

# Education Reforms and Social Outcomes

## The Impact of the Reforms on Hong Kong Students' Concerns and Future Perspectives

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## **ABSTRACT**

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 thesis tries to investigate the key constraints posed by the reforms and their direct influence on Hong Kong local student's perception of 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 interiorized 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, contemporarily, not questioning the overall underlying structure of the reforms itself. 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.

**Key Words:** Educational Reforms, Inequalities, Competitiveness, Precariousness, Student Perceptions

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

*“Capitalist realism ... It is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture, but also the regulation of work and education”.*

- Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2009

Modern governments increasingly encourage the marketization of higher education to facilitate knowledge transfer and the commercialization of research, recognizing in its institutions the vital contributors to driving economic growth and maintaining global competitiveness. East Asia has emerged as one of the key global protagonists driving the trend of turning tertiary education into a mass-market benefit since the late 1990s, with multiple municipalities, such as Singapore, emerging as education hubs for their respective regions (Ng and Galbraith, 2020: 3).

With the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy, Hong Kong underwent a crucial systemic transition, following the 1997 handover from the British Colonial Administration to the transitory status of the Special Administrative Region of China. Given the changed state of affairs, the new Administration opted for enacting a wide-ranging social reform, speeding up the de-industrialization process and the subsequent shift to a service-oriented model society, as well as liberalizing and massifying educational institutions (Jin *et al.*, 2022: 52; Lo and Ng, 2018: iii).

Established to "continue economic, political, and social integration around the world, to connect with the markets, and to contribute to specialization to seek comparative advantages" (University Grants Committee, 2010: 13), the reforms were gradual, with surges of importance in the years 2002, 2008, and 2012. The new regulations were also promoted to make higher education more accessible to a wider range of people. Despite these efforts, the efficiency of the measures taken is debatable, primarily due to transformations introduced by mostly private institutions; it is evident to Hong Kong students and families, unconventionally, that those institutes provide less valuable degree outcomes when compared to those officially subsidized by the government. In fact, the state-funded universities in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) education system are those with the highest reputations and

who contribute to educating the upper strata of society. This higher education system, which is designed substantially differently from almost all of the Western ones, continues to model itself after a class and hierarchical-based social structure. Hong Kong youth now experience a significant increase in short-term and part-time employment phenomena, as well as increased job and economic precarity and low social mobility, partially because of the implementation of these policies of opening up and liberalization of the job and educational market (Chan, 2018: 6). Since the city is evolving into a high-quality provider of services and a hub for education (University Grants Committee, 2010: 13), the primary intent of the university and school adjustments was a strategic use of the economic transition, and not to contribute to the reduction of social inequalities, with effects that were experienced by students and workers as well as by society at large (University Grants Committee, 2010: 13).

Despite the introduction of the reforms, the changes to the existing system did not effectively address the prevailing inequalities, particularly those that adversely impacted the educational structure. In fact, if anything, these inequalities were further exacerbated. Confirmed by the increased competitiveness for admission to universities, the new public examination system wasn't able to encourage social mobility and lessen class inequalities (Bray *et al.*, 2013: 25, 26). Furthermore, the number of positions at publicly funded universities and colleges, subsidised by the University Grants Committee (UGC), has not increased in tandem with the private, self-financed education programs' rapid rise (Li, 2021: 5).

In any case, the reforms started in the 2000s led to greater rates of enrolment in higher education programs, worsening competition for both academic and employment opportunities (Lam and Tang, 2021: 1). This situation, coupled with the stagnation of the diversity of job markets brought on by a society focused on a small number of economically dominant sectors (Chan, 2018: 4), resulted in the saturation of some significant labour market segments and the development of a stark class divide between those who work in a more globalised and international environment and those who work in a more local sector (Lloyd *et al.*, 2019: 872). Due to these factors, young people in Hong Kong may be falling into an opportunity trap, that may lead them to a lack of occupations that match their degree credentials or other types of precarious and temporary employment (Lam and Tang, 2021: 2). Finally, the competitiveness that exists among youth, starting already in elementary school, puts them under considerable amounts of stress and might lead to a change in perspectives of the world and the formation of their future lives.



## 1.2 Purpose and Gap in the Literature

The shift of Hong Kong from colonial rule to a "Self-Administered" status has been widely researched and publicly debated. Part of the local community clearly showed reluctance towards the new Administration, protesting in 2014 and 2019 against China's increased influence. However, political and identity concerns have received a great deal of attention, while other aspects of the investigation have received little consideration. Authors like Pekkala and Tervo (2002) and Kieselbach (2000) have examined the negative aspects of unmet expectations, rising competition, mental health conditions and stress, and precarity in the youth social panorama in the West, while there are still few corresponding studies in English on Hong Kong regarding self-realization, competitive pressure, and insecurities among the population, particularly among its younger segments (Chan, 2019: 118). In order to add to the array of knowledge already available on the subject, authors like Bray *et al.* (2013) especially urge for a deeper comprehension of students' perceptions of inequality in the educational system for two main reasons: first, social stratification happening at an early stage have profound psychological and societal effects on individuals; secondly, the existing research mainly focus on families and teachers, and never on students.

The importance of studying abroad for Hong Kong students in relation to career and personal growth is another related secondary aspect of great relevance that has not been extensively researched; in fact, businesses and companies are increasingly looking for workers with international backgrounds and experiences. Despite the fact that several academic and press sources (Cheng and Szeto, 2019; South China Morning Post, 2022) examined particular parts of the issue, Cheng's (2014) work stands out as one of the few examples that examine the overall importance of studying abroad for the professional and personal development of Hong Kong residents. Regardless, several of these studies were carried out a short while after pivotal turning points in the school reform (2008, 2012), which might have influenced their conclusions. They also took place before major conflicts with the Hong Kong government (2014, 2019), which may have altered the context and people's perspectives.

Accordingly, the aim of this thesis is to comprehend, using a qualitative thematic analysis technique, the feelings and perspectives of Hong Kong students regarding the social environment surrounding them and their future opportunities. The goal is to capture their opinions, perceptions, and fears about the chances that they have in Hong Kong, as well as

their prospects for the future. To do this, the thesis will attempt to analyse their viewpoints on the possibilities and disparities in the HKSAR, and about their upcoming horizons and possibilities, while searching for any trends or common patterns that can be identified. The thesis's ultimate goal is to add to the pertinent body of literature by laying the groundwork for further mixed-method or quantitative research, and by analyzing related or similar phenomena to further advance knowledge in the educational inequality field.

### **1.3 The Research Question**

The Research Question will consequently focus on understanding Hong Kong students' awareness and concerns regarding competitiveness and inequality, and give them space to provide inner introspective thoughts on their future in Hong Kong, employing semi-structured interviews:

- 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 society reorganization?

The main research question will be followed by a secondary one, analysing the important aspect of studying abroad; this aspect, studied by Zhou *et al.* (2008) and Yang *et al.* (2011), has been neglected by scholars in relation to Asia, despite its extensive examination in Europe through programs like Erasmus. Understanding this factor is vital when addressing the first question, as it plays a crucial role in influencing career paths and determining job-seeking outcomes. For this reason, a secondary research question will be:

- B. How does studying abroad shapes the life-long opportunities and ambitions of Hong Kong's students?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The thesis's primary themes and issues were discussed in the introduction; the essay will seek to analyse and describe in further detail those themes in the literature review chapter, breaking

them down into 4 relevant subunits: historical context and political significance of educational policies; significant reform outcomes (split into supplementary five sections); implications of studying abroad; and conclusion. The sections are logically and consequentially organised so that the political underpinnings of the policies implemented by the new administration can serve as a rationale in the analysis of the effects that the reforms had on issues such as inequalities and education. This is complemented by an overview of the connected topic of graduates' personal and professional advantages of studying abroad in the context of social inequality.

## **2.2 Historical and Political Significance of the Reforms**

Following global powerful competitors such as the U.S., the E.U., Japan, and South Korea, and internal ones as other cities in Mainland China, the HKSAR, with a population of just 7.41 million people (2021), ranks as the sixth-largest trading and services entity in the world (Hong Kong Labour Department, 2022: 1). Since the late 1980s, as a result of the impending unification of the former British colony with China, the city has undergone continuous waves of transformation, wanted by the city's authorities to improve its global economic appeal; in order to be included in the Chinese National Development Strategy, the new leadership was prompted to commit to move rapidly towards an economy able to become more competitive worldwide, and able to consolidate its role of liaison between China and the rest of the world. This transition required an education reform, that was also aimed at improving global competitiveness (Burns, 2020: 1031).

The OECD classified the Hong Kong Education System as out-of-date and obsessed with testing in 1992, prompting the discussion on the harmonious integration of economic and educational reforms (Chow, 2013: 13). The Administration was persuaded to officially begin a decade of systemic educational reforms in the year 2000, as a result of the appointed education commission's Extensive Consultations (James, 2012: 42). Ng *et al.* (2020) and James (2021) welcomed the government's proposal and the gradual implementation of the education reforms, to "broaden and deepen students' educational experiences in order to develop their all-round capabilities [...] in a rapidly changing globalised world". The University Grants Committee (UGC) (2010) expressed the same standing, encouraging the revisions presented by the Curriculum Development Council in 2001, and implemented with

the amendment of the Basic Education Laws in 2002, which established the legislative basis for subsequent curriculum reforms.

The years 2009 and 2012 turned out to be significant turning points for the transition, starting with the implementation of the NAS (New Academic Structure) for secondary school in 2009. With the introduction of the New Secondary School (NSS) curriculum, the British 5+2 years of secondary school and 3 years of higher education system was replaced with an American-based 3+3 and 4 years system, which also led to the reduction of the number of official public examinations at the secondary school stage from two to just one: the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) (James, 2012: 43,44). The year 2012 was crucial for the authorities to see the first results of the new Curriculum.

The UGC investigation moves on to describe the significant economic factors that contributed to the decision-making process that was taken to strategically position the city as a high-quality service provider while integrating it into the global economy. Education was considered by policymakers as "a fundamental economic health of a society" in order to achieve this target, and its reform as a "policy of investment in the competitive knowledge economy", aimed at developing an education hub (UGC, 2010: 13). Lastly, the urgent necessity to establish frameworks to develop interrelations with Mainland China is recognized to be of vital importance in Recommendation n.19 (UGC, 2010: 73).

