong's political environment during the study period may have led some students to be reluctant to express themselves candidly during interviews. Additionally, only a few representatives from different postgraduate student groups could be interviewed amid social unrest and the pandemic. Future research could include a larger sample or investigate intercultural engagement among students enrolled in associate-degree or vocational training programs to provide more comprehensive findings.

Conclusion

This study has provided a richer understanding of the factors impeding meaningful interactions among students of different backgrounds during their academic journeys and social activities at Hong Kong universities. Findings highlight the need to develop and implement detailed strategic action plans in both the curriculum and co-curriculum to foster intercultural learning through intercultural engagement among local and non-local students in Hong Kong.

Appendix – Demographic Information of Participants from Three Participating Universities

	Hong Kong	**Mainland China**	**International**
Category of Students	31	15	10
Category of Staff	20	10	6

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