

Hong Kong Students' Perspective on Educational Inequalities in the Context of the New Educational Reforms

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ASIA IN FOCUS

The structural reforms of the curriculum implemented by the Hong Kong administration in the field of education at the beginning of the 2000s had profound implications for the future perspectives and ambitions of students and graduates. This article tries to investigate the key constraints posed by the reforms and their direct influence on the perception of Hong Kongese local students on their future careers. The employment of a qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews allowed the study to reveal how the majority of the students internalised the theoretical basis of the reforms as a given, accepting the hyper-competitive system created as a stimulus for their improvement. Their concerns mainly focus on the precarious nature of their future prospects, but they generally do not question the underlying structure of the reforms themselves. Students exhibit acceptance of the challenging circumstances they face, seemingly involved in the new idea of the social environment brought about by the new administration.

Keywords: Educational reforms, Inequality, Competitiveness, Precariousness, Student perceptions

Modern governments promote higher education privatisation to boost economic growth and competitiveness, with East Asian governments leading this trend since the late 1990s (Ng and Galbraith, 2020). Hong Kong's transition from British Administration to Special Administrative Region status aimed to shift from an industrial to a service-oriented society, expanding access to educational facilities but inadvertently bolstering private education, expanding the disparity in quality between public and private degrees, favouring the former and deepening the class-based hierarchical divisions within society (Jin et al., 2022; Lo and Ng, 2018).

Liberalisation and privatisation have reduced social mobility and increased precarity, causing job market diversity stagnation and a focus on a few dominant sectors (Chan, 2018). The diminished value of degrees from private educational institutions has led to increased competition and limited employment opportunities, trapping individuals in precarious, temporary positions (Lam and Tang, 2021).

Academic attention has largely focused on the political dimensions, specifically the 2014–2019 protests, while scholars like Bray et al. (2013) underscore the need for a deeper understanding of how students perceive growing social and educational inequalities. Social stratification, especially when institutionally enforced at an early stage—as it is in Hong Kongese primary school—is well-documented in English literature, with a focus on individual expectations, heightened competition, and associated health implications (Pekkala et al., 2002; Kieselbach, 2000). However, there is less focus on the Asian context. Another critical aspect that demands examination is the influence of studying abroad on the

increasing disparities in job prospects for students in Hong Kong, a subject addressed by a limited number of scholars, such as Cheng (2014), prior to the visible outcomes of implemented reforms.

This research aims to collect the perspectives and emotions of higher education students in Hong Kong regarding the evolving social landscape and their future prospects, encompassing apprehensions and aspirations. Its objective is to identify prevalent patterns and contribute to the relevant literature, laying the groundwork for future mixed-methods or quantitative research, thus advancing knowledge in the field of educational inequality.

The primary research inquiry aims to gauge the extent of student perspectives regarding the shift in competitiveness and inequality resulting from the reforms:

- A. How do Hong Kong students and graduates perceive the social environment and their future ambitions after the changes introduced by the systemic education reforms in Hong Kong, and the consequent reorganisation of society?

A secondary research question aims to evaluate the perception of students regarding the impact of studying abroad on the unequal opportunities offered to Hong Kong students under the new education system:

- B. How does studying abroad shape the lifelong opportunities and ambitions of Hong Kong's students?

History, Ratio, and Implications of the Reforms

At the beginning of 2000, an educational commission led extensive consultations based on the idea that education reform was vital to enhancing Hong Kong's economic attractiveness (James, 2021; Burns, 2020). As scholars such as James (2021) and Ng et al. (2020) point out, these reforms introduced the New Academic Structure (NAS) and the New Secondary School (NSS) curriculum, altering promotion systems, education duration, and instituting the unique final high school exams: the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) (James, 2021). Policymakers prioritised education to create an "education hub" (UGC, 2010: 13) for economic growth and city development (Monash University, 2021). However, other job markets were neglected, leading to bottlenecks and precarity (Population-by-Census, 2016). Lee and Law (2014) suggest this aligns with the "selective incorporation" strategy in Globalisation Theory to enhance national financial performance.

