

If not now, when?

Hong Kong's students have bravely asked the question that its universities have ducked, observes Bruce Macfarlane



PAUL BATEMAN

I recently found myself in the curious position of teaching a session on academic freedom as part of a master's course on higher education at the University of Hong Kong. I say curious because my session took place at the same time as a student-led pro-democracy protest took place in the downtown area demanding the right to freely choose Hong Kong's leader.

Students, who have led the "Occupy Central" movement, started a boycott of classes on 22 September. In the past few weeks, only about half of my undergraduates have turned up. But the effect on my postgraduate group has been less pronounced. Undergraduates are largely Hong Kong locals with a keen stake in shaping the future of society here. Most postgraduates, however, are from mainland China and see Hong Kong as an already over-privileged part of the People's Republic of China with comparatively high levels of personal freedom. (Mainland students are classified as "non-local" even though Hong Kong is part of the PRC. This convenient fiction helps to puff up claims to the "internationalism" of Hong Kong universities.)

The undergraduates come mainly from ordinary local families. Unlike the wealthier, who send their children to study abroad in the US, the UK or Australia, these undergraduates have no Plan B. They need to make their future

here. This is why many feel that they must make a stand for democratic freedoms before, as one of my students put it, it is "too late". One banner at the university plaintively asks: "If not now, when?" There is a feeling among this generation that it is now or never.

This sense of urgency may be hard to fathom from the outside. In many ways, Hong Kong still looks much the same as it did 30 years ago, when I first worked here. It is, however, an increasingly divided society. This is not a racial split: 94 per cent of the population are ethnic Chinese. The schism is between local Cantonese and growing numbers of mainland settlers who speak a different language and use simplified rather than traditional Chinese characters. Perhaps most significantly, they also have different values and assumptions, shaped by living in a communist society.

Many Hong Kongers feel that their language and culture is under threat from the changing demographics of the territory. In 2010, almost half of all births in Hong Kong were to mainland Chinese mothers. This new generation, with a right to local citizenship, will change the face of Hong Kong for ever. In the 1980s, you rarely heard anyone speak Mandarin, the official common language of the PRC; now it is heard everywhere, particularly on the university campus. Signs in simplified Chinese, used in the mainland but

not previously in Hong Kong, are also starting to spread. Hong Kong's cultural identity is under threat.

The protests have placed all universities in Hong Kong under close scrutiny. Their collective response, however, might best be described as paternalistic or, less charitably, as demonstrating a clear-headed understanding of which side their bread is buttered on. The eight government-funded institutions have limited themselves to issuing repeated pleas for students to stay safe and to keep their protests peaceful. This was followed shortly afterwards by a joint plea for students to call off their protests for "safety" reasons, a message that conveniently echoed the government line. So much for staying neutral.

Worse still, some universities are using draconian rules on attendance as a way of cajoling students to return to campus. Since the protests started, I have stopped taking my attendance registers and have lobbied others to do likewise. Given the voluntary nature of higher education and the fact that most students are adults, I have never understood why we need them anyway. But in the current circumstances, attendance records provide a means to identify which students have participated in the protests. Such information, once collected, always has the potential to get into the wrong hands. This might appear an exaggerated fear. But it is a very real one if you live in a place that is part of a one-party state without respect for human rights.

Under the "one country, two systems" policy, Hong Kong has its own higher education system, and there is formal legal protection for academic freedom. But at an individual level, academic freedom is more fine-grained. As a financially secure middle-aged British passport holder without family responsibilities, it is easy for me to exercise my academic freedom. However, for academics with a young family to support, without tenure or a passport to a "safe" democratic destination, the reality is somewhat different. Few academics have spoken out publicly. Many are more focused on the upcoming submission deadline set by the local research grant council, success in which is critical for those trying to forge an academic career here. There are different degrees of academic freedom in Hong Kong. It is a relative concept.

One of the reasons why scholars have argued that universities need academic freedom is that they act as a critical conscience of society. But having academic freedom in theory is not the same as exercising it in practice. The main problem is self-censorship. It's about who feels willing and able to speak out. Sadly, those with the most to lose rarely do. The universities have kept their heads down while their students have placed theirs very firmly above the parapet. To our collective shame and embarrassment, it is the students, and not the universities, who are the critical conscience of Hong Kong society. They are the ones who have spoken truth to power.

Bruce Macfarlane is professor of higher education at the University of Hong Kong.