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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**EDITORIAL**

**Hong Kong National Security Law education programs: What do evaluation findings tell us?**
Daniel TL Shek, Diya Dou, Xiaoqin Zhu, Xann Li and Joav Merrick

**REVIEW ARTICLES**

**ORIGINAL ARTICLES**

**Perceived effectiveness of a National Education Program for undergraduate students in Hong Kong: Subjective outcome evaluation**
Xiang Li, Daniel Shek, Xue Wu and Daiyi Chen

**Subjective outcome evaluation of an online program on law-abiding leadership**
Xiaoqin Zhu, Daniel TL Shek, Xue Wu and Hongyi Zhan

**Evaluating the impact of a national education program for taught postgraduate students in Hong Kong**
Diya Dou, Xue Wu, Shunhao Zhang and Daniel TL Shek

**Evaluating the effectiveness of an online National Education Program for Research Postgraduate Students in Hong Kong: A multidimensional approach**
Diya Dou, Xue Wu, Daniel TL Shek and Gilbert KP Leung

**Qualitative evaluation of law abidance leadership education for undergraduate students in Hong Kong: Focus groups**
Xiang Li, Daniel TL Shek, Xue Wu and Shunhao Zhang

**Online National Security Law (NSL) education in Hong Kong: Qualitative evaluation based on focus groups**
Xiaoqin Zhu, Daniel TL Shek, Xue Wu and Jun Hong

**Focus group evaluation of national education in Hong Kong: Postgraduate students' perceptions**
Diya Dou, Xue Wu and Daniel TL Shek

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# Editorial

## Hong Kong National Security Law education programs: What do evaluation findings tell us?

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## Introduction

Law and order are vital to the stability of a society. Without law and order, criminal offences would increase which results in social unrest and chaos. To achieve law and order, the public must have a sense of law-abiding spirit, which includes understanding of the requirement of the law and the motivation to follow the law. In particular, as young people usually hold negative views about authority, there is a need to educate young people on the importance of law abidance.

To maintain national security, many countries have legislations on national security, including economic security, energy security, social security and political security, which are commonly regarded as "national security law" (NSL). With particular reference to Hong Kong, the Hong Kong National Security Law is something new to the Special Administrative Region of China. Under the Hong Kong Basic Law, Hong Kong has the constitutional responsibility to enact the Article 23 covering national security issues such as treason, theft of state secrets and subversion. Unfortunately, because of different obstacles, Hong Kong has not been able to enact Article 23 since the resumption of sovereignty by the P.R.C. on July 1, 1997. During the past 26 years, two major social events took place that have shattered the stable social foundation of Hong Kong. These included the "Occupy Central" movement in 2014 and the "Anti-extradition Law" social event in 2019-2020. In the former case, although there was widespread illegal occupation of roads, violence was not serious. Unfortunately, for the social event taking place in 2019-2020, widespread vandalism and violence took place. For example, protestors occupied the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong to block the major roads in Hong Kong.

To regain law and order in Hong Kong and to maintain national scrutiny in the Special Administrative Region of P.R.C., the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress promulgated the Hong Kong National Security Law. Before finalization of the Hong Kong National Security Law, consultation of various stakeholders (such as the two professional bodies of lawyers and barristers) was carried out. To help young people understand the Hong Kong National Security Law, it is explicitly stated in the Hong Kong National Security Law that education institutions, including universities, have the responsibility to implement education programs on the Hong Kong National Security Law.

As the Hong Kong National Security Law education is something new for Hong Kong, there are two issues to be addressed. The first issue is the content of National Security Law education programs. While it is necessary to introduce the four offences under the National Security Law, mere coverage of such offences is not adequate. There is a need to cover the basic concepts of national security, the "Century of Humiliation" in modern Chinese history, a brief introduction of the history of modern China, the Constitution, and Hong Kong Basic Law. Through such topics, it is hoped that the students could appreciate the background leading to the Hong Kong National Security Law as well as develop national identity. The second issue is to understand the impact of NSL education through systematic evaluation. Essentially, evaluation provides the necessary scientific evidence to inform educators about the impact of the Hong Kong National Security Law education programs.

At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, we have developed four NSL programs. First, we have designed a face-to-face program on law abidance leadership for 4-year undergraduate students (3 hours of interactive lecture and 7 hours of self-study). Second, we have designed an online program on law abidance leadership (3 hours of online teaching and 7 hours of self-study). Third, for taught postgraduate students, they are required to take a 3-hour online course plus three hours of self-study. Finally, for research postgraduate students, they are also required to take a 3-hour online course plus three hours of self-study. In the past two years, we have already demonstrated the impact of the program for the 4-year students via objective outcome evaluation, subjective outcome evaluation and qualitative evaluation. Besides the responses of students, we also collected sharing from the teachers. Taken as a whole, the available evaluation findings are very positive (1-6).

Besides the 4-year undergraduate program, there is a need to understand the impact of NSL education programs for the Senior-Year program, Taught postgraduate programs, and Research postgraduate programs. Hence, in this special issue, we collected several papers adopting different evaluation strategies to examine the impacts of NSL education programs in Hong Kong.

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# Perceived effectiveness of a National Education Program for undergraduate students in Hong Kong: Subjective outcome evaluation

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***Abstract:*** Based on students' subjective perception, the primary objective of the present research was to assess the effectiveness of a national education program within the framework of higher education in Hong Kong. Responding to the need to foster law abidance education among university students, we delivered a three-hour lecture on law abidance leadership addressing issues related to the Hong Kong National Security Law and invited students to answer an evaluation survey. A total of 1,155 students completed the post-lecture questionnaire. By analyzing the data using Confirmatory Factor Analysis, we found that the three-factor model (i.e., teaching qualities, lecture attributes, and students' law appreciation) was well established and students had positive perception of the lecture. Furthermore, we identified the three factors as significant predictors of students' overall perception of the national education program. Qualitative responses, echoing quantitative data, were also found to be positive. This study conducted further research to validate existing empirical evidence about the efficacy of the national education program in the higher education sector in Hong Kong.

***Keywords:*** National education program, leadership subject, subjective outcome evaluation, undergraduate students, Hong Kong

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## Introduction

The protest known as "The Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill" in 2019 had evident adverse social implications that significantly impeded the quality of life and well-being of those living in Hong Kong (1). Despite the protests being initiated with peace, most of them ended up with disturbance and violence, where demonstrators and criminal syndicates who took advantage of the chaos attacked bystanders and destroyed private and public properties. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong government) reported sharply increasing criminal cases during the second half of 2019, which reversed a consecutive downward trend of crimes since 2007 (HKSAR Government, 2020). Months-long social unrest

was believed to significantly contribute to the upheaval of crime statistics either directly or indirectly (2). Moreover, people believe that university students actively participated in the protests as violent altercations between demonstrators and police happened in educational institutions (3). According to the Hong Kong Police Force, 10,278 people had been arrested by June 2022, among whom 4,010 were students, accounting for 39% of the arrestees (4). Charges against protesters included rioting, unlawful assembly, arson, possession of offensive weapons, assaulting police officers, and stopping vehicles on the highway (5). These incidents reflected students' insufficient legal awareness and understanding of the value of law abidance, making them susceptible to external influences and more vulnerable to irrational expressions of arguments (6). Several local universities such as The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) were occupied and damaged much during the riots. As reported, the estimated renovation fees of PolyU reached HKD 700 million, covering the reconstruction of broken building gates and windows, besmirched exteriors, and waterlogged indoor facilities (7). Meanwhile, the protests hindered the regular functioning of universities, leading to "conflictual academic environments on campuses, with several violent confrontations between students, demonstrators, and the police" (8), forcing the temporary cessation or substitution of lectures with online instruction, the rearrangement of examination schedules, and the deferment of new admissions (1,9). Furthermore, it also affected the positive image of Hong Kong universities for international students and academics (3). There was concern that the willingness of non-local students and outstanding academics to study and work at Hong Kong would be undermined (3). Therefore, it has become a very urgent and necessary task to restore social stability in Hong Kong and conduct education on national security in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions so as to raise the awareness of adherence to the law among university students and the public.

"The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" (also commonly regarded as the "Hong Kong National Security Law" or NSL) is one of the important means of restoring law and order in Hong Kong. Enacted by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on June 30th, 2020, the NSL aims to "establish and improve the legal system and implementation mechanism for safeguarding national security in the Special Administrative Region" (10) and empowers the Hong Kong government to take ad hoc actions to preserve national security and social stability. It also draws "political red lines against the spread and infiltration of Hong Kong independence on university campuses" (3). As reported, the number of violent crimes in 2020 dropped by 3.1% since the introduction of the NSL (11). In addition, to enhance the public's understanding of NSL and to fully grasp the legal values and rules, Article 10 of the NSL encourages "the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) to promote national security education in schools and universities and through social organizations, the media, the internet, and other means to raise the awareness of Hong Kong residents of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law" (12). Thus, there is a requirement for colleges to implement national security education programs in order to clarify the significance of the NSL and raise students' awareness of appreciating the law.

In fact, programs related to national security have become a significant addition to the social studies curriculum in high schools and higher education institutes worldwide (13). Particularly in some developed societies, national security education has been considered a substantial component of civic education. For example, in the U.S., both sides of the political spectrum have widely agreed upon national security education against international and domestic terrorism ever

since the attack of September 11. The United States government has since then initiated a national undertaking of protecting national security through education, where education covering skills and knowledge essential to national security protection, including computer programing, engineering, and crisis leadership, are to be offered to pre-college students (14-16). Similarly, national security education constitutes an indispensable part of civic education in Singapore, emphasizing how Singapore's prosperity has been established in a secure geopolitical environment (17). In Hong Kong, primary and high schools are given the responsibility to implement citizenship education (commonly known as "Moral, Civic and National Education [MCNE]") to enhance students' national security awareness, but almost no general education subject related to national security is implemented in the higher education sector (15).