However, other academics and researchers questioned the reforms in many different manners. While praising the success of extending higher education to a larger pool of applicants, counter effects emerged and led to volatility and uncertainties in the social landscape of young individuals. According to the report provided by Monash University in Australia to its students interested in studying or working in Hong Kong, particular weight has been given by the Authorities to the business and commercial sectors, which may have contributed to the SAR's economic growth (Monash University, 2021: 6). Other sectors have been neglected and relegated to a second role, creating bottlenecks on one side and dissatisfaction on the other (Population-by-Census, 2016: 1). According to Lee and Law (2014), this type of strategy can be comprised into what is known as "selective incorporation" in the Glocalization theory, which outlines the way nations use selective learning to improve their financial performances.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See section 3.2 for further explanation

The reasons for the changed expectations for the younger generations are attributed by Lo and Ng (2018), Postiglione (2013), and Oleksiyenko *et al.* (2013) to "anchoring globalization," pragmatic and market-oriented decisions, and a tighter relationship with China. Since higher education and policymaking are intertwined, "governance linkages with the higher education institutions affecting the nexus between higher education and policy making" is cited as the primary driving force of the deteriorating young stability and future prospects.

On the same page, Lam and Tang (2021) have emphasized the "possessive perspective" graduates are given on employability, where students assume it will be simple for them to find an ideal position, regardless of how competition is growing and leading to instability, precarity, and dissatisfaction. A volatile and uncertain scenario was created for the students as a result of the private-oriented massification of access to higher education (60% of school leavers in 2010), which focused primarily on market-led, self-financing institutions (Chan and Lo, 2007: 3,4). The role of increasing the number of students in higher education was, in fact, largely left to the private or self-financed sector, resulting in a significant and unfair diploma quality imbalance between the 23% of students entering the prestigious UGC publicly funded Colleges, and the remaining students accessing lower accredited private institutions (Chan and Lo, 2007: 32); in fact, only a small number of UGC funded universities are nowadays able to compete with other international institutions in quality (Education Bureau, 2014a), and graduates from self-financed or private institutions struggle to find jobs matching with their competences.

Ng *et al.* (2021) have addressed comparable concerns, further examining the negative effects of greater competitiveness, the potential for a "brain drain," and other chances of human capital loss prompted by government reforms. Nevertheless, as Lam and Tang (2021) have pointed out, there is a dearth of social science literature that attempts to comprehend the inner viewpoints and experiences that individuals have with regard to this topic, which is required to lay the groundwork for comprehending and analysing the actual situation.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix III for the complete list of the Universities in Hong Kong

## **2.3 Relevant Outcomes of the Reforms**

### **2.3.1 Background**

As mentioned in subchapter 2.2, a significant portion of academia recognized the increase of precarious situations for students and graduates following the changes implemented from 2000 to 2012, and attempted to investigate their causes. The effects of these actions will be more thoroughly examined in this chapter's subsections.

The educational system has been placed under intense pressure to produce a substantial number of post-secondary graduates, mostly specialized in determined fields, who are the necessary backbone to jump to a different stage of development, as a result of the transition to a service-oriented economy, and the corresponding reshaping of the long-term programs and policies carried out by the Hong Kong Government. The investment in both public and private education has doubled over the past ten years (Census and Statistics Department, 2018: 359), while enrollment in post-secondary institutions has risen substantially from 19.4% to 73.1% between 1990 and 2020 (Li, 2021: p.3). However, there are still significant gaps in the perceived and real quality of universities, with the eight public institutions believed to be of the highest calibre and the private universities and the self-financed programs seen as less renowned and appropriate for entering the job market.

### **2.3.2 The Role of public examination and the Banding system**

Three crucial issues acquired an extensive amount of consideration under the new curricular system: the function of the public examination, the "Banding system," and the hierarchical division of the universities. The issue of substantial inequalities emerges from the new education scheme, where the role of elitism, the vertical structure of society, and the social capital of a family represents a "relevant role in the creation of the human capital of the next generation," is recognized by Chow (2013) and Poon and Wong (2008). Under the current educational reform structure, pre-existing inequalities appear to be worryingly escalating, as the city's social class mobility shrinks (Poon and Wong, 2008: 52).

Regarding government-funded institutes, primary school students are divided into 30 "school nets", areas where the quality of education inevitably varies according to their overall socioeconomic status. Even though parents can apply to schools in different zones, the primary application requirements are based on a "point system" which is discouraging it, providing higher scores to people who have relatives employed or studying at the same institute, or who

belong to the same religion or sponsoring organization of the school. Private and international schools are regarded as highly selective and have the freedom to select pupils in accordance with their own standards, regardless of the public allocation system, worsening the already low level of social mobility between social classes (Education Bureau, 2023: 3).

As pupils move on to high school, the student allocation becomes even more arbitrary. According to Sieh (1993), Bray *et al* (2013), and Lee (2023), the segmentation of schools into "Bands" of quality results in enormous class inequalities between the various institutions. Parents choose schools based on that ranking as a result of the competition to attract pupils, which led to this "Banding" system. Because access to secondary education is generally correlated with academic achievement in primary school exams, and because kids typically attend the same institution for both their primary and secondary education, in order to have easier access to high-quality education, this rating consequentially extends to primary schools.<sup>3</sup> The Banding is associated with quality and prestige, since it traditionally depicts better outcomes on the last secondary school public examination (HKDSE), which translates to improved chances of being accepted into one of the top public colleges and universities. One evident example is the teaching of topics in English, which is very common in Band 1 schools (almost 100% of the subjects in Band 1A), but incredibly uncommon in Band 3 ones, giving it a definite advantage to pupils attending the former.

Private tutoring and curriculum development are additional ways to increase students' competitiveness, so that they can perform better on the final exam, given that the HKDSE is based on four obligatory subjects (English, Mandarin, Math and Liberal Studies) and elective ones. Researchers such as Bray *et al.* (2013), Coniam (2014), and Spires (2017) have dealt with the importance of private tutoring, which is directly correlated to household incomes and aids students in enhancing their final exam grades (particularly in the English subsection, which is the most expensive and pursued); this has led to tutors becoming very renowned and well known in Hong Kong. Other types of skills, such as drawing or playing an instrument, may also be helpful to have a stronger curriculum for the application.

Summing up, the HKDSE is among the finest examples of standardized tests that are designed to evaluate pupils based on meritocracy after their final year of secondary school. However, the way elementary and secondary school allocation works, entirely undermines this meritocratic process; the test has the ability to determine how students from Hong Kong will

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<sup>3</sup> Bands are further divided in three parts: 1(A,B,C); 2(A,B,C); 3(A,B,C).

progress in their future career, and additionally functions as a "powerful mechanism to maintain the imbalance of power in the society", contributing to the segmentation (or dualization) of the labour market (Tsang and Isaacs, 2022: 228). Because public universities are extremely competitive and only admit less than 20% of secondary students, there is pressure on young people to do well, which can result in anxiety and health conditions attributable to the intense competition (Chow, 2013: 19).

### **2.3.3 Competitiveness in Education and in the Labour Market**

The literature further focused on the increased competition brought about by the reform in both the educational and the labour market, which still appears to be rooted in a Confucian Heritage Culture dominated by extremely competitive test scores; Lam and Tang (2021) and Ng and Galbraith (2020) have analyzed the impact of the expansion of higher education sector within the context of limited employment prospects for graduates; private and self-financed higher education enlargement "pushed the rate of participation" to undergraduate programs up by more than 30%, leading to higher pressure on particular industries by causing an impasse in the upward mobility of salaries and professions (Lam and Tang, 2021: 1).

Poon and Wong (2008) further studied the new educational setting in which top-performing students from higher bands are given privileged admission to the most prestigious universities, the UGC-funded ones. The accumulation of human capital at those institutions enables the general standard of education quality to become unequally spread, having an impact on the lives of graduates from non-elite higher education institutions (Poon and Wong, 2008: 57,58). Pressed by the ambition of maintaining their status, these colleges operate in a market-oriented manner, attempting to monopolize the most ambitious, bright, and wealthy students, increasing the competition for admissions (Oleksiyenko, 2013: 5,6).

The self-financed and private programs and universities boosted the transformation of higher education into a market product. This fast and impetuous movement may have brought to a mismatch in qualification in some sectors of the labour market; in fact, the elitist classification of the universities created another disadvantage in terms of the job-seeking process for those students applying to self-financed and private programs (Lam and Tang, 2021: 12). Ng and Tang (2008) have focused their attention on those institutions that are also seeking to attract students from the international market, as part of a process of internationalizing the campuses.



The authorities increased the quota of foreign students to 20%, which raised the bar for admissions, but was a very profitable practice for the institutions.

Lastly, the report redacted by the Australian Monash University (2021) has provided a good explanation of the level of competitiveness reached by the educational and, in some sectors, by the labour market: the report warns students about the competitiveness of the educational and labour market in Hong Kong, advising them on paying attention to overcrowded and competitive faculties, to set realistic salary expectations, and to prepare an adequate Curriculum Vitae, inclusive of international experience, in order to not spend too much time seeking for a job. Nevertheless, as Wong (2015) effectively emphasises for the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong is not "overeducated"; rather, the distribution and bottlenecks formed in recent years have decreased the average return in terms of degree education.

#### **2.3.4 Precarity**

The future landscape of the workforce balance in the city must be carefully examined; casual, part-time, and self-employed work increased by 40% from 2000 to 2015, as reported by the administration dataset gathered in the study "Challenges of Manpower Adjustment in Kong Kong" (LegCo Secretariat, 2016). In the same time frame, there has been a significant decline in income, permanent employment, social protection, and stability. Due to the limitations caused by the economy's structural change, more graduates were forced into lower-skilled jobs. From 1994 to 2015, only 666.000 new jobs were created, compared to the more than 850.000 people who earned a higher education degree (excluding sub-degrees) (LegCo Secretariat, 2016: 1).