"Anchoring globalization," as described by Ng (2018), Postiglione (2013), and Oleksiyenko et al. (2013), has transformed youth job-seeking. Despite a highly competitive and precarious job market, students often maintain unrealistic expectations about securing ideal positions (Lam and Tang, 2021). Reforms significantly increased post-secondary enrolment from 19.4% in 1990 to 73.1% in 2020 (Li, 2021), intensifying the distinction in degree value between public and private universities. Public institutions are perceived as offering superior degrees, while private institutions are seen as providing lower-level qualifications, leading to difficulties in finding employment. This shift results from the massification of private, market-driven higher education, with 67% of high school graduates ending up in self-financing institutes (Chan and Lo, 2007).

Two key factors have significantly shaped Hong Kong's education system: the "Banding System" and the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education

(HKDSE), as outlined by Chow (2013) and Poon and Wong (2008).

The "Banding System" categorises schools from primary to high school based on a point system, creating significant disparities between schools (from 1 to 3, 1A higher, 3C lower), with higher band institutions being more prestigious and providing better university admissions outcomes, as confirmed by Sieh (1993), Bray (2013), and Lee (2023). Access to English education is primarily limited to "high band" institutions, exacerbating educational inequalities.

Another influential factor perpetuating societal imbalances is the HKDSE, as noted by Tsang and Isaacs (2022). Intended as a standardised meritocratic evaluation, it closely links outcomes to the "banding level" of students' schools of origin, undermining the meritocratic system. Pupils invest time and families invest money to enhance their HKDSE results, with private tutoring having enormous importance among Hong Kong students, as highlighted by Bray et al. (2013), Coniam (2014), and Spires (2017). The HKDSE significantly determines young people's post-education career prospects, yet it proves divisive for society, as students from "lower band" schools face substantial barriers to being admitted to prestigious publicly funded universities.

This transformation has intensified competition for publicly funded universities, widening the quality gap between public and private institutions. According to Wong (2015), the average return on degree education in Hong Kong has decreased, predominantly affecting private university students. This division negatively impacted their job aspirations (Lam and Tang, 2021) due to the unequal distribution of educational quality (Poon and Wong, 2008). Between 2000 and 2015, the rising competition pushed many young graduates into lower-skilled, precarious, lower-paying jobs, leaving them highly vulnerable and with limited protections (Lo, 2018; LegCo Secretariat, 2016: 1). The widening income and education gap between social classes contributed to frustration and stress among the

City's youth about their prospects (Global Times, 2021).

Lastly, studying abroad is considered an invaluable opportunity for students to enhance their competitiveness, both educationally and professionally (South China Morning Post, 2022). Yang et al. (2011) and Zhou et al. (2008) established the theoretical foundation for the significance and outcomes of studying abroad, with Cheng (2014) conducting a study to gauge its value among students, suggesting the need for more research in this area.

Theorising Educational Reforms

The Educational Stratification theory underscores how inequalities between privileged and less privileged classes are exacerbated by unequal access to education, with social status as a key determinant (Bilecen, 2020: 1). This connection strongly intertwines education with occupational outcomes (Allmendinger, 1989). The state's role in shaping this social differentiation is particularly pronounced in economies transitioning between two systems, as seen in Hong Kong (Buchmann et al., 2001). The significance of family background is amplified in systems with early-stage selection, like Hong Kong, resulting in an overrepresentation of students from affluent families in higher academic tracks (Traini, 2022). This educational model shift has markedly reduced social mobility in the city (Poon and Wong, 2008), establishing a highly stratified system where a student's socioeconomic status is a potent predictor of their occupational and career prospects (Buchmann and Park, 2009).

Glocalisation Theory explores how global ideas adapt to local customs, potentially fostering societal conservatism (Robertson, 2012); governments play a pivotal role by introducing bureaucratic barriers and legal exclusions, leading to the creation of urban enclaves (He and Wang, 2019; Turner, 2017). In Hong Kong, policymakers used foreign concepts, employing selective incorporation and adaptation to shape education reforms, ultimately leading to a

more hierarchical and elitist society (Lanford, 2016).

In contrast to the neo-classical approach, the Segmented Labour Market (SLM) theory better represents Hong Kong's current labour market, where institutions, labour laws, technology, industrial organisations, and social factors significantly influence wages, employment, and working conditions (Leontaridi, 1998).