In response to the call for national security education for university students, national security education program was incorporated into a subject entitled "Tomorrow's Leaders" at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). The program includes a 3-hour in-person lecture in conjunction with 7-hour self-study, with the objectives of briefly introducing "the history of modern Chinese history" ("Century of Humiliation"), "the concept of national security", and NSL with selected cases considered as its offense and other relevant issues to first-year undergraduate students. As a kind of law-related education (LRE), the program aims to develop more positive attitudes toward the law in university students through helping them acquire knowledge of legal concepts and promoting their spirits of law abidance. It could also facilitate students to understand the consequences of criminal offenses and charges under NSL in Hong Kong and enhance their respect for law abidance (18). It is well known that lack of information literacy (19) and self-autonomy awareness (20), and imitation of peer's criminal behaviors (21) are significant contributors to juvenile delinquency. In addition, insufficient legal education and competitive sociality jointly catalyzed local youngsters to be apt to release the pressure by committing violent crimes (6). Consequently, higher education institutes have the responsibility to "nurture students' awareness and understanding of the basic democratic principles and values on which our law, government and society are based" through law-related education in order to help them become effective citizens (22). The "US Office of Education" (23) described LRE as:

> "Those organized learning experiences provide students and educators with opportunities to develop the knowledge and understanding, skills, attitudes, and appreciations necessary to respond effectively to the law and legal issues in our complex and changing society"

Scholars also identified multi-dimensional benefits of practicing legal education for university students, including familiarizing elementary knowledge of laws (intellectual dimension), regulating individual behaviors regarding laws (social dimension), and fostering awareness of maintaining public well-being (environmental dimension) (24,25). Moreover, the enhancement of legal education in terms of social administration renders the necessity of preventing potential illegality and social unrest.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic was no longer categorized as a public health emergency, the teaching mode of our national education program has shifted from hybrid to face-to-face in 2022/23 academic year. Scholars believe that face-to-face instruction can optimize the effectiveness of teaching sensitive or controversial topics, such as children's sexuality (26) and sexual violence (27), as well as politically sensitive ones, like religious beliefs and LGBTQ citizenship (28, 29). National security education may be a sensitive topic in contemporary Hong Kong. Therefore, the cultivation of high-quality learning experiences that include sensitive issues

is of utmost importance in fostering the resilience necessary for students to navigate the sensitive terrain that unavoidably emerges within academic and professional settings. As demonstrated, students generally benefit from such a learning process because controversial topics usually push them to reflect critically on perspectives from multiple and, in most cases, conflicting interest parties, whereby they realize how intricate social issues could be (30). Correspondingly, teachers also want to listen to more student voices and give students different opportunities to express themselves on complex and sensitive issues. In addition, studies on the pedagogy of sensitive topics in various disciplines commonly stress the significance of establishing a learning community to address any discomfort or misgiving that emerges throughout the learning process, and the key to successful teaching lies in the correct guidance of the teacher. In this sense, face-to-face instruction allows the convenience of constructing learning communities so that teachers can immediately address any concerns that emerge during teaching (28). Especially for undergraduate students whose values are taking shape, guiding students' emotions and understanding of controversial topics promptly during the learning process can help them think about themselves, the world, and others in new ways (31). Upon completion of the face-to-face lecture and online self-study, students' learning outcomes will be assessed via a multiple-choice quiz with 20 questions, where students are offered unlimited attempts until they achieve a passing grade (16 out of 20).

In previous academic years, the national education program has been successfully delivered to all students (including first-year undergraduates, senior-year students, and postgraduates) at the PolyU, and its teaching effectiveness has also been evaluated using different research approaches (6,18,24,32-34). The first-year undergraduates generally held favorable opinions of the lecture content and benefits and were satisfied with their teacher's performance. On these grounds, replicating the results over time is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the NSL education program by analyzing how students perceive the program under a face-to-face teaching mode, which provides more direct interaction between teachers and students or amongst peers. Silliman (35) suggested that politically sensitive issues are better taught in an environment that allows close interaction between students and instructors. It would be easier to encourage fruitful and thought-provoking discussion and reflection on topics among classmates when there is better and more conformable teacher-student interaction in the classroom, mainly when some of the critical socially acknowledged cases are utilized to underscore the fundamental principle of national security law (35). Furthermore, students could get the opportunity to witness their instructors' expertise in person and perceive their enthusiasm, openness, and concern toward students.

The objective of this research was to investigate the potential predictors of students' overall satisfaction with the Law Abidance Leadership lecture, specifically focusing on their reported teaching quality, perceived lecture qualities, and appreciation of law. First, how students perceive teaching performance of the instructor has been regarded as a critical predictor of their general perception of learning experiences. The extent to which an instructor manages to articulate knowledge, maintain interactive atmosphere, and display personal charisma to convince the audiences are thus of high relevancy to how students evaluate the learning experiences (36). Second, students' perceived lecture attributes, consequently, contribute to ultimate satisfaction with their learning experiences. Other than the instructor's teaching strategies that embody during the class, lecture attributes serve as routine devices such as readings and lecture notes by which the instructor utilizes to facilitate knowledge transfer (37). Specifically, learning materials such as readings and lecture notes are usually students' first

encounter with the information they are about to receive as students are generally required or at least recommended to consult these materials before attending a lecture (38), hence their ultimate perception of learning experiences can be expected to covary with the lecture attributes they previous perceived. Lastly, students generally display satisfaction if they are connected with the values that a specific course has conveyed. Therefore, students would speak in favor of a lecture on legal issues and law abidance if they identify with the value of appreciating the laws.

Based on previous evaluation projects covering multiple positive youth development programs (in both secondary and tertiary education), we identified students' perceptions of lecture attributes (i.e., course contents, relevant materials, teaching structure, etc.) and teaching quality to be the predictors of students' overall subjective assessment of the courses they take (6, 18, 39-41). The third factor of students' appreciation of law has also been tested as a significant predictor of their overall satisfaction. Meanwhile, we also hope to alleviate the "replication crisis" in the social sciences (42), especially in psychology (43), by replicating our previous findings in the existing scientific literature. Based on the previous evaluation studies of current "Law Abidance Leadership" lecture, students have reported dominantly positive perception both in post-lecture satisfaction scales and open-ended comment boxes, indicating both quantitatively and qualitatively their overall satisfaction with the lecture (6, 18). As the students in this study were drawn from a different population, there is a need to see whether the previous findings can be replicated.

In this study, we examined students' perceptions of the national education program offered in the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year at the PolyU through the post-lecture evaluation. The evaluation questionnaire contains 26 items and an open-ended question. Based on previous studies (6, 18, 40), the 26 items were further categorized into three dimensions: perceived quality of instruction, teacher performance, and student appreciation of law abidance leadership. In the current study, we aimed to further validate the first-year undergraduates' perception towards the law abidance leadership course and identify which components, including lecture attributes, teaching quality, and appreciation of law abidance, could predict students' satisfaction in face-to-face education programs. As a replication study, this study can draw an integrated picture of how students view national security education across various teaching and learning contexts. Three research questions were proposed as follows:

1. What are the psychometric characteristics of the 26-item questionnaire of students' subjective perception on the national education program? Based on established findings on the contribution of lecture attributes, teaching quality, and appreciation of law abidance (6), we hypothesized that the three-factor model would be supported (Hypothesis 1a) and the three factors significantly contribute to students' overall satisfaction of the program (Hypothesis 1b).
2. What are students' perceptions of the national security program in terms of course attributes (including course design, content, process, and benefits), teaching quality, and appreciation of law abidance? Drawing on our previous research (6,18), we expected students' responses to be positive across all the three dimensions (Hypothesis 2).
3. What are the qualitative responses of students to the three-hour lecture on law abidance leadership? Based on previous observations (6), we expected students' qualitative responses to be positive (Hypothesis 3).

## Methods

All year 1 undergraduates from nine faculties and schools (e.g., Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences) are required to attend a leadership subject, "Tomorrow's Leaders" at the PolyU. This subject consists of 13 lectures including a 3-hour lecture on law abidance leadership (Lecture 8). After attending Lecture 8, students were invited to fill out an evaluation form to report their subjective experiences on this lecture in terms of their opinions on the teachers' attributes, perspectives of the lecture attributes, and their appreciation of law abidance leadership. A total of 1,155 students completed the survey.

**Instruments**

The post-lecture evaluation survey was developed based on Shek and colleagues' study (18). It had been used for several times in the previous studies and was demonstrated reliable and valid (6, 18). This survey included 26 quantitative items and one open-ended question. As for the quantitative part, item 1 to item 11 were employed as a subscale for students' perception of the lecture attributes; item 12 to item 19 were for studying students' appreciation of law abidance leadership; item 21 to item 26 were designed for the subscale of teaching quality; and item 20 was asking about students' overall evaluation of this lecture. All quantitative items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating higher agreement (from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 6 = "strongly agree"). Scores higher than or equal to 4 were positive responses while those lower than 4 would be considered negative. As for the qualitative item, it asked students to write down their comments about the lecture or anything they learned from the lecture. They could also write "NIL" if they do not have any comments. Students' responses were categorized as positive or negative/undecided.

**Data analysis**

To replicate the three-factor model, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using MPlus. To analyze the impacts of the three variables on students' overall perception of the lecture, we employed a structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the structural model. The model fit was assessed based on several indicators, including the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; 90% CI), and the Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMR). CFI and TLI greater than 0.9, RMSEA less than 0.06, and SRMR less than 0.08 would be considered satisfactory (44-46). Moreover, a one-sample Chi-square test was conducted to check if the possibilities of students holding positive or negative/undecided opinions on this lecture were equal.

Table 1

## Results

The descriptive statistics and inter-correlational relationships among the three variables, namely students' perceived lecture attributes, appreciation of law abidance leadership and teaching quality, and overall satisfaction are summarized in table 1. It was found that the inter-correlations among the three variables ($rs > .82$, $ps < .001$) were significant. We also found that the inter-correlation between three variables and overall satisfaction were significant ($rs > .80$, $ps < .001$).