In the context of Anglo-Saxon liberalization and deregulation of the labour market, Chan (2018) and Wong and Au-Yeung (2019) have explained the precarity of young workers through the theories of, respectively, flexi-employment and flexicurity. Few authors have emphasized the decreasing horizontal and vertical mobility, the erosion of labour rights and job security, the rise in temporary work and non-engaged youth, and a general tendency that sees a further segmentation of the labour market; nonetheless, Liang *et al.* (2017) have described a market with less favourable job opportunities and salary security, and Jin *et al.* (2022), Lee and Law (2014), and Lo (2018) have pointed out the youth's exposure to the market, low social protection, long-term social and economic exclusion, and deteriorating

general living conditions in the city. Lo (2018) has expressed particular concerns about the administration's focus on the services sector, which has led to an uneven and unbalanced development that aggravates and creates a gap between social classes in income and education.

The situation of students increasingly choosing part-time employment in order to improve their curriculum, and opting for lower wage workplaces in public administration, social services, and sales sectors to start their careers, accepting a job which typically is not related to their studies field, is explained in detail by Li (2021). According to the Global Times (2021), many bachelor's students must accept lower-paying or unrelated-to-their-studies jobs, rather than take the chance of spending a long time on "the waiting list" of the companies. Others have chosen to continue their education in order to have better prospects, taking into account the current state of the work market. Young people living in the city often feel frustrated, depressed, and stressed by those kinds of scenarios.

### **2.3.5 Happiness and health conditions**

Understanding the significance of happiness and fulfilment in education is also crucial for analyzing choices and concerns regarding job expectations, the future, and place identification. In fact, fierce competition, precarity, and unhappiness can have long-term impacts, including health disorders associated with social marginalization. Chan (2019) analyses the topic from the standpoint of increasing competitiveness, acknowledging and criticizing the dearth of pertinent literature on these topics regarding East Asia, and notably Hong Kong. In any case, Noddings (2003) has offered a significant contribution to the field as a whole, which may be used to analyse the Hong Kong situation as well. He examines happiness in education in totalitarian and democratic governments, while also offering a helpful theoretical framework. In order to address this issue, Chun (2022) has examined the education system's long-term effects, portraying a society of young individuals who are heavily stressed out and suffering from health conditions as a result of the new HKDSE exam's competitiveness, leaving room for a more in-depth examination of the students' perceptions.

## **2.4 Implications of Studying Abroad**

In the attempt to explain why Hong Kong families and students perceive studying abroad as a competitive advantage, The South China Morning Post (2022) quotes Wycombe Abbey School headmaster Howard Tuckett as saying that this opportunity is "invaluable for creating lifelong personal links and understanding different cultures in preparation for an enriched professional life in Hong Kong." By defining terms like "cultural shock," "intercultural contact," or theories like "cultural learning," "stress and coping," and "social identification," Yang *et al.* (2011) and Zhou *et al.* (2008) have provided the necessary theoretical foundation for the meaning, objectives, and outcomes of studying abroad. They also schematise the most crucial outcomes of this practice that must be further examined in future studies.

Cheng (2014) conducted a study that, like this thesis, attempts to analyse how Hong Kong students perceive the value of studying abroad. However, unlike this dissertation, Cheng's study employs a mixed method rather than an introspective qualitative approach. Furthermore, Cheng's research is from 2014, making it both prior to the two social movements of 2014 and 2019 and is very close to the introduction of the final phase of the education reforms, which may have influenced people's perspectives on the future. The leaflet published by Monash University (2011) features three interviews with students who studied overseas and subsequently returned to Hong Kong, outlining the benefits of doing so and emphasizing bilingualism as one of the top concerns for employers in Hong Kong. Anyways, more studies are necessary to deeper understand the real weight of the phenomenon.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The research question of this thesis aims to comprehend how changes introduced to the social environment of Hong Kong students, as a result of educational reforms that were implemented in the 2000s, influenced their present and future perspectives. This literature review aims to provide the necessary context for the research question by laying out the historical background of the political justifications for such reforms as well as the practical effects of such policies.

By doing so, it was possible to depict the framework of the various institutions and elements that the reforms have produced, which are the protagonists of directly and significantly influencing students' lives. In subchapter 2.3, the most pertinent of these factors are

recognized, and context is given to their origin and the reasons why they have an impact on the present and future point of view of Hong Kong Youth.

As stated in the introduction's subchapter 1.2, the importance of studying abroad has been separated from other factors in the subchapter 2.4, because it has received relatively little coverage in previous research but is extremely important for influencing students' opportunities and lives. By recognizing these key points, it was possible to focus the research, make it more concise, and clarify the relevant theories to efficiently analyse the field of educational inequality.

### **3. THEORIES**

The literature review highlighted the key elements of societal changes resulting from educational reforms, contributing to contextualising the framework to address the research question's pivotal points, including the importance of the educational reforms, students' recognition of their social environment and their future concerns and ambitions.

The research is grounded in the interconnectedness of three key theories: Glocalization theory justifies the educational structure desired by the Administration for political implementation, which brought to an increasingly vertical and service and market-oriented society; Social and Educational stratification theories identify in this structure a hierarchical and competitive society, explaining the privileged outcomes resulting from capital accumulation in society and education; lastly, the Labour Market Segmentation theory helps to comprehend the social consequences of these reforms and the resulting stratification, illustrating the creation of distinct sectors in society with limited communication. To comprehend the current role of studying abroad in Hong Kong society, all three theories will be employed.

#### **3.1 Educational Stratification Theory**

The Social Stratification theories depict the gaps that currently exist between privileged and underprivileged classes because of the unequal access to the distribution of resources, power, and social status (Bilecen, 2020: 1). These theories attempt to investigate the role of the main stratifying categories, such as class and institutions, in generating and consolidating privileges.

In the context of education, the Educational Stratification Theory explains how learning institutions stratify students in highly selective manners, impacting the balance between educational and social structure. Those systems characterized by a close coupling between education and the occupational structure present career trajectories directly correlated with the individual's quality of education (Allmendinger, 1989: 231-233; 239). Hanushek *et al.* (2010) explain how these kinds of policies, known as "tracking," establish systems that might strengthen disparities in society through educational outcomes, which have been recognized in the literature review chapter 2.3.

Buchmann and Hannum (2001) highlight the role of the state in formal schooling in relation to the emergence of new patterns of social differentiation and social mobility in countries that are transitioning between two different economic or social systems, where the state plays a central role in education and can determine the provision of educational opportunities. Similarly, Holsinger's (1975) analyses the relationship between social changes and economic growth, overcoming any direct causal link between financial progress and a decline in inequality.

The stage of stratification also plays a major role in differentiating future educational outcomes. Family background has a stronger impact on academic success in systems where selection occurs early, such as in Hong Kong; on the other hand, the magnitude of that impact diminishes with time (Traini, 2022: 11). Berger and Combet (2017) argue that this effect can be seen also from the overrepresentation of students from upper family social backgrounds in higher academic tracks, because of the transferability of the social capital (Traini, 2022: 22).

Connected with the idea of inherited forms of capital, Bourdieu (1984) argues that society is stratified due to the unequal distribution of four types of capital, which he defines as Social, Cultural, Symbolic, and Economic. These 4 types of capital accumulation allow the already privileged groups to retain their social positions throughout later life and to transmit it to future generations. These kinds of privilege inheritance are compelling in Hong Kong's educational system, where class divisions and the introduction of the new educational model have contributed to significantly reducing the city's social mobility (Poon and Wong, 2008: 48, 52).

In this perspective, student fulfilment during education was found to be crucial: Högberg (2019) identified the school environment as a major social determinant for health outcomes, both in higher and lower strata of the population. Noddings (2003) emphasises the role of the

damages of the modern liberal state in shaping education in an extremely market-led oriented way, to the detriment of the students.

Summing up, in highly stratified systems such as Hong Kong, the socioeconomic status of students is therefore seen as being highly predictive of the type of school they are attending, and the institution they are enrolled in has a stronger influence on their educational and occupational outcomes and expectations, which are more realistic than those of students in unstratified systems (Buchmann and Park, 2009: 249).

The Educational Stratification and its means of enforcement are required to answer the research question, to comprehend the actual challenges and opportunities that students are presented with when they must choose their future careers, in connection with the literature that has been presented on the effects of the HKDSE, the Banding system, private tutoring, and studying abroad.

### **3.2 Glocalization Theory**

The concept of globalisation would be too narrow to comprehend the profound changes taking place in the HKSAR; today, there is a tendency to think of globalisation as a widespread phenomenon of institutional and costume homogenization that transcends locality (Robertson, 2012: 191–193). In this regard, the concept of "Glocalization" deals with the dual condition of institutions or policies having a global outlook but being adaptable to the local customs and conditions, offering a better framework for what concerns Hong Kong (Robertson, 2012: 194). The dual reality of the "glocal" and the local, as defined by Roudometof (2016), is comparable to micromarketing, making international models suitable for local-oriented systems, but also maintaining certain significant features of the original local systems.

In addition, Turner (2017) and He and Wang (2019) both painted a similar picture of how globalisation can produce substantial types of conservatism in societies, even while there is still mobility for products and services. Turner (2017) meant that governments in the globalised world keep trying to maintain the authority to control spaces for political, social, and cultural reasons by erecting bureaucratic obstacles and enacting legal exclusions, in the interest of asserting their sovereignty. He and Wang (2019) explored how urban enclaves, which divide metropolitan areas into different socioeconomic sectors, may be seen expanding in major cities.

To sum up, to improve the quality of students' education and their competitiveness as an inspiring Asian educational hub, policymakers and administrators in Hong Kong deliberately decided to adapt elements of foreign paradigms to their reforms. Through a process of selective incorporation, the state attempted to internalise foreign ideas and to re-elaborate them in a way that could fit the Hong Kong environment (Lanford, 2016: 190). In this context, Glocalization is important in showing how the historical context of the reforms, as described in subchapter 2.2, is directly related to answering the Research Question, which aims to comprehend how Hong Kong students perceive their social environment. To do this, it is necessary to demonstrate the potential theoretical and practical forms and effects of the market-driven educational reforms.