Atkinson (1984) advocates for a flexible labour market, but Dettmers (2003) warns that employer dominance can lead to inequality without social protections. The SLM theory highlights how privilege-based barriers create occupational disparities, often tracing back to factors like education and social class, making it suitable for describing Hong Kong's labour market complexities.

Hong Kong exhibits a multi-tiered labour market with distinct inequalities; the top tier offers skilled jobs and promising careers, while lower tiers face less favourable conditions (Ashton and Maguire, 1984); this division widens class disparities and limits inter-segment mobility (Chan, 2021). Despite overall economic growth, labour market segmentation in Hong Kong creates few sectors with stable employment but also elevates insecurity, precarity, and substantial income inequality in others, mainly with regard to future generations (Chan, 2021; Wong et al., 2019).

Methodology

In order to explore how Hong Kong students perceive and respond to changing socio-economic and local community transformations (Luker, 2010) this qualitative study employs a constructivist ontology; the research considers institutions and students as central actors in these educational shifts, aiming to understand how youth perceive and respond to the evolving scenario (Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were the primary research method, allowing for a detailed exploration of students' interpretations (Clark et al., 2021). The data collected were treated as subjective (Behar, 1990) and were

complemented with non-participant observations of Hong Kong universities.

This research aims to understand participants' inner experiences and to explore a phenomenon related to the human experience (Creswell, 2007: 252). The interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes among the interviewees (Van Manen, 1990), using the Nvivo software package for coding and data analysis.

The study included 23 participants, aged 19 to 35, who recently completed their higher education (within the previous three years). A combination of random sampling and snowball sampling was used for recruitment, with efforts to maintain a gender balance (13 male, 10 female). Diversity in educational background was also considered, but participants from private institutions were challenging to approach due to restricted access for non-students; the banding system was employed to address individuals from less wealthy backgrounds since lower banding usually corresponded also to lower social class.

Conducting interviews in an authoritarian environment with a history of repression poses limitations (Morgenbesser, 2018). Challenges for this study included university accessibility, participant willingness, and the risk of government surveillance. Other considerations involved language-related challenges due to interviews being conducted in English and efforts to minimise personal biases and Western perspectives (Sultana, 2015). Ensuring trustworthiness is crucial, so the study rigorously adhered to precise ethical guidelines (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). Consent was obtained verbally twice, at the first meeting and just before the interview, and anonymity and data protection measures were implemented to ensure confidentiality and security.

The Hierarchy of Universities

Interviewees confirmed the hierarchical stratification of universities (Poon and Wong, 2008;

Oleksiyenko, 2013), with a further subdivision among public universities: Hong Kong University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology were perceived as higher tier institutions. Respondent 12 emphasised that accessing these universities is not solely based on academic performance but reflects societal constructs, particularly for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, often associated with lower school "banding", aligning with observations by Hanushek et al. (2010).

Connected to the university hierarchy, the "banding system" division of primary and secondary schools plays a critical role in shaping the educational and career trajectories of Hong Kong students, as described by Traini (2022). While only a few students from higher banded institutions criticised its implementation in Hong Kong, most interviewees highlighted the inferior quality of education provided by Band 3 schools. However, this issue was often presented by interviewees as a normal dynamic of their society. In contrast, all respondents from Band 3 schools recognised the high degree of unfairness within this system and the long-term impact it has on their careers. Respondent 6, for instance, pointed out the disparity in English teaching, considered advantageous by employers for job-seeking but lacking in Band 3 schools. Two interviewees from Band 1 schools also acknowledged and criticised the deep-seated unfairness of this system. For instance, Respondent 19 said:

I would say that dividing the schools in band is trying to instil into child minds that some children are built differently; I know people from Band 2, they are still very intelligent, but in high school or middle school we are told by the parents that child from Band 2 or 3 are bad, not to mess with them. To go to Band 1, you need a lot of resources. When I was in primary school my mom spent a lot of money to make me learn piano, ballet and other basically, if they are in Band 1 school and they have been trained to

be very competitive, the study environment will be better and they will have more success.