The overall fit of the three-factor model was acceptable: $x^2(272) = 1130$, CFI = .938, TLI = .932, RMSEA (90% CI) = .054 (.051, .057) and SRMR = .032. All factor loadings were high, ranging from .83 to .93 for perceptions of the lecture attributes, .85 to .94 for appreciation of law abidance leadership, and .87 to .93 for teaching quality. All items' values of skewness were

smaller than 2 and values of kurtosis were lower than 7, which were far below the criteria of being moderately nonnormal and satisfied the prerequisite of normality (47). Details were reported in table 2. Hypothesis 1a was well supported.

Table 2

The SEM results revealed that all attributes of the scale (i.e., perceptions of the lecture attributes, appreciation of law abidance leadership and teachers' attributes) were significantly related to students' overall satisfaction towards the lecture. The overall fit of the structural model was acceptable: $x^2(294) = 1164$, CFI = .940, TLI = .934, RMSEA (90% CI) = .052 (.049, .056), and SRMR = .031. Specifically, the study found that there is a notable positive correlation between perceptions of the lecture attributes, appreciation of law abidance leadership, teachers' attributes, and students' overall satisfaction ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.50$, $p < .001$; $\beta = 0.10$, $p < .05$; respectively). The SEM model was depicted in Figure 1. In short, the design of the lecture, including the lecture attributes and the content of law abidance leadership, and teachers' teaching quality was significantly related to students' perception towards the lecture, supporting Hypothesis 1b.

Table 3

The positive responses rate for each item was also calculated as shown in Table 3. Consistent with our expectation, most students responded positively to each question. The means of all questions were higher than 4 and many of them were approaching 5 (scores higher than 4 indicate positive perceptions). Meanwhile, the positive response rates of all items were approximately 90% and some (item 18 and 26) even reach 95%. To be specific, 90% and 88% of students thought the design and atmosphere of this lecture was pretty great. Meanwhile, students agreed that they had much interaction with their peers (87%) and the lecturer (91%). They had many opportunities for participation (87%) and reflection (88%) during the lecture. Moreover, students thought that the lecture benefited their personal development (86%), especially their ability of solving problem (85%), communication (84%), and critical thinking (88%). Besides, students also thought that this lecture helped them understand more about the importance of successful leaders' attributes (88%), the importance of law abidance for social stability (92%) and leadership (90%), the concepts of national security (92%), the principles (93%) and importance of Hong Kong National Security Law (89%). More importantly, students received that this lecture clarified their previous myths surrounding National Security Law in Hong Kong (90%) and signified that they would do their best to be a law-abiding citizen (95%) and a leader with social responsibility (94%). As for views on teachers' attributes, students generally expressed high recognition. The positive response rates for items in this subscale were all as high as 95%. Specifically, students appreciated that the lecturer mastered the materials used in the lecture, encouraged students with various methods, livened up the classroom climate and promoted mutual respect, and helped all students understand all the knowledge effectively. Thus, hypothesis 2 was well supported.

Table 4

Finally, we conducted a one-sample Chi-square test to assess if students were equally likely to

share positive or negative/undecided opinions on this lecture. There was a total of 90 students providing responses to the qualitative question: "Please write down your comments about this lecture (e.g., what you have learnt in this lecture)". Amongst all the opinions collected (see table 4), almost all of them were positive ($n$ = 85) while only 5 were negative or neutral. The Chi-square value was 71.11 ($p$ < .001), suggesting that there were more positive responses than negative or neutral responses at a significant level. Despite of some general positive answers, such as "it is a good lecture which broaden my horizons" and "it is a meaningful lesson", many students offered more specific opinions. For instance, 59 students in total said that they learnt a lot of knowledge through this lecture. The knowledge they mentioned mainly referred to the content and the importance of Hong Kong National Security Law and personal development, such as "how to be a good people" or "a socially responsible leader". Meanwhile, students also shared their appreciation of teachers' attributes ($n$ = 3). Students "felt grateful" and deemed the lecturer "observant and tactful". On the contrary, some students held negative or neutral views on the lecture ($n$ = 5). Instead of the content of the lecture, students' comments were basically about the length of the lecture, the passing rate of the examination, the lack of interaction, and the gender indication question in the examination, which was also in line with previous studies (24). In short, the lecture was largely well-received by the students. Hence, hypothesis 3 was well supported.

## Discussion

Based on post-lecture evaluations, this study investigated how undergraduate students perceived a law-related education program conducted via face-to-face teaching mode in Hong Kong. In addition, as the 3-hour lecture is to foster undergraduate students' consciousness of law-abidance, the present research additionally conducted a special examination of students' viewpoints about the lecture, focusing on the delivery of the course and specific elements pertaining to education on national security. This research has two distinct qualities. First, after the COVID-19 outbreak ceased to be an event of international concern, this study shifted the focus from online/hybrid (6, 18) to the face-to-face mode of delivery. By evaluating students' perception of their classroom learning, it provides new insights into how students perceive national education under different teaching modes. Second, the study used a three-factor model to measure students' perceptions of the national security program, which proved its validity in predicting students' attitudes toward the program and echo previous studies (6,18).

Several conclusions could be derived from the findings. First, consistent with our previous studies on the same topic using different learning mode (e.g., online and hybrid mode), the findings demonstrated that the majority of students gave favorable responses on this national education program, indicating that the national education program had been accepted by undergraduate students. Students were found to be satisfied with teaching quality, lecture attributes, and appreciation of law abidance leadership. In terms of students' perception of the lecture attributes, the atmosphere in the classroom was particularly well received by the students, with frequent peer interaction and excellent teacher-student interaction. Furthermore, students felt that they gained a good sense of engagement throughout the face-to-face teaching process. They believed that the 3-hour lecture on law abidance leadership will be beneficial for their whole-person development and equips them with law-abiding and responsible social citizenship. We therefore believe that the law-related education was seen as being of high quality, informative, important, and beneficial in assisting students to comprehend the value of national security and Hong Kong NSL. The qualitative comments also triangulated the effectiveness of

law-related education in promoting students' legal awareness. Accordingly, due to the scarcity of research on the efficacy of the face-to-face learning approach to law-related education, our finding expanded the existing body of knowledge.

Second, the current results further showed that lecture attributes, teachers' attributes, and law abidance appreciation as effective predictors of students' evaluation of education programs as such. Lecture attributes and teaching qualities have been validated by scientific literature in education studies as two of the major contributors of students' satisfaction with their specific learning experiences, respectively. With regard to lecture attributes, an evaluation study has identified students' perceived effectiveness of lecture design is the strongest predictor of students' general satisfaction with the courses taken (48). Other evaluation studies of students' learning satisfaction have validated that the effectiveness of teaching perceived by students displays the strongest relationship to their overall satisfaction to specific educational experiences. Particularly, an evaluation study conducted in the United States revealed that the more students conceive that they gained desirable skills and knowledge from instructors' teaching, the more they construe the learning experiences decent (49). Such findings resemble the cases in psychology courses where students' evaluation of teaching quality also shows the highest explanatory power towards their overall learning satisfaction (36). Moreover, our findings are in line with several evaluation studies that spontaneously examine the two factors of lecture attributes and teaching quality. Shevlin and colleagues (50) identified lecturer's charisma and module attributes as joint contributors to students' teaching evaluation in UK's higher education, where the former contributes more significantly than the latter. Other works reported such relationships vary across disciplines, where the contribution of lecture attributes to students' subjective evaluation of courses is the most significant in social sciences education (51).

Going beyond conventional predictors, our previous analyses of students' subjective perception of law abidance leadership and NSL education add the extent to which students are willing to abide the laws to current social scientific literature on specific education programs of this kind (e.g., legal education for non-law school students) (6,18). Until now, this three-factor model has been applied to evaluation of programs in various kinds and demonstrated promising usefulness (18,39,40). Again, replicated results reaffirmed the efficiency of national security education in the context of Hong Kong. We also expect our efforts on reproducing and re-verifying previous outcomes will confirm the validity of the predictors and the measurement over time.

Finally, this study clarified several constant misrepresentations concerning national education in Hong Kong. Most importantly, our findings argue against the idea that students in Hong Kong's universities dominantly disapprove NSL education. In terms of the structure of NSL education, it should be illustrated that it not only includes principles and significance of national security but also spirits of law and order. We have discussed the absence of legal education in Hong Kong society and its possible consequences in the introduction section, where previous studies have demonstrated that insufficient legal education can turn dissenters to violent reactions against perceived structural pressures (6,52). NSL education is then delivered to cover both absence of national security and legal education in Hong Kong higher education.

Some limitations of this study should be noted. Overall, high rate of positive response should be interpreted with caution, given the topic of lecture is controversial and that students might shy away from reporting their authentic feedback. Out of 1,424 students taking this subject, only 1,155 students (81.1%) responded to the post-lecture evaluation questionnaire. Hence, even if response rate is satisfactory, further efforts should be put on unvoiced students in the program. In

previous evaluations of the same program (24), we applied qualitative methods such as focus group approach to access students' experiences in detail. Qualitative responses were dominantly positive as expected, where students shared how they benefited from the lecture with regard to enhancing awareness of national security and law abidance. We have collected five negative responses in which insufficient interaction during the lecture was mentioned. For future design of lectures of this kind, we recommend including more interactive components to allow ideas exchange between instructors and students. We then expect conversation to be more effective than merely instruction. Finally, as we argued when interpreting previous evaluation results (18), it should be noted that optimistic survey results cannot be directly used to predict behavior improvement in real life. Replicative and longitudinal survey should be conducted on students who have taken NSL education lecture to examine whether lecture attendance eventually leads to appreciation of national security and law abidance.