### **3.3 Labour Market Segmentation**

Quoting the former chief executive Mr. Donald Tsang, “the free market is perceived as the cornerstone of Hong Kong’s Economy” (Chan, 2021: 177), explaining the neo-classical economics background in which the reforms took place. The policymaker’s explicit directives regarding the reforms were to employ self-adaptivity, absence of or limited control over the labour market, and minimal levels of public regulation (Chan, 2021: 172,175); as described by Atkinson (1984) in his Flexible Firm Model, this search for more flexibility in the labour market was oriented to give the employer more freedom in bargaining, to the benefit of the economy. Dettmers (2003) strongly adverse this vision, explaining how when the balance of power is leaning too much for the employer, lack of social protections and constraints for the employees emerge.

However, the Theory of Segmented Labour Markets (SLM) seems to be more appropriate to represent the nature of the labour market more accurately in Hong Kong. The SLM theory openly questions the classical and neoclassical explanation of how labour markets operate, highlighting the demand side of the labour market rather than the supply side, imagining a fragmented labour market, and not a single competitive one, and giving more relevance to the institutions and social impact on influencing wages, employment and working conditions (Leontaridi, 1998: 63).

The SLM theory challenges the notion that an individual's salary and professional allocation are mostly regulated by their productive capacities, according to Leontaridi's (1998) analysis,

accepting that laws governing the labour market, technological advancements, product markets, and industrial organization all influence how jobs are structured and organized.

According to the SLM theory, there is not a single competitive market, but rather 2, 3 or a variety of "non-competing segments", where the differences in occupational outcomes are caused by barriers that create privileges for certain sections of the population, and vulnerable groups of workers may be trapped in the lower portions of the labour market. John Stuart Mill's further analyses the effects of education and social class as determinants of pre-market segmentation subdivision resulting from attributes acquired prior to entering the workforce (Leontaridi, 1998: 64,66).

In the Dualization of labour markets theory, which is part of the Segmentation one, the only 2 sectors of the labour market are increasingly growing in inequalities; the first one contains all the skilled jobs with regular careers, high wage rates and less competitiveness, and the opposite happens in the second sector. Workers are only allowed to compete for jobs inside their own labour market portion, rather than being free to relocate between different segments, displaying the limited mobility of labour. Because of this restriction, there is less competition for jobs, which largely favors, those who are already employed in the higher segments and makes it more challenging for employees to shift into segments with greater incomes or more stable employment (Ashton and Maguire, 1984: 106,114).

These characteristics are all visible in the Hong Kong labour market, where businesses have adopted a flexible approach to keep up with the competition, widening gaps and reducing mobility between classes and segments (Chan, 2021: 172,174). Yoon and Chung (2016) advocated the formation of a new sector they named the "future insecure," which consisted of a labour force not immediately vulnerable but, due to temporary work and insecurity, likely to bear direct consequences in the following future. As a matter of fact, the income gap between professionals, managers, and administrative positions as well as between lower-level occupations widened after 2010, as differences between "insiders" and "outsiders" in the accessibility of opportunities (education and other kinds of formation) increased. In addition, general labour market indicators revealed an increased dualization in the segmented Hong Kong market, demonstrating that, while economic prosperity can lead to growth, it does not necessarily result in the reduction of inequalities (Chan, 2021: 184, 190, 191).

These fragmentations contribute to and influence the level of job insecurity, which is high in Hong Kong, partially for the nature of his economy. According to Van Eyck (2003), the large



amount of part-time and short-contract work in the city contributes to insecurity by encouraging flexible jobs and precarious employment, making it difficult to maintain relationships with family and friends and leading to a lack of social protection and health conditions. Economic segmentation can produce specific sectors with secure employment, but the general trend is towards high levels of insecurity, with high income inequality and precariousness (Wong et- al., 2019: 796-800).

The available research on the competitiveness and precarity of the job market in Hong Kong makes all these characteristics visible. As a critical first step in answering the Research Question, the theory of SLM enables to explain how these elements differ in population distribution and how they significantly affect and constrain students' environment and aspirations for their future.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

The methods chapter will be addressed as follows; first, the research design paragraph will explain the ontological and epistemological positioning and place them into the structure of the thesis. Subsequently, the methodological approach – qualitative semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation – is introduced and justified. Lastly, there is a critical discussion of the limitations and ethical considerations.

##### **4.1 Research Design**

Taking into consideration the gaps in the existing literature on the topic, a qualitative approach has been used to understand more in-depth the area of inquiry. Because of this, the study will have exploratory qualities, which provide the rationale for favoring this research technique over a quantitative one. This thesis will attempt to answer the research question by trying to comprehend how Hong Kong students describe the changing socio-economic environment and discern how this and changes in the local community setting affect their perceptions (Luker, 2010: 16). The qualitative technique was considered the most appropriate to comprehend it, because the process required an introspective comprehension of students' viewpoints (Clark *et al.*, 2021).

The research adopted a constructivist ontology to the analysis of the social phenomena, considering institutions and students the main protagonists of these changes in the education

system, since the main objective of the investigation was to comprehend how youth perceived and responded to the scenario that was developing around them (Bryman, 2012: 33).

As a result, the main research method of this qualitative study—the semi-structured interviews—was used to let emerge the consistency of the data, using interpretivist epistemology (Bryman, 2012: 14-16). The semi-structured interviews were employed as the best means to understand how Hong Kong students interpret the social environment around them, allowing respondents to further explore their past and deepen their perspectives and opinions; the data collected were treated as a subjective opinion, rather than an objective fact (Behar, 1990: 224-228), and were complemented with non-participant observations of the universities in Hong Kong. Finally, a deductive strategy of analysis was employed, according to which existing theories and concepts are used to explain the data collected (Bryman, 2012).

#### **4.2 Type of Data Collected and Sampling.**

The objective of this research is to understand the interviewees' inner selves and identify a phenomenon, subject of the human experience, that the thesis wants to discover and analyse (Creswell, 2007:252), allowing greater room for their opinions and thoughts.

For this reason, the interviews were shaped by phenomenology, which aims to use the approach of "Thematic Analysis" with essence questions, in order to show common themes that are recurrent among the interviewees (Van Manen, 1990: 78,79); those themes were emerging during the data analysis through the use of coding, aided by Nvivo program. In this way, 7 major recurrent subjects emerged from the interviews: University Prestige Perception, means of status privilege in Education, Competitiveness, Health and Psychological Conditions, Advantages of Studying Abroad, Job Seeking Difficulties, Job Flexibility and Precarity.

The sampling procedure consisted first of the identification of the group to be analysed. These were students and workers who recently finished (max. 3 years) higher education, between 19 and 35 years. This age range was chosen by taking into consideration that many students from 25 to 35 are still pursuing their master; their point of view resulted being especially interesting, as they most likely already had at least one working experience. The participants in this study reached the number of 23 and were all contacted through the combination of random sampling and snowball effect. In this process, attention was placed in the maintenance of a gender

balance (13 male, 10 female), even if it was understandably more difficult to contact women, probably because of reasonable personal and security reasons.

Further attention was paid to the diversity of their background: the participants were enrolled in six on eight of all the public subsidized universities; in the remaining two, as well as in all the private universities, access was restricted to non-students, making it difficult to identify participants studying there. These factors made it more difficult to locate students from backgrounds with lower socioeconomic standing. However, the Banding system, which was employed to identify people from less wealthy households, who were underrepresented in colleges, was helpful in establishing new networks and attempting to come in touch with more people from the same socioeconomic standing.

Lastly, twenty students resulted to be born and raised in Hong Kong, while three of them were from Mainland China, and just received their education in the HKSAR, where they are now residents.

### **4.3 Limitations and Risks**

The first and most relevant limitations regarded interviewing people in an illiberal context; the dimension of the authoritarianism in Hong Kong after the 2014 and 2019 protests is strong, and repression could be harsh both against researchers and against interviewees (Morgenbesser, 2018: 3,5). Other important considerations were the accessibility to the universities (see paragraph 4.2), the willingness of people to participate in the interviews and the risks of doing research being under control and tracked by the Hong Kong Administration (Morgenbesser, 2018: 3).

Other kinds of limitations were taken into exam: the interviews were performed in English, and this could have had some reflections on the final outcome, since the use of a non-native language can lead to mistakes and misunderstandings. Being aware that there is a "necessary relationship" between the researcher and the issue of research, which typically creates conditions for biases to emerge, the thesis tried to avoid those based on personal, ideological and political engagement, as well as a Western perspective, as much as possible when addressing reflexivity (Sultana, 2015: 8).

Lastly, the trustworthiness of the researcher was relevant too, since people could see foreigners in a bad light; at the same time, every attempt to contact people was cautious, and mostly done through other interviewees' networks.

#### **4.4 Ethical Considerations**

The thesis respected the rules stated in the official Swedish publication "Good Research Practice" on ethic of research, published by the Swedish Research Council, which explains rules and limits on transparency, anonymity, free will and confidentiality (The Swedish Research Council, 2017).

The first issue to face was consent: to perform the interview, oral consent was always asked twice, at the first meeting with the participant and right before starting with the interview (written consent has been considered not suitable for security reasons). Before obtaining the consent of the interviewee, a clear explanation of the aim and purpose of the study was provided, showing how it would have been carried out and who could have been the potential readers of the paper and the areas where the study may be published in the future. Furthermore, at whatever time, the interviewee could decide to terminate the interview (Bryman, 2012: 511).

Another important aspect was avoiding possible dangers for the participants; anonymity was provided to all the interviewees, even if not requested, due to the young age of the participants and the sensitive information they provided. This was done through the anonymization of names and all the other possible information that could make a person recognizable, such as places and other distinctive characteristics. Participants also decided the place they considered more suitable for the interview sessions; at the same time, the place suggested was checked in advance, in order to prevent finding myself in difficult situations. The possibility of recording was always asked; in case of refusal, the interviews were typed on normal word paper. The transcription of the content was performed as soon as possible, and the interviews deleted, in order not to leave any track.