Respondent 19

All interviewees recognised the significant influence of the school band assignment on students' prospects. Despite the fact that study's small sample size is not representative of the whole population, it highlights the importance of inherited capital, as described by Bourdieu (1984), in terms of capital accumulation.

The "banding system", and the closely linked HKDSE standardised exam, has been scrutinised by researchers such as Sieh (1993), Bray et al. (2013), and Lee (2023), revealing its potential to exacerbate inequality and foster social stratification among students. As suggested by Tsang and Isaacs (2022), it perpetuates societal inequalities, where Band 1 students often outperform Band 2 and 3 students in the HKDSE exam, significantly impacting their future prospects. Respondent 16 emphasised the connection between school band and HKDSE outcomes, highlighting the competitive pressure students face, echoing Respondent 12's sentiments on the exam's pivotal role in shaping their lives and careers. These insights align with the findings of Buchmann and Hannum (2001) concerning the HKDSE's contribution to socioeconomic stratification in Hong Kong.

From the interviews it emerged that the significance of English proficiency for passing the HKDSE is even higher than expected. Band 1 and top Band 2 schools, along with private and international high schools, predominantly use English in their teaching to enhance students' chances of success. In contrast, Band 3 and low Band 2 schools primarily employ Chinese for instruction, putting their students at a disadvantage, as observed by Respondent 22. The research reveals that schools leverage the quality of English instruction to attract students, emphasising its role as an advantage during their educational journey.

The role of private tutoring and schooling in

enhancing HKDSE results and university access is also important. According to Respondent 19, private tutoring is widely used in Hong Kong, beginning as early as age three, and parents are willing to invest substantial sums in these services, which can cost up to 300 Hong Kong Dollars per hour. Meanwhile, Respondent 4 highlighted the exclusivity of private and international schools, noting that they offer better results but remain financially inaccessible to many students. This underscores how a student's family background significantly influences their prospects in Hong Kong. Private educational options and tutoring provide avenues for improving academic abilities and present an alternative path to higher education, as underlined by respondents 4 and 19.

After the HKDSE exam, fierce competition ensues as all universities demand high grades for admission, particularly the top 3 (HKU, CUHK, HKUST). Failure necessitates a year's wait for a retake or consideration of less prestigious self-financed institutions, posing financial challenges and limited job prospects, as Respondent 1 highlights. Even Band 1 students face tough admission odds and may end up in their second or third-choice programmes. Findings reveal that students from lower band schools are underrepresented in top-tier public universities; none of the Band 3 interviewees attended a top 3 University, and only one out of 20 who secured a place in a public university was from that Band.

The perpetual competition faced by students throughout their education journey, as observed by Högberg (2019) in the context of pressure, competition, and social comparison, and Chun's (2022) findings on competitiveness and high-pressure environments, places them under immense stress and anxiety. These pressures stemming from institutions, employers, peers, and family members in Hong Kong often lead to severe health and psychological issues. All respondents experienced extreme stress at various points during their education, prompting some to change courses, switch

majors, or even discontinue their studies due to the high-pressure environment and its health implications. More than 75 per cent of the respondents encountered stress-related health problems, and some suffered significant psychological traumas due to the competitiveness of Hong Kong's educational landscape:

Actually in Secondary 4 I attempted suicide for how much pressure I was getting, obviously also for family reasons but main one is academics, cause I think for most of secondary school you don't get a sense of where you are going in your life, and at a certain point you just get tired of it, and everything lose meaning, you just get lost, and you start losing hope and faith, you end up in a dark spiral and I think is a very common problem in Hong Kong.

I think something like 80 per cent of students have mental issues which is pretty insane, that is definitely too much.

Respondent 20

The inclusion of psychological analysis is a significant advancement in East Asian research, addressing a noted gap in comprehensive studies, as highlighted by Chan (2019).

In this context of competitiveness, an important factor is frequently forgotten: studying abroad is often overlooked in the realm of Hong Kong academia, as indicated by Cheng's research (2014). The possibility of studying abroad carries substantial significance for families, students, and employers in the region. According to Respondent 1, employers value international experience and improved English proficiency, recognising the advantages it brings to candidates' resumes. For students, embarking on an overseas academic journey represents a personally transformative experience, coupled with notable professional advantages. This includes the enrichment of career prospects, enhanced language skills, and a bolstered position in the global job market. In

summary, studying abroad offers crucial benefits for career advancement, personal growth, and expanding students' worldviews.