In sum, the current study examined undergraduate students' responses to the learning experience of a 3-hour face-to-face lecture on law-abiding leadership and national security education at the PolyU. Based on the data gathered from 1,155 undergraduates via the post-lecture evaluation, the finding of this study demonstrated that the majority of students had a positive learning experience in the program in terms of their satisfaction with lecture attributes, teaching quality, and their appreciation of law abidance leadership. The findings triangulated our previous studies with different learning modes (6, 18) and provided a solid basis for further promoting national security education in Hong Kong.

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**Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among three factors and overall satisfaction**

| | | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Perception of the lecture attributes | 4.64 | 1.04 | | | |
| 2 | Appreciation of law abidance leadership | 4.80 | 1.01 | .89*** | | |
| 3 | Teachers' attributes | 4.91 | 0.90 | .82*** | .83*** | |
| 4 | Overall satisfaction | 4.72 | 1.14 | .88*** | .89*** | .80*** |

*Note.* ***$p < .001$.

**Table 2. Skewness, kurtosis, and standardized factor loadings for the TL post lecture evaluation form (n = 1155).**

| | Skewness | Kurtosis | Factor Loading | SE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Perceptions of the lecture attributes | | | | |
| Item 1 | -0.95 | 1.25 | 0.89*** | 0.01 |
| Item 2 | -0.92 | 0.96 | 0.88*** | 0.01 |
| Item 3 | -0.81 | 0.67 | 0.86*** | 0.01 |
| Item 4 | -0.85 | 1.07 | 0.83*** | 0.02 |
| Item 5 | -0.89 | 0.95 | 0.89*** | 0.01 |
| Item 6 | -0.93 | 1.02 | 0.92*** | 0.01 |
| Item 7 | -0.94 | 0.87 | 0.92*** | 0.01 |
| Item 8 | -0.90 | 0.77 | 0.92*** | 0.01 |
| Item 9 | -0.96 | 1.08 | 0.93*** | 0.01 |
| Item 10 | -0.84 | 0.62 | 0.92*** | 0.01 |
| Item 11 | -0.98 | 1.19 | 0.91*** | 0.01 |
| Appreciation of law abidance leadership | | | | |
| Item 12 | -1.07 | 1.48 | 0.91*** | 0.01 |
| Item 13 | -1.06 | 1.64 | 0.91*** | 0.01 |
| Item 14 | -1.11 | 1.76 | 0.93*** | 0.01 |
| Item 15 | -1.18 | 2.05 | 0.92*** | 0.01 |
| Item 16 | -1.09 | 1.32 | 0.94*** | 0.01 |
| Item 17 | -1.12 | 1.53 | 0.93*** | 0.01 |
| Item 18 | -1.14 | 2.20 | 0.85*** | 0.02 |
| Item 19 | -1.15 | 2.28 | 0.87*** | 0.02 |
| Teachers' attributes | | | | |
| Item 21 | -1.02 | 2.03 | 0.87*** | 0.02 |
| Item 22 | -1.05 | 2.02 | 0.92*** | 0.01 |
| Item 23 | -1.10 | 2.16 | 0.93*** | 0.01 |
| Item 24 | -1.09 | 2.26 | 0.93*** | 0.01 |
| Item 25 | -0.97 | 1.77 | 0.91*** | 0.01 |
| Item 26 | -1.04 | 2.01 | 0.93*** | 0.01 |

*Note.* *** $p < 0.001$.

**Table 3. Students' responses in the post lecture evaluation form (*n* = 1,155)**

| Questionnaire Item | | Mean | Positive response rate% |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 | The design of this lecture was very good. | 4.71 | 89.96% |
| Q2 | The classroom atmosphere of this lecture was very pleasant. | 4.67 | 87.73% |
| Q3 | There was much peer interaction amongst the students in this lecture. | 4.62 | 86.82% |
| Q4 | There was much interaction between the lecturer and the students in this lecture. | 4.77 | 91.18% |
| Q5 | There was much student participation in this lecture. | 4.65 | 87.42% |
| Q6 | There were many opportunities for reflection in this lecture. | 4.66 | 87.98% |
| Q7 | This lecture is helpful to my personal development. | 4.59 | 86.09% |
| Q8 | This lecture has improved my problem-solving ability. | 4.56 | 85.48% |
| Q9 | This lecture has improved my understanding of the importance of attributes of successful leaders (e.g., critical thinking, moral competence, law abidance etc.). | 4.63 | 88.07% |
| Q10 | This lecture has improved my interpersonal communication skills. | 4.52 | 84.03% |
| Q11 | This lecture has improved my critical thinking. | 4.63 | 88.23% |
| Q12 | This lecture helps me understand the importance of law abidance in leadership. | 4.71 | 89.69% |
| Q13 | I understand that law abidance is important for the stability of a society. | 4.79 | 91.82% |
| Q14 | This lecture helps me understand the concepts of national security. | 4.80 | 91.98% |
| Q15 | This lecture helps me understand the offenses and penalties surrounding the National Security Law in Hong Kong. | 4.82 | 92.76% |
| Q16 | This lecture helps me understand the importance of implementing the National Security Law in Hong Kong. | 4.72 | 89.29% |
| Q17 | This lecture helps me clarify some myths related to National Security Law in Hong Kong. | 4.72 | 89.89% |

| Questionnaire Item | | Mean | Positive response rate% |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q18 | I will try my best to serve as a law-abiding citizen. | 4.95 | 95.02% |
| Q19 | I will try my best to serve as a socially responsible leader. | 4.87 | 94.41% |
| Q20 | Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of this lecture. | 4.72 | 89.63% |
| Q21 | The lecturer had a good mastery of the lecture material. | 4.90 | 94.93% |
| Q22 | The lecturer used different methods to encourage students to learn. | 4.90 | 94.67% |
| Q23 | The lecturer was able to promote an atmosphere of mutual respect in the class. | 4.96 | 95.20% |
| Q24 | The lecturer was able to help students understand the knowledge covered in the lecture. | 4.90 | 94.94% |
| Q25 | The lecturer was able to effectively take care of all students. | 4.91 | 94.94% |
| Q26 | Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of the lecturer in this lecture. | 4.92 | 95.18% |

*Notes.* All items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale, in which 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, and 6 = Strongly Agree). Scores equal to or above 4 were considered positive responses while those lower than 4 indicate negative responses.

**Table 4. The narrative responses to the qualitative questions regarding students' views on the lecture 8 (law-abidance leadership).**

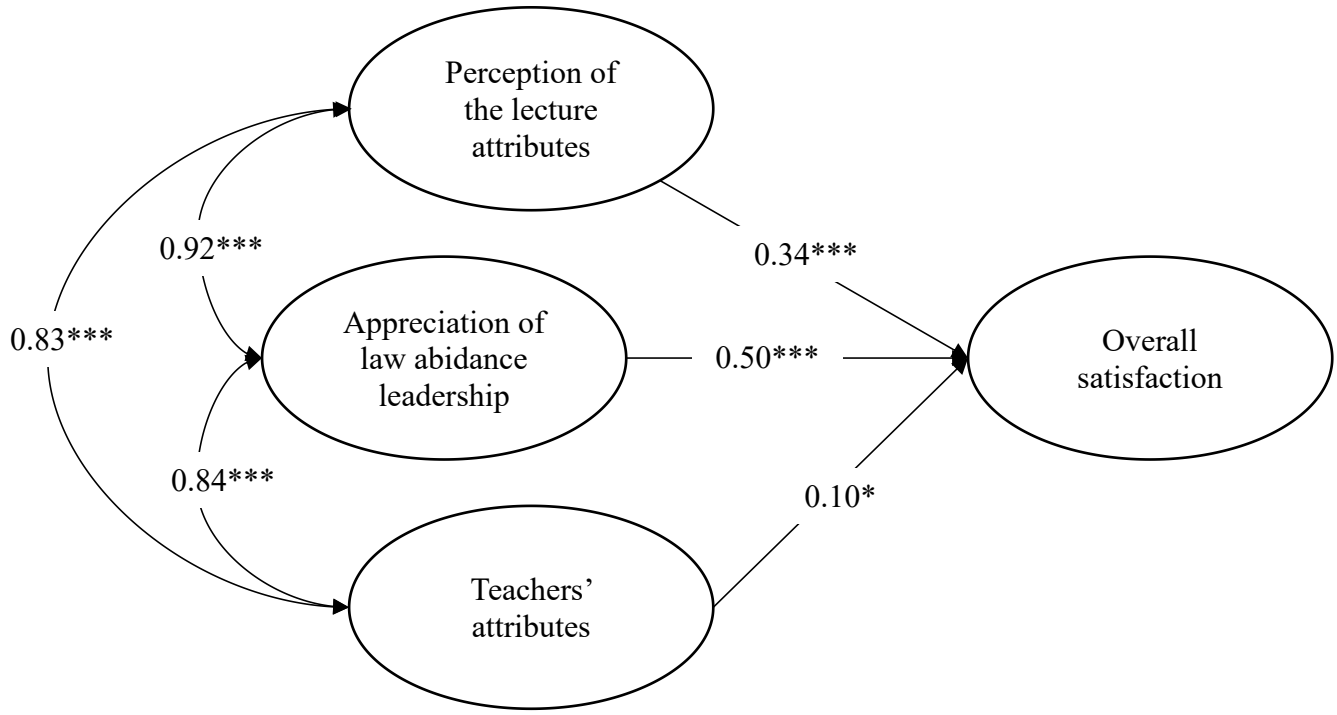
| **Qualitative responses** | |
|---|---|
| **Positive responses (85 responses)** | |
| "General positive opinions" (22 responses) | #Thank you. It is a good lesson. #Very good. #Very good. #Very good. #Very good. #Good lesson. #This lesson was so great. #Nice. #Better than the University of Hong Kong. #It is good lecture which broaden my horizons. #Very good. #Good. #Good. #It is a meaningful lesson. #Very good. #Good. #Good. Very good. #Very good. #Ok. #Happy. #Good! Very interesting. #Lively and interesting. |
| "Learn a lot" category | |
| "National Security Law" sub-category (21 responses) | #Understand more about the laws deeply. #This lesson made me have more and deeper understanding on the National Security Law in our country and our region of Hong Kong. Such lesson is really essential. #Nationial Security. #Refreshed my opinions on our country. #Know more about the knowledge of the National Security Law. #I learn NSL. #I know NSL much now. #The knowledge of NSL. #We have deeper understanding on the different aspects and details of NSL. #I learnt about NSL. #National Security Law. #Learn more about NSL. It is great. #National Security Law. #Have a clear understanding on NSL. #I learnt about NSL. That's good! #I learnt the NSL. #I learnt about the two different ways of enforcing the NSL. #I learnt about the laws in the NSL. #NSL. #I know deeper about NSL. #I have a deeper understanding of NSL. |
| "General knowledge" sub-category (9 responses) | #Learn a lot. #Very useful. #The lecture was quite informative. #Learnt many things. #Abundant. #Very meaningful and useful. #I learn a lot. #I got a lot. #I learnt a lot. |
| "The importance of national security or NSL" sub-category (12 responses) | #There are still many law-breaking citizens out there. We still need to work hard. #It helps me understand the importance of national security. #The importance of NSL. #I have learnt that the National Security Law is very important and cannot be replaced by any other laws since it is very important. It is our responsibility to obey the law. #I've learned the great importance of National Security Law and have a detailed understanding of National Security Law. #National Security Law is very important to me. #The importance of obeying the law. #Importance of national security. #The importance of NSL. #Importance of NSL and to be aware of unintentional actions that may be breaking the law. #National security is important. #I |