To further protect data, the transcriptions and any other written document were downloaded on an external hard disk, disconnected from any access to the web, and they were put in hidden and encrypted folders. Furthermore, the folders which contained this material were coded, in order to make it difficult to access them.

## 5. FINDINGS

This chapter contains the information gathered from interviews and observations of the social environments at the universities. Those findings will be elaborated in key of the already presented literature and theory, through which it will be explained how the changed socio-political environment, brought by the new administration reforms, deeply modified the priorities and concerns of Hong Kong students. Relevant to the topic, the increasing societal inequality will be analysed through the comparison of the interviews and the theories of Educational Stratification and Segmented Labour Market, to explain how this transformation in their framework is actively modifying students' current and future perspectives.

### 5.1 University-Level Perception

When discussing the differences in university quality, all the 23 interviewees offered a framework that was slightly distinct from the existing literature: a stratified and hierarchical classification of universities was confirmed, as presented by Poon and Wong (2008), Oleksiyenko (2013), and Lam and Tang (2021), which placed self-financed and private colleges and universities at a lower level of prestige than the eight UGC-funded universities. The interviews made it evident that the hierarchical division expands to the public-subsidized universities, putting the Hong Kong University (HKU), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) in a more prestigious position than the others, as reaffirmed by Respondent 3:

*“I think first is the fame of the school, we always mention there are top three universities in Hong Kong: HKU, CUHK and HKUST, they are the top three schools”.*

This popular widespread knowledge is reflected also in the perceived difficulties of accessing those three elite public universities, compared to the other ones. The weight of the HKDSE score is especially relevant as: “If you have a relative high score, you can choose out of the eight universities, but if you have a so-so or not so good result, you may have not the opportunity to choose one of the eight public universities, surely not one of the top three: HKU, HKUST, CUHK”. (Respondent 11)

As emerged from both the interviews and non-participant observations, students clearly interiorized that there is a highly stratified system, divided into multiple strata of education

quality, which, in the words of Hanushek *et al.* (2010), can establish multi-layer structures that might strengthen disparities in society through educational outcome. These findings amplify the range of stratification expected and discovered in the existing literature and theory on the topic, which limited the division mostly to public and private universities. This stratification got reflected also in the working environments, as noticed by Respondent 12:

*“The people who get into the three universities that I have mentioned (HKU, HKUST, CUHK) have better and more opportunities in finding jobs, as many recruiters would prefer the students or graduates from these three universities”.*

## **5.2 The Means of the Status Privileges in Education: The Banding System, the Public Examination and Other Forms of Advantages**

### **5.2.1 The Inequality of the Banding System**

The role of the Banding system, as depicted in subchapter 2.3.2 of the literature review, is crucial to understand how the students are distributed throughout the Hong Kong educational system, beginning from primary school. The outcome of the entire educational process can result in significant disparities for future citizens when screening occurs at an early stage, as Traini (2022) conceptualizes.

While all interviewees acknowledged the importance of school screening and selection in society, only a limited number of them expressed criticism towards its implementation in Hong Kong and viewed it as a source of inequality that limits opportunities for the less privileged individuals.

Most interviewees simply pointed out the inferior services and quality provided by the lower Banding schools, confirming that: “the students you interact with in La Salle (Band 1 High School) are generally better off or wealthier, that means you have a greater connection, and you have more opportunities than other Bandings of schools. I don’t really like it though” (Respondent 21)

Interestingly and expectedly, all three respondents who graduated from band 3 high schools, acknowledged and criticized the educational system for treating them unfairly and unequally, underlining the long-term effects on their education and careers:

*“In band 1 schools either they are more talented or wealthier to have more choices, they have a lot of seniors who had experience in this that can help them and provide more options to the students; the students that can provide more friendly environment for studying also are in Band 1. Back to my high school (Band 3), I was doing nothing. in Band 1, I could have done much better”.*

*Respondent 15*

The answer went on to assess other disparities in educational quality between the high schools. The other two respondents from band 3 high schools had the same dissatisfaction with the unfairness of having unequal opportunities, which is also influencing their outlook on the future:

*“In Band 1 high schools, almost all the lessons use English and they have more abilities to carry their HKDSE examination. For the HKDSE, they don't need to spend more energy in chasing or achieving the target of their favourite university or college, or something like that. The locals will be hardly to be compared with these schools. The advantages are skills and language, and they are difficult to access. Only a small group of people can apply for it.”*

*Respondent 12*

*“My school (Band 3) was taught in Cantonese, is not a very good high school, there is a grade for Hong Kong high schools, and mine was in Band 3; in Band 1 high school maybe they have help to access university, but for mine not. Studying design, the design institute was the best opportunity for me because I can't get to the university, so I chose that school, because after high school we have the HKDSE, I had bad grades, so I had to get to that school where you just pay and you get accepted”.*

*Respondent 6*

At the same time, two interviewees from the Band 1 schools recognized and criticized more deeply the level of unfairness of the system and the impact that this can have on the future of the students, taking into account two interesting factors: the psychological effects of stratification for future ambitions and the influence of being assigned in schools by social classes at an early age:

*“I think the most important is that band 1 has reputation, and also the language difference, because we study Mandarin and English in school and we learn and are confident to speak it,*

*I know Band 3 they only speak Cantonese. I think for Band 1 the norm is to get in a high-class university, like CUHK or HKU, but Band 3 they get only a couple of students to that universities, so the reputation is very different and heavily impacts how hard you try. In Band*

*3 people just think that they can’t make it, they will surely end up in doing some physical job”.*

*Respondent 20*

*“I would say that dividing the schools in Band is trying to instill into child minds that some children are built differently; I am now at the university and 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, so I was stuck in the environment of the Band 1 child basically. I tutor kids on the side, even if they are in primary school, in kindergarten they must take interview classes, at 3 years old they have to learn how to do interviews, that is absurd. 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 the interviewees agreed that the Band school pupils are assigned to has a significant impact on the prospects available to them for the future. This pervasive notion of inherited capital—



capital acquired by previous generations—reflects Bourdieu's (1984) theories and Tsang and Isaacs (2022) research on the four different ways that capital accumulates. However, those in the lower Bands have the highest level of consciousness of inequality.

### **5.2.2 The Screening HKDSE Public Examination**

The Banding system and its close connection with the standardized public examination test, known as HKDSE, have been the subject of analysis by Sieh (1993), Bray et. al (2013), and Lee (2023). Their research revealed that this screening method based on meritocracy can lead to increased unequal outcomes and can further contribute to the social stratification of the students.

It is realistic to identify the "powerful mechanism to maintain the imbalance of power in society" described by Tsang and Isaacs (2022) when analyzing education in Hong Kong, which, through the HKDSE exam, exerts a significant amount of decisional power over students' futures as: “Band 1 school will provide more support, school has more resources for studying and teaching, and they have better facilities. The teacher will have better previous exam samples they can buy from the seniors, so they can know the strengths and the weaknesses they faced. So I think the result is generally better in the HKDSE” (Respondent 16)

This connection between band and the outcome of the HKDSE is very important to understand the role this screening system has in the society, the pressure felt by the participants, and the noteworthy importance of the final result on students' future career, as stated by Respondent 12: “The HKDSE examination is extremely competitive. Students are studying all days after they wake up, and for me is very hard to focus on it. And all the people they fail the examination they feel really sad, because they have to face the choice of their future, they may be scared for their future. It is very important, so they stress out because they know this is going to change their lives and their careers”.

These interviews support and enrich the findings in the literature, elaborating on the burden that students carry during the entire educational process. According to Buchmann and Hannum (2001) in their analysis of the stratification theories and studies, the HKDSE plays a crucial role in identifying some of the causes of socioeconomic stratifications in the city.

The importance of English as a mean to increase the chance of passing the HKDSE exam is an intriguing finding from this research. Private high schools, international schools, and generally Band 1 (and top Band 2) high schools offer programs almost entirely taught in English to increase the probability of passing the final exam, in which the latter is one of the subjects examined. Meanwhile, Band 3 (and low Band 2) high schools primarily employ Chinese as a method of instruction, which is detrimental to their students, since: “Only Band 1 high school would use English teaching materials to teach all non-Chinese related classes, while the Band 2 or 3 high school would use Chinese teaching materials to teach most subjects” (Respondent 22).

Analyzing the respondent’s interviews, it is evident that the quality of English teaching is used by the schools to attract students, and that it is another mean of creating an advantage during the education process.

*“In my school (Band 3) is awkward that not even those who are teaching, I find most of the people couldn’t speak English, they are much fewer international insights. For this, it is really hard to get in University for many reasons, for example English level is not enough. Once I’ve written a long proposal about to travel and passports for students there, but it seems the supervisor doesn’t understand what I’m writing, even some students from Band 2 can understand what I was talking about. I think it is a good contrast to understand the context”.*

*Respondent 15*

### **5.2.3 Private Tutoring**

Another important contribution that emerged from the interviews, which has scarcely found a place in the existent literature, is the importance of private tutoring and schooling as a parallel way to obtain better results in the HKDSE examination through economic means, enhancing the required skills for accessing University. For the students, “Tutoring can be really important for the results of the HKDSE exam and is felt important also by parents; they send their kids to tutoring since they are 3 years old, and the price of tutoring can be very expensive. It can be up to 300 Hong Kong Dollars (30£ ca) per hour, it is very unfair. Tutoring is done also for students at the university, that’s how important is it” (Respondent 19).

Respondent 4 further added that:

*“For private and international schools, it depends on your financial status, is not accessible for every student in Hong Kong. The private school are usually very competitive and restrictive, but they can give you better results for the HKDSE. I was in an international school, where they apply the international curriculum and not the DSE, so I didn’t have to do the HKDSE exam”.*

*Respondent 4*

In this perspective, it is evident how family background can substantially influence the cost/opportunity of a student's future in Hong Kong, where private institutions and tutoring allow students to improve their abilities or, in the case of international schooling, completely avoid the intense competition for the public examination, with an alternative pathway to higher education.