The disparities in educational opportunities, career paths, and objectives have led to profound social class divisions, in line with the enclave society concept by Turner (2017) and He and Wang (2019), as confirmed by Respondent 16. Living outside the "elite school network geography," as noted by Respondent 23, necessitates greater effort to access quality education.

Neoliberal policies have rapidly transformed Hong Kong's society while exacerbating pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities, aligning with the findings of Robertson (2012) and Roudometof (2016). Leontaridi (1998) identified significant variations in career aspirations across different socioeconomic strata, a perspective validated by Respondent 20's observation that "Band 3 students typically pursue manual labour". The intensification of competition can be attributed also to international specialised migration. However, the brunt of this competition falls upon the lower classes due to the city's shift towards a service-oriented economy, rising living costs, and limited access to international job markets, primarily due to English proficiency barriers.

These conditions have created job markets with minimal employee protections, especially impacting young individuals, aligning with Dettmers' findings (2013). Labour market segmentation and the proliferation of temporary or unpaid positions have added to the challenges faced by students. Salary concerns are prominent, along with the escalating cost of living. Many students grapple with the uncertainty of their future, accepting the idea of not securing permanent employment and opting for a series of temporary positions; stability is a universal concern among the interviewees. Despite their apprehensions about the fiercely competitive system, a deep-seated fear of financial insecurity has taken root in many. While some contemplate leaving the country in search of better opportunities and security, most feel bound to Hong Kong due to family,

friends, and a profound connection to the city, even though they acknowledge the heightened market difficulties they may confront.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has aimed to explore how the social and cultural environment in which Hong Kong students are immersed, shaped by their concerns, aspirations, and uncertainties, has led them to common patterns of thinking. Over the past two decades, Hong Kong has witnessed significant influence from policymakers' strong neo-classical orientation and increased integration into international markets, resulting in substantial societal changes (Postiglione, 2013; Oleksiyenko, 2013). The long-term consequences of unregulated liberalisation have created significant inequalities in the labour market, fostering an enclave society and urbanism (Turner, 2017; He and Wang, 2019). Despite some rejection of aspects of the education system, such as standardised public examinations, most interviewees do not contest the fundamental principles of the reforms but rather specific outcomes. They have internalised the idea of a competitive, market-driven environment as a prevailing assumption, and mostly do not see any alternative to it.

Key themes such as socioeconomic stratification, the HKDSE examination, the school banding system, and the prominence of private education support are critical for understanding the new educational goals set by the government. The government's neoliberal approach led to an educational reform that further emphasises the role of capital accumulation in society. In this research, the findings suggest that students and families recognise the mechanisms of social stratification, such as the HKDSE exam. They also imply that the perceived "realism" of the situation generally leads them to accept it as a natural aspect of their system. Symptoms of this system, English proficiency and studying abroad notably enhance future careers, opening doors to enhanced professional opportunities.

However, these privileges are predominantly accessible to a smaller segment of the city's population due to financial constraints.

Young people in Hong Kong share common concerns about intense competition in education and the job market. Precarious job prospects, unstable contracts, and the struggle for salary stability compound their anxieties. The pressure from family, peers, and educators intensifies as they enter the challenging job market. Some students find relief in religion or athletic success, while others grapple with mental health issues. While some consider leaving their hometown, most are deeply attached to their family, friends, and the city, determined to secure their futures despite the numerous challenges they face.

In conclusion, the 1997 educational reforms in Hong Kong reshaped students' and graduates' outlook on their futures. While their general attitude remains optimistic, concerns about job competition, societal pressures, and precarity play a more prominent role in their life plans. In this interconnected global society, students focus on gaining marginal advantages to enhance their competitiveness. They see studying abroad as a crucial aspect of personal development, a perspective undervalued in recent literature on education in Hong Kong. This shift aligns with the evolving educational landscape in Hong Kong, with employers highly valuing international exposure and strong English skills, reflecting students' adaptation to changing circumstances (Postiglione, 2013; Cheng, 2014).

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