| | |
|---|---|
| | know the importance of NSL. |
| "Specific knowledge" sub-category (13 responses) | #Bill. #In this lecture, I have learnt concepts of national security, the importance of implementing the National Security Law in Hong Kong, etc. #Change the world map. #Strengthen my knowledge about law. Very good. #Laws are written by people. #Learn what national security is. #National security. #Learn about Chinese history. #This lecture made me know more about some events happened in our history and some law-related information in Hong Kong. Those are something I did not know or pay attention to. I think designing such a lecture is necessary for students who are studying in Hong Kong. #History of Hong Kong and the NSL. #I'm happy to see that we can learn about the nation security. Thank you. #Law is important everywhere. #We learnt a lot of abiding law. |
| "Personal development" sub-category (4 responses) | #Learn how to be a good people. #I learnt how to be a good citizen. #I would put more awareness on protecting myself. #I have learnt how to try my best to serve as a socially responsible leader. |
| "MCQ-related opinions" category (1 response) | #I really liked the open-ended discussion, this helped me stay engaged and focused. |
| "Teacher attributes" category (3 responses) | #The professor has put a lot of effort into making the lecture entertaining. She was very observant and very tactful in handling the lecture. #Teacher resisted much pressure and emotion and taught with heart. I felt very grateful. #I love the content and the teaching and communication styles that the teacher uses to convey the message and it helps develop a good understanding of the topic (NSL). |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Negative/Undecided Responses (5 responses)** | #Answer 16/2 question correctly is too much Such a waste of my life to do these 2 MC My life would be much grateful to do another study instead of doing this dumb MC for a whole morning. #The first question regarding gender indication is not sensitive enough. Some people do not identify as male or female. #Still lack of understanding of national security laws and the importance of it. And the lesson is lack of interaction. #This is just a waste of my precious time. #Maybe a shorter lesson would be better. |

*Notes.* Students were asked to write down any comments that they would like to share about the lecture or what they had learned from this lecture. They could write "NIL" for no comments.

**Figure 1. Structural equation model**




*Note.* * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

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# Subjective outcome evaluation of an online program on law-abiding leadership

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***Abstract:*** To promote national security education amongst college students, we developed a law-abiding leadership subject consisting of a 3-hour online lecture plus 7-hour self-study materials. In this study, we reported the findings of a post-program subjective outcome evaluation using a 19-item scale (*N*=557) to understand undergraduate students' (Senior-Year intake) of the subject. Results demonstrated that the scale possessed high internal consistency, validity, and reliability levels. Overall, students viewed the curriculum design favorably and agreed that the program significantly improved their understanding of the law-abiding education learning outcomes. In addition, they pledged to be law-abiding citizens and socially responsible leaders after completing the course. More importantly, this study supported for the claim that e-learning and self-paced study mode is an efficient and flexible platform to explore politically sensitive issues related to national security law education. It offers students a less hostile environment for acquiring law-related skills and knowledge compared to the traditional classroom delivery, which may produce tense interaction. In summary, this study replicated previous research in a new sample of students, demonstrating the online program's perceived effectiveness on law-abiding leadership.

***Keywords:*** National security, law-related education, successful leaders, subjective outcome evaluation, replication

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## Introduction

A successful leader should have domain-specific skills (i.e., expertise) and excellent soft skills (1). Furthermore, a leader should also exercise law-abiding leadership in abiding by the norms and regulations of the community and society, violating which could have devastating consequences for individuals and society (2,3). However, deviant behavior such as cheating or plagiarism is not uncommon among youths and is now a growing problem globally (4,5). Thus, to prevent these misbehaviors, which may develop into more severe wrongdoings or even crimes, socially accepted values and legal responsibilities should be presented to university students as far as practicable

clearly and concisely. Law-related education (LRE) has been regarded as a highly effective way to build one's legal awareness. The Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship (6) concluded that "LRE can be understood as an education to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and values needed by citizens to function effectively in a pluralistic and democratic society based on the rule of law" (6). It is believed that LRE can prevent newer generations from engaging in illegal behavior (7).

However, previous research showed that the younger generation in Hong Kong lacks an in-depth comprehension of law abidance and tends to disobey laws that they deem "unreasonable" (8,9). Two significant "social events" erupted in Hong Kong in the past decade due to a lack of law-abiding knowledge. For example, after the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) released "*The decision on improving the electoral system of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region"*, a series of sit-in street demonstrations known as the "Occupy Central Movement" (or "Umbrella Movement") broke out in Hong Kong from late September to mid-December of 2014. Protests by students and members of the public outside government offices and the occupation by some of the numerous key subway junctions and highways harmed the daily lives of those living in Hong Kong. Another "social event", generally known as "the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement", was held in Hong Kong with a series of demonstrations from March 15, 2019 in reaction to the presentation of "the Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill on Extradition". The initially peaceful demonstrations developed into violence, vandalism, and sieges (10). For instance, the protesters beat people with different political opinions, constantly damaged railway facilities, and occupied two universities in Hong Kong, which caused detrimental effects on people's studies, work, and life.

In response to such social instability as well as the failure to legislate on "Article 23 of the Basic Law", "The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region", also abbreviated as "Hong Kong National Security Law" (or "NSL"), was enacted on June 30$^{th}$, 2020 to "establish and improve the legal system and implementation mechanism for safeguarding national security in the Special Administrative Region" (11).

The NSL is highly related to people's well-being. First, The law significantly influences the living environment and, in turn, health (12). When everyone living in society abides by laws, study, work, and life can be carried out safely and orderly, without feeling fearful of any potential social unrest, such as terrorist activities. Second, concerning Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, safety needs (e.g., security of body, health, property) are placed at a rather fundamental level, with the satisfaction of which could allow people to pursue higher-order psychological and self-fulfillment needs. This suggests that when people know they are physically safe, they can fulfill the needs of love, esteem, and self-actualization, all of which enhance their quality of life. Because of the importance of social stability and national security to individuals' quality of life, laws about national security are commonly practiced internationally and are gaining mounting attention.

Nevertheless, some people hold skeptical views toward NSL. For example, some skeptics believed that the law would constrain the freedom of speech, undermine Hong Kong's press freedom, and lead to self-censorship when criticizing the government. Chris Yeung, the former Chairman of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, has voiced his concerns that "the arrests of *Apple Daily* staff members have exacerbated the fear among journalists since the enactment of the national security law" (13). He also believed that "the law has had a more damaging impact on freedoms and way of life than many people had anticipated" (13). In addition, others argued that the coercive Chinese Communist Party imposed the HKNSL without the support of the Chinese

people. For instance, in our previous studies on NSL education (3), some students commented that "it is sadly a 'Party' Security Law" (3). As such, objective NSL education is deemed quite necessary to promote a proper understanding of HKNSL among the public, especially young people. Indeed, Article 10 of the NSL states that "the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall promote national security education in schools and universities and through social organizations, the media, the internet, and other means to raise the awareness of Hong Kong residents of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law" (14). It underlines the significance of higher education institutions in the process of legal socialization, which means that the younger generation "grow their relationship with the law by learning law-related values, attitudes and reasoning skills" (15). Niu (16) also advocated that higher education institutions have a responsibility to promote law-abiding values and behavior among students and nurture qualified leaders.

Accordingly, to promote law-abiding education among undergraduate students, we integrated a national education curriculum focusing on law-abiding leadership and NSL education into a leadership training program in a leadership subject. In particular, a 3-hour face-to-face course and 7-hour self-study including basic concepts (i.e., "law and law-abiding behavior", "law-abiding leadership", and "national security"), historical background (modern Chinese history including "the history of Hong Kong", "the Constitution" and "the Basic Law"), and Hong Kong NSL ("four major offences", and "the issues and myths surrounding NSL") have been developed. Since the 2021/2022 academic year, all Year-1 students in a 4-year or 5-year undergraduate programs are required to complete the national education to cultivate their understanding of NSL and foster their law-abiding leadership values and practices. As a graduation requirement, students must pass a multiple-choice-question test (i.e., correctly answering at least 16 out of 20 questions) as the national education assessment. Studies showed that this assessment mode can consolidate student learning (17,18).

For those students who do not have to take the required leadership subject (i.e., Senior-Year intake and articulation degree program students), an e-learning module mirroring the 3-hour face-to-face lecture plus the same self-study materials are provided since the 2022/2023 academic year. They also need to pass a similar assessment test as a graduation requirement.