### **5.3 Competitiveness to Access Higher Education**

All of the students attending the public HKDSE exam have in common that they will all have to compete fiercely to pass with the required grade to get accepted into one of the UGC-funded subsidized colleges. The prestige hierarchy that separates those institutions shows that the eight public universities are often seen as being at a higher level than private universities or self-financed programs. Even if a student fails to pass the HKDSE, they still have the option to join graduate studies through self-financed curricula, which are often offered by the same public universities. These programs, however, require extra years of study, and the competition is still intense. Finally, the admission requirements for the so-called "top three" public universities, HKU, CUHK, and HKUST, raise the competitiveness bar for achieving success on the public exam:

*“It was super competitive, I failed the HKDSE exam; I could either repeat the public exam again or I can enter the community college, and for the community college you have a lot of different choices, if you have enough money you pay, it will be easier to offer you a program”.*

*Respondent 1*

Failure to obtain a score high enough to be accepted by a university is common, primarily affecting Band 3 high school students, but also Band 2 and 1 ones; the alternatives typically

involve retaking the HKDSE or applying for a self-financed program, both of which can have detrimental effects on future psychological and strategic career planning:

*“HKDSE was very difficult to access; Now I’m studying by myself for trying again to pass it, but maybe I’ll go to the self-financed education. The level is just lower than the bachelor, like a community college”.*

*Respondent 12*

However, the disadvantages of applying to a self-financed program, rather than being accepted in a government-funded university, are considerable and can pose significant challenges in terms of future employment prospects, as confirmed by Respondent 1: “I would say the legitimacy is not quite high, if you just graduate there (associate degree) is not much significant and not much used, in terms to get a job, the employer will not be sure that this is a good qualification, unless you are not promoted to one of the classic traditional universities through this program”.

Admission to universities is hard, even for those with high enough HKDSE scores, and students commonly have to accept offers from second- or third-choice programs that they hadn't originally applied for, as for Respondent 23: “In general, during my cohort, that is 2019 admission year cohort, there was only 20% of HKDSE candidates can get a university offer. Among all programs in universities, it is not too hard to get a BBA offer”, and for Respondent 13: “I had doubts, I would like to do architecture, but it was too difficult, then there was biological sciences, but it was too related to business, very competitive, so at that time I chose language”.

The findings showed that students from lower Band schools, who are underrepresented in universities, are unfairly disproportionately impacted by the fierce rivalry to enter higher education, backed also by what Berger and Combet (2017) discovered in their study. Only three interviewees were from Band 3 schools, and just one of them, of a total of 23 interviewees, was able to enrol in a government-funded university (none of the Band 3 students in the sample were able to make it into the top 3).

#### 5.4 Competitiveness in Education: Health and Psychological Conditions

The constant evaluation that Hong Kong students are subjected to, and the multiple competitive hurdles they must overcome, cause them a great deal of stress and anxiety. As described by Högberg (2019) regarding the effects of pressure, competition, and social comparison on social behaviours, and as discovered by Chun (2022) in regards to competitiveness and high pressure reflecting in health and psychological conditions, such concerns, which are supported by challenges from peers and family members, may end up causing severe health or psychological problems. From the interviews, it became clear that every respondent felt under extreme stress at least once while going through the course of their education. They specifically mentioned the time leading up to the HKDSE examination, but they also referred to the regular academic year, due to the intense internal and external competition that students must deal with every day:

*“Every year, we all are searching an internship for the summer, this job probably you can secure it for later and is necessary for the future CV. So in September or October, you start thinking about other people that they already found the job, and you think “I’m panicking”, because you didn’t even have an interview, not even a job, your friends or other people in the major they got the interview, so you feel like “I’m not the chosen one” and you think “I have to find jobs”, so at the moment I was quite stressed, so every day I had to file a new application for a new company that I haven’t applied, and you receive also some attitude test that you have to do it ASAP, and also to do the housework”*

*Respondent 3*

*“I do feel stressed all the time, a lot of schoolwork, at HKU you need to do at least 5 courses per semester, is hard to juggle between work and school, I just feel very stressed for midterms and finals. In terms of competition, in my first year studies I was also very obsessed in about my grades, which were not as bad as compared to other kids”.*

*Respondent 19*

The students' severe workload significantly alters how they view themselves and shapes how they envision their future and careers. Some of them may decide to change their course of

study by switching major, quitting their studies, or delaying their graduation due to pressure or health and psychological factors, while others might search for sources of stability in other places, such as religious engagement, as Respondents 20 and 10 affirmed:

*“In Hong Kong usually when you pick a major you stick with it, that’s what the older generation wants, because your paying and you’re losing precious year of your youth. The older generations, your parents and older people, they don’t agree that I take a gap year, but*

*I want to explore what I want in life. what I want to do that is not being stuck on a computer all day”.*

*Respondent 20*

*“I see Hong Kong students need god in general, because stress make people think in general, people are alone and under stress, everyone doesn’t know how to deal with it, people behave weakly because they are, because they cannot remain strong”.*

*Respondent 10*

Part of the respondents— significant when taking the sample into account— had severe physical and psychological traumas, which are a clear indication of the dangerous competition that characterizes today's educational environment in Hong Kong:

*“I was depressed, and it made me harder to focus and there were trouble also after recovering, I lost one year, and also I had then other health issues that I was facing, kind of made me not focusing as great as before”.*

*Respondent 10*

*“Actually in Secondary 4 I committed 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, you only get told just to study, study, study, and at a certain point you just get tired of it, and everything lose meaning, you just get lost, like where am I going, and you start losing hope and faith, and*

*eventually you end up in a dark spiral and I think is a very common problem in Hong Kong.*

*Not everyone*

*goes to suicide, but a lot of people end in depression and mental issues, because of how much pressure they felt, I think something like 80% of students they have mental issues which is pretty insane, that is definitely too much.”*

*Respondent 20*

*“HKUST, the university of Science and Technology, is also known as “The University of Suicide” among the students, because of the high pressure on students and the number of attempted suicidal happened in the years; on the balconies, there are signs to prevent people to go closer, to prevent this to happen again”.*

*Respondent 3*

The various factors significantly and visibly transformed students' perceptions of their lives, their perspectives on employment, and their experiences of stress. These factors offered them a valuable opportunity to gain insights into different priorities in their lives. This calls for additional investigation into Chan's (2019) recommendations that scholars examine the understanding of health issues in education in Asian Societies.

### **5.5. The Advantages of Studying Abroad for Education and Job Seeking Competitivity**

According to Cheng (2014) research, academia has long disregarded the importance that studying abroad plays in Hong Kong society; studying abroad is instead seen as being of utmost importance by families, students, and employers in Hong Kong, as confirmed by Respondent 1: “I believe they have a very clear perception, especially the employers; when they look at your CV, if you had an exchange experience, they mostly think you can engage with a more globalised vision, and in wherever they will think that your English is better”.

Overall, it seems that all students view it as a significant personal benefit, and the vast majority consider it as a professional asset that will make it more straightforward for them to succeed in their careers and hold stronger positions in society. Families push their children to study

abroad, primarily in the UK, Canada, and Australia, but also in Europe and the US, to improve their curriculum, and students consider it as a life-changing experience. Additionally, they all note how language proficiency improves sensibly while engaging with exchange programs or studying abroad, with favorable results for all the competitiveness-related reasons, outlined previously; this goes along with factors such as Banding, the role of the HKDSE, the value of private tutoring, and proficiency in English, as examined in the previous chapters:

*“Studying abroad, it will help you with your English proficiency, it will help you to have higher chances, career opportunities, because having a good English it means you have higher chances for your career and of getting hired”*

*Respondent 11*

Additionally, career advantages were not the only ones acknowledged by the students, while a more complete and comprehensive set of personal improvements were commonly recognized by the interviewees; for the respondent 16: “It broadens your horizon and experience and culture, because usually people coming back from US and Europe they are proactive, and they don’t need the teacher to ask questions, or raise the hands to reach out the professors; I think is the experience of a different culture, see how other worlds works”; at the same time, for the Respondent 21: “It helps you to get a better understanding of what the world really is outside. I remember there was some cultural shock when I started studying in the UK, people do things differently in different places, and there’s customs and taboos that I do in Hong Kong that I can’t do in UK, same as the other way round. Your world view is wider”.

To sum-up, when discussing the benefits of studying abroad with students, it becomes clear how this can be an essential phase in their career development, giving them an edge over competition, and opening their minds to new opportunities and cultures as confirmed by Respondent 7: “During the exchange I also changed my mindset as a student. It just makes the student feel that the world is big and the competition after graduation is worldwide, is not confined to Hong Kong”.



## 5.6. Expectations for Job Seeking

Because of different opportunities given, educational paths, career objectives, and, sadly, heavy stratification in social classes, Hong Kong society is increasingly divided into communities that generally don't interact with one another, reflecting Turner's (2017) and He and Wang's (2019) concept of enclave society and urban enclaves, as affirmed also by Respondent 16: "I have never studied in band 2 or 3, I don't have friends in those schools as well".

This is confirmed also by the fact that only one of the three interviewees from band 3 schools was enrolled in a publicly subsidized university (but not one of the top three, HKU, CUHK and HKUST), and the other two did not achieve the required HKDSE score. In addition, they were not a part of the same network as the other interviewees contacted through snowballing and random sampling: the first was studying in one of the few accessible community colleges, far from the other universities and in a less connected area of the city; the second was contacted through another interviewee, during an evangelization event.

Hong Kong's class separation in districts was further underlined by Respondent 10: "In terms of long-term preparation and personal problems, schools in Hong Kong Island are the best, teacher would choose to work there as there is more social life, and is less stressful. But there is more entertainment, people are more chill, so the teacher working in HK island and Kowloon side is more likely to guide the student in a better way. In order, Hong Kong Island is the best, then Kowloon and then the New Territories for quality of education and opportunities"; and by Respondent 23: "I was not living in the elite school network geography, so I needed to pay extra efforts on study and interviews. Those who live in the network get higher chance to get into elite schools".

The market in Hong Kong is becoming more interconnected, with closer ties to China and a renewed political push for neo-liberal policies, which created the conditions for a market-driven society to change quickly. However, old patterns of class and elitist division from the former British colony persisted as a result of the adaptation of international policies to the local context, which exacerbated pre-existing socioeconomic disparities (Robertson, 2012; Roudometof, 2016).