The opportunities and challenges facing online learning have been widely discussed in the literature. The advantages, such as its easy accessibility, flexibility, and affordability, have been highlighted by many practitioners and researchers (19-21). In addition, by eliminating the social limitations of face-to-face interactions, online learning may also safeguard students' anonymity, allowing them to be fully involved in the course without the fear of repercussions from their participation (3,22). Also, the online environment gives students the space and time to address sensitive issues by removing the need for immediate response (23). Davis (24) concluded the benefits of "public anonymity" in higher education institutions as "the ability of the student to submit responses viewed by the entire class without his or her identity being revealed" (p. 301). Besides anonymity, Gupta et al (25) also identified several attributes underlying online learning, including richness, simultaneity, telepresence, and synchronicity. Therefore, online learning is seen as an effective solution to teaching sensitive topics.

On the other hand, there have been voices showing dissatisfaction with technological, pedagogical, and social issues related to the online approach, such as a lack of motivation, engagement, interaction, self-regulation, and learning disposition (19,26-28), all of which may co-work to shape students' satisfaction and achievements (29). In particular, some scholars have questioned students' lack of active engagement in online courses, as active involvement is a

prerequisite for meaningful learning. Educators claim that active learning doesn't happen naturally in the classroom; it is much more likely to occur when the instructor creates an ideal and safe introductory learning environment (22).

Previous feedback from students who completed the 3-hour face-to-face law-aidance leadership lecture in the 2021/2022 academic year was generally positive, suggesting that students may benefit from a law-abiding education in terms of their comprehension, attitudes, and behavioral intention to the NSL (3,30,31). Besides, teachers also shared that the students had a very positive perception of the program.

Since the law-abiding leadership and NSL program was delivered to Senior-Year students through an e-learning module, which may be different from learning in the face-to-face lecture as illustrated before, students' learning experiences and perceptions of the e-learning module need further investigation. In particular, as the topic is politically sensitive, the perceptions and responses of the students to the online national security education are also significant aspects of their learning motivation and involvement in the self-paced online program, which would subsequently contribute to their quality of life on and off the campus to some extent. Thus, we attempted to understand students' views on online national education and the benefits they perceived on personal development.

**The present study**

In this paper, we focused on Senior-Year students' evaluations of the e-learning module, including the 3-hour online course and 7-hour self-study in Semester 1 of the 2022/2023 academic year via post-course evaluation, which has been widely used to secure students' views toward educational programs (3,31,32). The post-course evaluation form in this study was adapted from the 26-item measure that was used by Shek et al. (3) in investigating students' views toward different aspects of the face-to-face national education program in 2021/2022 year. The adapted one retained two original dimensions, including the perception of program attributes (e.g., content, benefits of e-learning program to personal development, seven items) and respect for law-abidance leadership (8 items). A new dimension related to the evaluation of self-paced online learning mode (3 items) was added while items in the dimension of teacher attributes were deleted because students took the course via the internet, and there was no interaction between teacher and students or amongst students. The item on the overall evaluation was also retained, resulting in a 19-item scale (see table 1). Using the insights of Senior-Year students, we sought to answer the following two questions in this study:

1. What psychometric properties does the modified evaluation form possess? We expected the aforementioned three-dimensional structure to be supported (Hypothesis 1).
2. What are students' perceptions of the online national education program, including the program attributes (course design, content, and benefits), views of law-abiding leadership, and perception of self-paced learning mode? Based on previous studies (3,31), we expected that most students would respond positively to different aspects of the program (Hypothesis 2).

Table 1

## Methods

After the Senior-Year students complete the e-learning module and pass the assessment test, they are directed to the post-lecture evaluation form to which they can respond anonymously and voluntarily. Institutional ethics approval was obtained for the study under the "Tomorrow's Leaders" subject. By the end of the first semester of the 2022/2023 academic year (i.e., 8th January 2023), 557 students ($M_{age}$ = 20.91, $SD_{age}$ = 1.90; 52.42% males) out of 1,145 students (response rate = 48.6%) who passed the test and completed the survey.

**Instruments**

As aforementioned, the evaluation form adopted in the present study included 19 items concentrating on different aspects of the e-learning program (see table 1). Each item was measured using a 6-point scale ("1=strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree").

**Data analysis plan**

Data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0 and Mplus 8.5. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted via Mplus to determine whether the proposed 3-factor structure matched the data well. Model fitness indices and the respective criterion, including "comparative fit index" (CFI ≥ 0.90), "Tucker-Lewis index" (TLI ≥ 0.90), "root mean square error of approximation" (RMSEA ≤ 0.08), and "standardized root mean squared residual" (SRMR ≤ 0.08) were adopted to indicate adequate model fitness (33). Descriptive analyses were performed using SPSS 28.0 to illustrate the characteristics of students' responses regarding different aspects of the e-learning module on national education.

Table 2

## Results

Results of CFA supported the proposed three-dimensional structure with $\chi^2_{(131)}$ = 411.79, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.04. Among all items, factor loadings ranged between 0.74 and 0.94. The average factor loadings for the three dimensions, were 0.91, 0.88, and 0.91, respectively (see table 2). As shown in table 2, reliability measures, including Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω for the three dimensions were above 0.93, indicating good internal consistency. In addition, the three dimensions were significantly correlated (*rs* = 0.64–0.84, *ps* < 0.001). The three dimensions were also significantly correlated with the overall evaluation, with the coefficient ranging between 0.68 and 0.87. Hence, Hypothesis 1 was well supported.

**Students' responses on different aspects**

Table 1 illustrates students' perceptions of the course from different perspectives. As anticipated, students generally had positive views of the course. First, they expressed satisfaction with the design of the learning mode. Most students (86.03% and 87.57%) agreed that the self-directed and online learning modes were efficient and flexible, respectively.

Second, the results indicated that most students held positive views of law abidance after completing the course. Specifically, 85.92% and 83.94% of the students perceived that the course helped them better understand of law abidance as an essential indicator of societal stability and the "concepts of national security", respectively. In addition, 87.16% agreed that the course provided clear explanations of "the offenses and penalties surrounding the Hong Kong National Security Law", and 82.19% felt that "some myths related to the law" were dispelled during the course. Notably, 90.63% and 87.86% of the students expressed a willingness to "serve as a law-abiding

citizen" with "socially responsible behavior", respectively, which is consistent with the course objectives.

Finally, the present study demonstrated that students had a generally favorable opinion of the course attributes, although the percentages of positive responses in these items were comparatively lower than those in relation to law-abiding leadership as well as the appreciation of learning mode. Specially, around 67.70% of the students found the curriculum design satisfactory, and more than 70% assumed that "the course offered ample opportunities for reflection". Moreover, a majority of students believed that the course was beneficial for their "personal development" (71.27%), "problem-solving ability" (65.64%), as well as "the importance of attributes to be successful leaders, such as critical thinking and moral competence" (70.58%). In sum, the quantitative results based on students' responses to various aspects of the course attributes were generally positive and met our expectations. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

## Discussion

The current study explored the post-lecture evaluation of an e-learning national education program offered by a public university in Hong Kong. To summarize, three objectives of this study were achieved. First, the study replicated the findings in the previous studies (3,31) with a new sample of Senior-Year intake students attending a similar course via self-paced and online learning mode at different times. Second, this study investigated Senior-Year undergraduate students' views of national security education and its potential benefits, complementing previous research on Year 1 undergraduate students. Third, compared with the previous study on HyFlex learning mode (31), this study specifically examined the potential impact of e-learning mode on both teaching and learning, as well as whether such mode was positively received without interaction or communication between students and instructors and students to each other. These findings contribute new knowledge to teach sensitive topics in an online environment.

The findings suggested that students generally had positive views towards the course attributes, law-abiding leadership, and learning mode. Based on the quantitative findings, several observations can be drawn. First of all, the results indicated that the course attributes were viewed positively by students, and they perceived the course as positively impacting on their interpersonal and extra-personal development. Specifically, students found the design and content of the course appealing and believed that it provided opportunities for reflection and critical thinking, which are important for shaping them into successful leaders. Chinese cultural values, influenced by Confucianism, emphasized traditional virtues such as "benevolence" ("ren"), "righteousness" ("yi"), "propriety" ("li"), "wisdom" ("zhi"), and "trustworthiness" ("xin"), which are considered essential for successful leaders (34). Consistently, the study's findings also suggested that being a successful leader involves law-abiding behaviors and positive personal development. These findings are generally consistent with previous research conducted by Shek and colleagues (3,31) with similar evaluation methods. Collectively, these studies provide strong evidence of the course's positive impact on the future development of undergraduate students. As Karns (35) has noted, an activity containing values for the students would "give them opportunities to express themselves, to make decisions, to enjoy the camaraderie of their peers, and to improve their employability" (35).

However, it is worth noting that the proportions of positive responses from Senior-Year students were comparatively lower than those from previous studies among their Year 1 counterparts (3). Moreover, after attending this course, many Senior-Year students held negative perceptions of their improvement in interpersonal communication skills. These discrepancies might be attributed

to the different learning modes. Unlike Year 1 students who took a similar course using face-to-face teaching with instructors' guidance of learning, the course for Senior-Year students was delivered via a self-paced e-learning module. Thus, the course might lead to the need for peer interaction and affiliation in the process of promoting self-autonomy in the learning process and protecting students' anonymity. Nevertheless, more evidence is needed to test this hypothesis. As a result, future studies should explore other factors contributing to differences in students' perceptions of the course attributes between senior- and first-year students.

On the other hand, although the e-learning and self-paced study mode may limit interaction and communication between instructors and students, it was perceived as efficient and flexible in this national security education subject area according to the post-course evaluation. This e-learning module promoted students' learning experience by offering a less hostile environment for acquiring law-related knowledge and skills, and enabled students to be more comfortable with the course content. This result is consistent with prior research efforts on national security education (3) and suggests that self-paced online learning is an effective way to enhance the satisfaction of online learners by contributing to aspects concerning the perceived impartiality of learning and assessment and the effect of personal cognition, including locus of control and self-efficacy.

Meanwhile, given that national security education involves politically sensitive topics, some students in Hong Kong may have opposing or controversial views expressing resistance towards law-abiding education regarding national security and NSL (36). For example, Russell and colleagues proposed (37) that "some students feel personally accused when they hear about a group to which they belong perpetrating injustice against a power minority… students could also feel constrained in their critique of the content being presented for fear of offending the professor (who has more power than they do in the classroom), adding to their experience of feeling threatened" (37). These problems will particularly appear in national security education class where students may hold oppositely presupposed acknowledge and feel worried about sharing their true feelings. Therefore, it is an excellent choice to create a safe and comfortable environment for students to explore knowledge during the course is to use e-learning mode. As Asbury and Orsborn (38) argued in their study of cultural safety e-learning, "a private and independent e-learning package can provide students with a safe environment to encounter challenging concepts and improve their understanding of sensitive topics" (38). As a result, they believed that although "the online environment will not suit all learners, for many others, a platform where content can be explored privately and independently may be the optimal environment to encounter potentially challenging content" (38). This may explain why most students responded positively to the e-learning and self-paced mode in the post-course evaluation. Flexible e-learning modules are beneficial for students who have already been familiar with these sensitive topics as well as those encountering the concepts for the first time. Students significantly improved their knowledge and understanding of national security law while being comfortable with the course content and delivery mode. To sum up, our finding is a valuable supplement to current research and highlights the benefits of using e-learning for teaching national security education.

Third, in terms of law-abiding leadership, the lecture was perceived as an effective way to enhance students' understanding of the importance of law abidance, law-abiding leadership, national security, National Security Law, and related issues. Besides, students agreed that the course would better prepare them to be ethical and effective social leaders. These results were consistent with the previous findings published by Shek and colleagues (3,31), who emphasized the significance of cultivating law-abiding leadership among university students. According to Shek et al (3), adhering to legal requirements enhances "respect for the law, promotes justice, and

enables leaders to serve as role models for their subordinates when they observe the requirement of the law" (3). Therefore, these findings indicated that the course benefits university students in promoting law-abiding leadership.

Finally, the study supports the psychometric properties of the assessment tool. In particular, the study provides factorial validity for the measure. Although the current instrument was only validated in law-related or general education courses, it is argued that subjective outcome evaluation can be applied to other courses with sensitivity or controversial contents because this method effectively allows students to share their experiences. Meanwhile, researchers may efficiently and conveniently use this method in their routine practice.

Even with the benefits of self-paced and e-learning mode and its application to law-abiding leadership and NSL education being demonstrated in this study, there are some limitations that should be borne in mind in interpreting the present findings. First, as this study relied on a quantitative method, it would be beneficial to incorporate a qualitative or mixed-method approach, including data collection from a qualitative evaluation, focus groups, and individual interviews. However, another paper based on qualitative findings published in this special issue has shown complementary support for this e-learning program. Second, this study only covered one university in Hong Kong. Since all universities in Hong Kong are responsible for providing national security education to enrich public knowledge of NSL and enhance their awareness of law abidance under the requirements of HKNSL, the circumstances in other tertiary education institutes in Hong Kong should be considered for future discussion. Third, the current response rate (i.e., 48.6%) is not as high as that in our previous studies based on face-to-face and hybrid modes on the "Tomorrow's Leaders" subject (face-to-face: 69.7%; hybrid: 78%) (3,31). It is noted that the response rate of online surveys (on average 33%) is generally much lower than that of paper-and-pencil-based surveys (on average 56%)(39). In addition, the current response rate is higher than the recommended threshold response rate (i.e., 35%) when the sample size is larger than 50 (39). Thus, the current sample size and response rate are sufficient to yield valid findings. Finally, as this study was conducted at the end of the first semester of the 2022/23 academic year and involved a new group of Senior-Year students for an initial attempt, there is a need to replicate this study to investigate the effect of law-abiding leadership education further.

Overall, the study's findings supported the thesis that the e-learning course of law-abiding leadership could enrich university students' legal awareness to be socially responsible citizens and leaders. Although this study has several limitations, it provides insight direction for future improvement of the subject course and self-paced and online learning mode.

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**Table 1. Descriptive results of students' perceptions of the course**

| Items | Mean | SD | Positive responses rate (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Perception of program attributes** | | | |
| 1. The design of this course was very good. | 3.92 | 1.34 | 67.70 |
| 2. There were many opportunities for reflection in this course. | 3.96 | 1.35 | 70.27 |
| 3. This course is helpful to my personal development. | 3.94 | 1.38 | 71.27 |
| 4. This course has improved my problem-solving ability. | 3.84 | 1.41 | 65.64 |
| 5. This course has improved my understanding of the importance of attributes of successful leaders (e.g., critical thinking, moral competence, law abidance etc.). | 3.93 | 1.38 | 70.58 |
| 6. This course has improved my interpersonal communication skills. | 3.63 | 1.47 | 57.48 |
| 7. This course has improved my critical thinking. | 4.00 | 1.38 | 74.41 |
| **Appreciation of law-abidance leadership** | | | |
| 8. This course has helped me understand the importance of law abidance in leadership. | 4.18 | 1.29 | 79.39 |
| 9. I understand that law abidance is important for the stability of a society. | 4.38 | 1.24 | 85.92 |
| 10. This course has helped me understand the concepts of national security. | 4.34 | 1.28 | 83.94 |
| 11. This course has helped me understand the offenses and penalties surrounding the Hong Kong National Security Law. | 4.43 | 1.22 | 87.16 |
| 12. This course has helped me understand the importance of implementing the Hong Kong National Security Law. | 4.26 | 1.32 | 80.84 |
| 13. This course has helped me clarify some myths related to Hong Kong National Security Law. | 4.26 | 1.31 | 82.19 |
| 14. I will try my best to serve as a law-abiding citizen. | 4.74 | 1.20 | 90.63 |
| 15. I will try my best to serve as a socially responsible leader. | 4.53 | 1.20 | 87.86 |
| **Evaluation of self-paced online learning mode** | | | |
| 16. The self-paced online learning course enabled me to learn more efficiently about this course. | 4.47 | 1.23 | 86.03 |
| 17. The self-paced online learning course allows me to learn the course materials according to my own situation. | 4.55 | 1.20 | 87.57 |
| 18. Overall speaking, I like the self-paced online learning experience. | 4.50 | 1.21 | 85.77 |
| **Overall evaluation** | | | |
| 19. Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of this course. | 4.13 | 1.39 | 76.80 |

Note. All items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly Disagree, 4 = Slightly Agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly Agree. Responses of 4–6 are considered positive.

**Table 2. Psychometric properties of the evaluation form**

| Factors | Average factor loading | Cronbach's α | McDonald's ω | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Perception of program attributes | 0.91 | 0.97 | 0.97 | 3.89 | 1.28 | | | |
| 2. Appreciation of law abidance leadership | 0.88 | 0.97 | 0.97 | 4.39 | 1.13 | .84*** | | |
| 3. Evaluation of self-paced learning mode | 0.91 | 0.93 | 0.93 | 4.51 | 1.14 | .64*** | .76*** | |
| 4. Overall evaluation | | | | 4.13 | 1.39 | .87*** | .82*** | .68*** |

*** $p < 0.001$

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Running title: TPG students' subjective outcome evaluation

# Evaluating the impact of a national education program for taught postgraduate students in Hong Kong

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***Abstract:*** This study evaluated a national education program that covers "the history of China and Hong Kong", "law-abiding leadership", and "the Hong Kong National Security Law (HKNSL)" in taught postgraduate students in a university in Hong Kong. This study examined students' perceptions of the course attributes, understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors, and self-paced learning, as well as the role of student perceptions of the program in predicting the overall satisfaction rate. We collected data from 1,808 taught postgraduate students via online survey at a university in Hong Kong. Results revealed that students demonstrated high satisfaction with the national education program and they had a favorable perception of the national education program. Moreover, multiple regression analyses indicated that different aspects of students' perceptions significantly predicted their overall satisfaction with the program. The present study underscores the value of the online national education program and suggests the usefulness of self-paced learning arrangement in delivering sensitive topics such as the HKNSL. Limitations and implications for future studies are discussed.

***Keywords:*** Taught postgraduates, national education, self-paced learning, online learning, subjective outcome evaluation

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## Introduction

In recent years, postgraduate degree programs have become increasingly popular in Hong Kong, attracting students from diverse academic backgrounds and geographical locations (1). Currently, the eight public universities in Hong Kong offer over 500 postgraduate programs, including "research postgraduate (RPg) programs" (Master of Philosophy (MPhil) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs" and "taught postgraduate (TPg) programs" (e.g., Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc) and Master of Social Science (MSSc or MSocSc) programs" (1). While MPhil and PhD programs prepare students for research-oriented careers, TPg programs are primarily

coursework-based and aim to foster students' professional skills and competencies, enabling them to pursue careers in their respective fields (2). As TPg programs in Hong Kong usually last for 1 to 1.5 years for a full-time period of study and place less emphasis on academic research skills, they attract a plethora of fresh undergraduates or professionals who wish to improve their academic qualifications, with the majority of admitted students coming from mainland China (1,3).

Given Hong Kong's unique social and geographical status, studying in Hong Kong makes almost no difference from studying abroad for non-local students, which requires them to adapt to the social and educational systems different from their home countries. It has been reported that some students experience "feelings of frustration, anxiety, and defeat" during their sojourn in Hong Kong (4). Moreover, due to the political and cultural complexity in Hong Kong, overseas students, especially those from Mainland China, often need help to adapt to academic and local norms. As Yu and Zhang (5) pointed out, Mainland students in Hong Kong often experience the "Mainland-Hong Kong Conflict" as the result of the "linguistic, socio-cultural, and political differences between Hong Kong and the Mainland", and often find the political turbulence in Hong Kong confusing, which may make them either become indifferent towards political issues, or grow erroneous appreciation and empathy towards Hongkongers involved in unlawful social movements in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, according to Tran and Vu (6), "the issue of student responsibility and capacity to exercise responsibility is becoming increasingly important in student mobility as these students have to live and study out of their socio-cultural comfort zone". Consequently, universities in Hong Kong have an obligation to provide relevant support to help them better adapt to the academic and sociocultural context.