According to Leontaridi (1998), variations in career aspirations between socioeconomic classes are also extremely marked, exhibiting characteristics specific to the existence of a

segmented or dualized labour market, visible in the Hong Kong reality as stated by Respondent 20: “Band 3 students usually they only end up doing manual jobs, they do electricity or construction work, for us if I heard someone of my classmates (Band 1 high school, HKU University) went to construction I would be very surprised”.

In addition, despite having a greater impact in the lowest occupational sections, competition in the labour market affects the entire youth population, making it extremely challenging to be employed after they graduate or complete their schooling, as confirmed by Respondent 10: “In Hong Kong, everyone does a lot of stuff, unlike China, there is a lot of competition, people cannot find a future”

Other 2 respondents further added on the issue:

*“Most people in engineering and business, especially the major’s where a lot of people get into they struggle a lot to get a job, I heard that someone hasn’t find a job in 4 years after the graduation, because there are over a thousand graduates from each university and a lot of competition”.*

*Respondent 20*

*“For my field it is quite difficult to find a design job, especially in Hong Kong; during my year, many of my classmates didn’t find a job until like 1 year after”.*

*Respondent 14*

This level of competition is further heightened by the outside: as a result of becoming a global centre for trade and education and being closer to China, locals frequently face external competition, as “For the international market, it is true that the international students will be privileged, because employers will prefer people from different backgrounds” (Respondent 1).

The respondents further underline that “There is competition from very top talents from overseas, such university as Oxford, Cambridge and similar; I think for graduates like me from a local university in Hong Kong the competition will be fiercer, because the government is attracting global talent to work in Hong Kong, so for us students the competition will be hard” (Respondent 2).

At the same time, even if the competition hits also high levels of the society, the wealthier individuals suffer fewer problems from this extra competition.

*“There are many types of job, for those labour-intensive work like accounting, it is quite easy to get a job in this industry. But as for banking, heavy competition exists among graduate’s job market”.*

*Respondent 23*

As the phenomenon of extreme competition affects all sectors of the Hong Kong economy, the lower classes of society suffer more as a consequence of being subjected to work for lower wages in a very expensive city and of being unable to move abroad without the necessary skills and language proficiency. Despite this, competition is widespread across all sectors of society, with only a few high-profile professions, as previously explained, being exempted.

### **5.7. Flexibility and Precarity in Students’ Future Perspectives**

While the economy was growing significantly, the newfound openness to international scene also had negative effects on the labour market. There are extremely few protections in employment contracts, particularly for young people, and employers instead reserve the right to change their labour force without significant restrictions, according to Dettmers (2013). For young people in Hong Kong, who already have to deal with the challenges of a very costly city in terms of rent and general cost of living, further market segmentation and the rise in temporary work or unpaid internships make life very difficult, underlining that: “Salary is the most concerning thing about the future for me, because the city is very expensive and everything is very expensive here, so I value a lot the salary for my future job” (Respondent 8)

Prices were a common concern, as stated by respondent 20: “Main problem is the price of living, cause with a million dollars in Hong Kong you can’t do much, you can’t buy a house, barely a car” and added by Respondent 12 “It is sooo expensive Hong Kong ahah; I’m concerned about the prices more than the salaries, prices for living in Hong Kong”.

Since there are few labour protections in their environment, students are concerned about their future and sometimes embrace the idea of not having a permanent job, but rather having to

“jump from job to job”, in order to progress their careers and their salaries, even though they are aware of the harms this can do to their personal lives:

*“If I want to find a stable job, I would have to look harder and longer to find a job; Competition is also on the kind of skill you have, so they request a lot of skills”.*

*Respondent 10*

*“For most field if you are not a professional as a doctor or lawyer, your salary increase is not even meeting the rise of inflation in Hong Kong, so essentially your salary is going down every year which is insane, if you want family or house or stable house, you want to improve your quality of life, you can't stay fixed to one job, and that is why in Hong Kong is popular to change more job or to have more of them; I think the culture in Hong Kong is to change a job every 1 or 2 years, so you can have bigger boost in salary”.*

*Respondent 20*

Despite some of them emphasising the benefits that competition with others can bring to their employment opportunities, stability is still one of the biggest concerns. Nonetheless, for many interviewees, this hyper-competitive system is quite interiorized, even if they are scared of not being able to sustain themselves in the long-term and to have a fulfilling life and career.

*“Flexibility is positive; only competition make people improve, is a positive cycle, because of competition people work harder and study harder, and people who study harder after they go to the workplace, they also become part of competition, so is a positive cycle”.*

*Respondent 7*

*“I'm worried for my future. I'm scared not to have a job for the design, because the career path doesn't allow to control your income, your money for you, because you can have a job in a month and in another month you have no jobs to do. So, it is very unstable and flexible.*

*It would be hard to control”.*

*Respondent 12*

The respondents were typically very realistic about their future prospects; sometimes they didn't consider if there could exist feasible alternatives to the system that surrounds them. As a result, they felt compelled to accept what was taking place in that environment and internalized some aspects of it, in order to pass through this extremely difficult pathway. Similar to what Fisher theorized in *Capitalist Realism* (2009), the liberal ideology's pervasiveness in the reforms implemented in the HKSAR after 1997 had a significant impact on how its residents view the world.

In this situation, some of them may decide to leave the country searching for better chances, since they are overburdened by living expenses, competition, and a lack of security regarding their future professional stability and advancement:

*“Once I have the chance to leave Hong Kong I will take it, here you can't really live with the salary you get here, while in foreign countries yes, rent is expensive and everything is expensive, so is better for me to live like in Europe”*

*Respondent 15*

*“I think there are more opportunities overseas, because I'm studying computer engineering, that is basically programming, which is my only way out, or data base manager, there isn't a lot of demand for that in Hong Kong, I think that the spot available for a job versus the graduate rate is very insane, 1 to 8 or 1 to 10, so only 1 of ten will get a job, so I think going abroad is wiser”*

*Respondent 20*

Nevertheless, the majority of them choose to remain, either because they want to reside closer to their family or friends or because they feel profoundly part of the city and love their peculiar "Hongkongness."

## 6. DISCUSSIONS

The study aims to comprehend how the social and cultural milieu to which Hong Kong students belong, shaped by worries, aspirations, and uncertainties, can produce common patterns of thought that can serve as a starting point for further study. Due to the new policymakers' strict ties to Mainland China and their strong neo-classical orientation, the city's increased opening to international markets has had the greatest influence on Hong Kong society in the past 20 years (Postiglione, 2013; Oleksiyenko, 2013).

The long-term implications of this unregulated liberalization in terms of societal costs (Law, 2014) led to significant inequalities in the labour market, as well as an increase in the phenomena of enclave society and enclave urbanism (Turner, 2017; He and Wang, 2019). Even though there was a widespread rejection of some parts of the mechanism of the education system, such as the standardized public examination, the majority of the interviewees were mostly not contesting the fundamental idea of the reforms, but rather only some of its results. Although student awareness of the negative consequences brought about by these modifications was quite widespread, the common reaction was not one of contrariety to the general system. This reaction should be considered in the peculiar context of the reforms: the atmosphere of liberalist competitive environment was profoundly rooted in the majority of the interviewee's viewpoints, as an assumption which couldn't be changed, but only slightly corrected in some of its aspects.

More in detail, the interviewee's answers were focused on more themes. Among this, stratification, which has been examined both in literature and theory for its potential to propel inequalities in society, can become a mechanism for maintaining and enlarging disparities. In this context, the role of the family's human capital becomes crucial to the development of a hierarchical and segmented society (Allmendinger, 1989; Poon and Wong, 2008; Chow, 2013; Bilecen, 2020). In this context, it emerged unambiguously from all the interviewees that their major objective when starting their studies in Hong Kong is to be admitted to publicly subsidized institutions. Being affected by the results of the reforms in the society, Hong Kong's youth generally seems to have internalized the idea of a softer state, in which people shouldn't be relying on welfare, but only on their own capital accumulation ability.

This effect can be observed clearly analyzing the crucial role of the HKDSE exam: all the participants were aware of the close relationship between the public examination system and the ability of this tool to determine an individual's future and agreed that it played a

disproportionate part in society. At the same time, only a minority of them were disputing the meritocratic foundation this standardized screening test had at its core realizing that social class divisions seriously and irreparably damaged the meritocratic assessment, limiting social mobility at a very low level, as emphasized by Tsang and Isaacs (2022). This institutional structure they are exposed to since they were young clearly shaped the perception of how this screening system, which would be portrayed very negatively in many other societies, affects their lives; in general, it may be inferred that this structure has been interiorized, following the 2000s social reforms.

The other two most significant issues emerged during the interviews were directly related to the public examination system: the school "Banding" and the private education support for students. Regarding Banding, it was frequently criticized that classifying students into multiple assessed quality levels at such a young age worsened the inequality scenario, as indicated by Traini (2022). Nevertheless, only a small percentage of those who participated in the interviews disputed the general idea of classifying schools according to quality, with the early allocation of pupils instead receiving greater attention. Once more, only a portion of the apparatus and not the entire infrastructure was criticized.

Similar to this, self-funded education and private tutoring were generally acknowledged as alternative routes to the targeted achievement: the admission to one of the eight public-funded universities, mainly the top three (HKU, CUHK, and HKUST). The literature on self-financed education made clear the financial benefits of developing such programs for school systems and universities (Chan and Lo, 2007; Lam and Tang, 2012) and their political value in reaching the goal of expanding higher education. What was instead further discussed is the broad awareness among students of the lesser level of work recognition offered by these programs, which are essentially perceived as a second way and attempt to gain entrance to publicly funded universities.

Instead, private tutoring is an additional form of capital-based knowledge and expertise development that only some families can afford; it is further separated into less and more qualitative options, and the associated expense varies according to these. When it comes to private tutoring, it has escalated to the point where some parents enrol their 3-year-old children in ballet, piano, or other programs to increase their chances of getting into higher-level primary schools. English proficiency is the most sought-after skill by students and families, as widely agreed upon by the students. As a consequence, English tutoring classes are the most

expensive, and higher Banding schools offer classes almost entirely in English, while lower Banding schools instruct nearly all of their classes in Chinese.

In this context, the meaning of studying abroad for Hong Kong students emerged as a key theme in the interviews, with a few authors such as Cheng (2014) recently addressing the topic. The family has a major contribution in creating the expectation that this could help to increase their children's prospects and improve their career path, as became clear from the interviews, since employers highly value young graduates with an international background. Interestingly, the effects of Glocalization are evident in analyzing the interviewee's answers: an international background is valued as extremely important by employers, and considered also a sign of English proficiency; this "glocal" dimension is accompanied by peculiar traditional characteristics of the local community mindset and labour market, such as extreme competitiveness and long working timetables. As portrayed in the findings, for these reasons studying abroad is commonly considered as a life-changing experience, under both a professional and personal point of view.

Understandably, all of these factors have a significant impact on how young people view their future, which must be concretely projected and cared precisely, in order to be able to be at the same level as peers in an increasingly competitive setting. In any case, this competition is also seen as occurring in several contexts: the majority of the students agreed that society is separated into non-competing sections with little to no interpersonal interaction, as described by Leontaridi (1998). According to J.S. Mill's theories, those segments appear to be developed and molded based on educational and social class position as a pre-market segmentation determinant (Leontaridi, 1998).

This social segmentation is brought up in relation to Hong Kong by almost all of the respondents, who acknowledge the existence of higher status areas such as Stanley on the Hong Kong Island, and lower ones mainly located in the new territories; this results in a similar framework of the urban and social enclave conceptualizations and subdivisions provided by Turner (2017) and He and Wang (2019). Nearly all of the participants also acknowledged the existence of rigid job market filters based on educational, linguistic, and social status qualifications.

In more detail, they highlighted that the educational system played a major role in contributing to these gaps and emphasized the existence of a clear division between a local job market, with lower wages and fewer skills required, and one that is more globally oriented, with higher



salaries and based almost exclusively on graduates from public subsidized universities. Both are fiercely competitive, but have very weak interactions. Doctors, academics, and other professionals make up a higher level of the labour market segment that has less competition, greater earnings, and more stable employment. This extremely hierarchical society, in which a restricted group of social classes occupied the highest levels of political and social power, is not very contested; students seem to be more in contrast with the political outcomes of the new Chinese rule, sharing instead the same idea of society which the higher classes imprinted to the community, enforcing it through the reforms.

Summing up, it emerged clearly from the interviews that there are common concerns about students' future. The first is undoubtedly the intense competition at the university and job-seeking stages, where there is a general anxiety about competing with local and international peers. At the same time, the majority of internationally oriented students accept and praise this competition as crucial to improving the qualities and skills, even though there is no assurance that they will be the ones to succeed.

Precarity is undoubtedly the second issue that the interviewees raised, and they all emphasized that it is one of their top priorities to compete for a stable job in order to establish themselves and strike a healthy work-life balance. However, most of the interviewees acknowledge that this will be extremely challenging in the short and medium terms due to unstable contracts and internships, extremely packed schedules, and intense competition to stand out among the high-achieving candidates. Since it is believed that attaining wage security would be the first step in obtaining a more secure life, salary stability is commonly cited as the most essential short-term aim; anyways, just a few interviewees were confident to manage to find this security in a short/medium term.

All of this resulted in youth being under tremendous pressure from their families, peers, educators, and the not-very-promising entrance into the job market. Students and graduates are among the most affected by these conditions in society, and their efforts to establish some sources of stability are frequently not supported by the school or the community as a whole. For this reason, some of the students who were interviewed claimed to have found relief from their struggles in not connected areas, such as religion or athletic success; other interviewees, however, asserted that the heavy burden on their shoulders had led them to depression, eating disorders, or, in one instance, a suicide attempt.

In light of everything, only about 1 interview of 4 were seriously considering leaving their hometown after their studies; the majority of them nevertheless valued their ties to family, friends, and the city too highly to give up on trying to secure their future. In any case, despite the numerous challenges in their path and the anxieties deriving from them, they all had a highly proactive and positive outlook on the future and were determined not to allow these challenges prevent them from succeeding.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The educational reform, which was an integral aspect of Hong Kong society's reorganization following its handover to China in 1997, brought about significant changes in how students and graduates in Hong Kong saw their futures.

Despite the fact that the general attitude towards their future appears to be still optimistic and energetic, significant worries about their job and future life in terms of competition and competitiveness, societal pressures, and precarity emerged more clearly, and took a very meaningful place in the planning of young people's lives. In order to maintain the level of the objectives they have set for themselves, students must now think more carefully and firmly about every step of their future profession and every investment in it.

The road to achieving this result has proven very long, and many barriers stand in their way. However, it became clear from the study's findings that the respondents generally abide by the rules of competition and market deregulation, and that they rarely criticize the entire background system, but rather just particular elements that they believe should be reviewed. This perspective, which is incredibly focused on students' roles in a more globalised and interconnected society, has undoubtedly been shaped by the reinvigorated political outlook of the reforms and the globalised milieu in which students are currently finding themselves.

Students must be able to manage and consider their cost/opportunity decisions maturely because of this approach, even if they were still at a stage of personal growth that may have been seen as premature in other societies. Thus, it appears that the choices they make for their future are oriented by obtaining those marginal advantages that can help them to be more competitive, such as taking the opportunity to study abroad.

The majority of students in Hong Kong view this last factor, which has received little attention in recent literature on Hong Kong, as almost essential to their development as people. While the importance of this factor for personal growth is undeniably significant, employers,

including those in the public sector, view students with an international background and strong English skills extremely favourably, making this factor even more significant.

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## **APPENDIX I: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

- 1.) Can you introduce yourself and tell me something about your background?
- 2.) At what stage/year of University career are you currently? Which university are you enrolled in and why did you choose this program?
- 3.) Can you tell me something about your senior High School education? Did it help you with your choice for University/Higher Education?
- 4.) Talking about limitations, were there any kind of obstacles (economic or educational or something else) which were preventing you from choosing one or another University?
- 5.) What are the main differences of studying in different kind of high schools?
- 6.) Was there a strong competition to be enrolled in your University Program? Is there a strong competition also inside of your program?
- 7.) Do you think people from other university have the same opportunities you have at yours?
- 8.) Was your program the first choice you had or did you have any doubt on what to study?
- 9.) Do you feel satisfied about the choice of your course? Do you think there could have been better opportunities accessible in other Universities here in Hong Kong?
- 10.) Have you ever felt dissatisfied/sad/depressed/alienated during your studies due to some of the problems listed and discussed earlier?
- 11.) Is your course focused also on the transition to the workforce in the future (with traineeships or other studying/working opportunities)?
- 12.) Did your University offer any opportunities for studying abroad? Did you participate to any of that?
- 13.) Do you think that businesses/workshops/any other kind of workplace you are planning to apply for will value positively or negatively an experience of studying abroad?
- 14.) Do you feel it will be complicated for you to find a workplace suitable with your objectives after finishing your University studies?
- 15.) What are your expectations for a salary and how important is for you?
- 16.) What do you think about the level of competition existing in the sector you want to work in? Is it an internationally working sector or is it more local?
- 17.) In your opinion, are there different opportunities for international and local students?

- 18.) What is your perception of the solidity of the job you can get in Hong Kong you finished your studies?
- 19.) Would you consider going living abroad after finishing your studies? Why?

## APPENDIX II: INTERVIEWS PERSONAL INFORMATIONS

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>High School Band</b>	<b>University (Last Program Attended)</b>	<b>Birthplace</b>
Respondent 1	33	M	1	Hong Kong University (Master)	Hong Kong
Respondent 2	23	M	Mainland China High School	Hong Kong University	Mainland China
Respondent 3	21	M	1(A)	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 4	19	M	1	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 5	22	F	1(B)	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 6	27	F	3	Hong Kong Design Institute (Self-Financed Program)	Hong Kong
Respondent 7	23	M	Mainland China High School	Polytechnic University of Hong Kong (Bachelor)	Mainland China

Respondent 8	24	M	2(B)	The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Master)	Hong Kong
Respondent 9	25	M	1(B)	The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Master)	Hong Kong

Respondent 10	24	M	2(A)	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 11	22	M	1(B)	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 12	20	M	3	Failed to pass the HKDSE Examination, trying to do it again to be accepted in the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong	Hong Kong
Respondent 13	33	F	1	Lingnan University (Master)	Hong Kong
Respondent 14	26	F	2	Polytechnic University of Hong Kong (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 15	22	M	3	Lingnan University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 16	23	F	1	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 17	25	F	Mainland China High School	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Mainland China
Respondent 18	22	F	1	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 19	21	F	1	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 20	20	M	1(A)	Hong Kong University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong



Respondent 21	21	M	1	Currently Studying in Scotland	Hong Kong
Respondent 22	22	F	1	Hong Kong Baptist University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong
Respondent 23	21	F	1(A)	Hong Kong Baptist University (Bachelor)	Hong Kong

### APPENDIX III: LIST OF THE DEGREE ISSUING UGC FUNDED AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

UGC Funded Universities	Publicly Funded Institutions (Not Part of the UGC Funding institutions)	Self-Financing Undergraduate Colleges
City University of Hong Kong (CityU)	The Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts	Caritas Institute of Higher Education
Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU)		Centennial College
Lingnan University		Gratia Christian College
The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)		Hong Kong College of Technology - Institute of Higher Education
The Education University of Hong Kong		Hong Kong Chu Hai College
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU)		Hong Kong Metropolitan University
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST)		Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education
The University of Hong Kong (HKU)		Hong Kong Shue Yan University
		Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong
		The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong
		Tung Wah College
		UOW College Hong Kong
		Yew Chung College of Early Childhood Education

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<sup>i</sup> See: The Government of The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, (2023) '*Institutions*', Education Bureau, available from: <https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/edu-system/postsecondary/local-higheredu/institutions/index.html>