"The 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement" (commonly known as "the 2019 Hong Kong protest") and the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted the traditional teaching mode in universities and altered students' perceptions and expectations of their learning experiences in Hong Kong. On the one hand, "the 2019 Hong Kong protest" disrupted the teaching orders of almost all universities in Hong Kong due to the damage to campus facilities and conflicts between student protesters, faculties, and the police (7,8). On the other hand, the border closure and social distancing policies entailed by the COVID-19 pandemic have forced teaching activities to transfer from the traditional face-to-face mode to online or hybrid modes. With the introduction of the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" (also known as the "Hong Kong National Security Law", "NSL") (9) and the gradual removal of pandemic-related restrictions, Hong Kong society is regaining stability, and Hong Kong universities are resuming regular teaching schedules accordingly. Consequently, maintaining the degree of internationalization of Hong Kong universities, regaining international students' trust to study in Hong Kong (4), and propelling students to become law-abiding and socially responsible citizens have become salient tasks for universities in Hong Kong (10). Meanwhile, with the implementation of the National Security Law (NSL) in Hong Kong that leads to changes and disputes in various domains, it is necessary to help non-local students understand the academic and local norms, establish academic identities beneficial for learning and life experiences during their sojourn in Hong Kong, and foster them into socially responsible citizens both in and outside Hong Kong.

With Article 10 of NSL demanding national security education to be implemented in educational institutions across Hong Kong in order to "raise the awareness of Hong Kong residents of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law" (11), all public

universities in Hong Kong have integrated national education in their programs as an essential part of the graduation requirements for students. Such education modules generally combine face-to-face lectures, pre-recorded online lectures, reading materials for self-study, and assessments (12-14). While such modules in most universities only target undergraduate students at the moment, "The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU)" has made it a requirement for students at all levels, with slight differences in delivery modes and contents between different levels (15). For taught postgraduate students, national education is employed as the "Education on 'Understanding China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, P.R.C.'", which includes a 3-hour e-learning module, 3-hour self-study with 20 lecture notes, and an assessment containing 10 multiple choice questions allowing for multiple attempts (15). The aim of this module for TPg students is to offer "some understanding of China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, including modern Chinese history, restoration of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997, Hong Kong Basic Law, and Hong Kong National Security Law", to help them make "successful and healthy adjustments when they study in Hong Kong, serve as 'ambassadors' to promote Hong Kong" as "potential leaders of the society" (15).

The current study is important for three reasons. First, it is crucial to understand how students receiving national education perceive their learning experiences and utilize evidence-based results to validate the necessity and effectiveness of such education (16). Although prior research has indicated positive feedback from university students regarding the NSL, national education programs in Hong Kong have faced continuous scrutiny and criticism for being perceived as brainwashing or a "legitimate instrument for social control and silencing criticisms" (10). This underscores the need for further investigation into the necessity and effectiveness of national education (16). Secondly, while most existing studies have shown positive feedback from students and teachers concerning national education experiences, they have yet to specifically focus on taught postgraduate students. Given these students' unique backgrounds, motivations for studying in Hong Kong, and plans of these students compared to undergraduate and research postgraduate students, their perceived values and attitudes towards national education may also differ. Lastly, while prior research has shown that lecture-based national education is effective in helping Hong Kong university students develop a deep understanding of law and respect for law abidance (17), there is still a need to understand the effectiveness of self-paced learning modalities. Consequently, this study aims to replicate and validate these findings to justify the need and benefits of NSL education in Hong Kong universities. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

Research question 1: What are students' perceptions towards the "Education on "Understanding China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, P.R.C'" regarding course attributes (CA), understanding of national education and law-abiding behavior (UNE), and self-paced learning (SP)? We expected the participants to generally have positive attitudes towards the program and corresponding aspects (Hypothesis 1a to Hypothesis 1c).

Research question 2: What are the relationships between the three aspects of student perception and their overall satisfaction? We expected positive inter-correlations amongst the related subscales (Hypothesis 2a), and between the three subscales and overall satisfaction (Hypothesis 2b). Additionally, we anticipated that all three subscales, including CA, UNE, and SP, would predict students' overall satisfaction (Hypothesis 2c).

## Methods

Student evaluation survey is a commonly used measure in evaluating course quality in higher education, and it is effective in "gauging consensus among students and identifying trends" (18). According to Denson and colleagues (19), course evaluation encompasses two primary purposes, including obtaining "student feedback regarding courses and teaching for improvement purposes" and providing "a defined and practical process to ensure that actions are taken to improve courses and teaching". Consequently, the current study employed a post-lecture online evaluation survey to obtain students' feedback on the national education program at the authors' university.

Survey participants in this study were taught postgraduate students who took the "Understanding China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, P.R.C." program during Semester 1, 2022/23 academic year. Informed consent was obtained from participants, who were aware of the research objectives, the study's confidentiality, and that the findings would be exclusively and anonymously used for educational purposes.

Survey items were selected based on their relevance to the course content and learning outcomes. They were drawn from previous evaluation studies on similar education programs at the same university (10,17), which adopted 26 and 28 items, respectively, to investigate students' perceptions of lectures. Due to the differences in course content, delivery mode, and target students from the two previous studies, the current study made some modifications to the survey items. Specifically, while two studies mentioned above investigated courses delivered online and face-to-face, the course evaluated in the current study only includes online mode, which does not have opportunities for face-to-face interaction and participation. Consequently, we omitted several items that assessed factors unique to in-person classes, resulting in a trimmed 19-item survey. In another article within this particular issue, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis on a 19-item scale derived from research involving postgraduate students. This scale displayed a three-factor structure, encompassing course attributes (CA), understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors (UNE), and self-paced learning (SP), which aligns with previous studies (10, 17). Items 1 through 6 pertain to CA, items 7 through 15 are associated with UNE, and items 16 through 18 fall under SP. Item 19 ("Overall, I have a very positive evaluation of this course") acts as a general indicator of the overall satisfaction. A 6-point Likert Scale was employed for each item (1 = "Strongly Disagree"; 6 = "Strongly Agree"), with "1", "2", and "3" regarded as negative responses and "4", "5", and "6" considered as positive responses. The 19 items are listed as follows:

1) "The design of this course was very good."
2) "There were many opportunities for reflection in this course."
3) "This course is helpful to my personal development."
4) "This course has improved my problem-solving ability."
5) "This course has improved my understanding of the importance of attributes of successful leaders (e.g., critical thinking, moral competence, law abidance etc.)."
6) "This course has improved my critical thinking."
7) "This course helps me understand the knowledge of the history of Modern China."
8) "This course helps me understand the knowledge of the history of Hong Kong."
9) "This course has helped me understand the concepts of national security."
10) "I understand that national security is important for the stability of a society."

11) "This course has helped me understand the offenses and penalties surrounding the Hong Kong National Security Law."
12) "This course has helped me understand the importance of implementing the Hong Kong National Security Law."
13) "This course has helped me clarify some myths related to Hong Kong National Security Law."
14) "I will try my best to serve as a law-abiding citizen."
15) "I will try my best to serve as a socially responsible leader."
16) "The self-paced online learning course enabled me to learn more efficiently about this course."
17) "The self-paced online learning course allows me to learn the course materials according to my own situation."
18) "Overall speaking, I like the self-paced online learning experience."
19) "Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of this course."

Apart from the 19 items pertaining to course evaluation, personal information, including gender and age, was also collected. An open-ended question was included at the end of the survey to gather further comments on the course, which asked participants to provide additional feedback or suggestions for course improvement.

Among 2,860 taught postgraduate students who attended the e-learning module and passed the assessment, 1,808 completed the online evaluation survey, resulting in a response rate of 63.22%. Richardson (20) contended that "response rates of 60% or more are both desirable and achievable for students who have satisfactorily completed their course units of programs" in course experience surveys via mail. Given that response rates of online surveys are lower than those conducted via offline means (21), the response rate in the current study can be considered satisfactory.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis was carried out using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistical analysis was first conducted to summarize the number of responses, means, and standard deviations (SD) of the overall and individual responses, indicating students' perceptions of the course. Inter-correlations among age, gender, the three subscales (i.e., CA, UNE, SP), and overall satisfaction (item 19) were also examined. Multiple regression analysis was then performed to examine the prediction of CA, UNE, and SP on students' overall satisfaction.

Table 1
Table 2

## Results

After the MCQ assessment, a total of 1,808 post-lecture subjective outcome evaluation questionnaires were gathered from taught postgraduate students. The descriptive findings based on the number of responses, means, standard deviations (SD) and percentage of responses of each item or three subscales are displayed in tables 1 and 2, respectively. A number of observations can be drawn from the percentage findings in table 1. First, most students showed positive perceptions of the program (positive responses > 88.59%). For example, 94.46% of the respondents regarded the course design as excellent and clear to understand, and 98.66% claimed

they volunteered to be good citizens and abide by the laws after the course. In addition, the students perceived the course was beneficial for their inter- or intra-personal development, including competencies of problem-solving (Item 4: 88.59%) and critical thinking (Item 6: 91.00%), as well as promoted reflection (Item 2: 92.64%). Finally, students generally appreciated the self-paced online learning experience (Item 18: 97.46%), as such a mode enabled students to learn more efficiently about the course contents (Item 16: 97.02%) and based on their situation (Item 17: 97.45%). Hypotheses 1a to 1c were supported.
Table 3

Table 3 shows the inter-correlations of the items from the coding schemes used to capture students' perceptions of the program from different aspects, including SP, CA, and UNE. All subscales showed significant inter-correlations ($rs > .698$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2a. As expected, students' perceptions in SP, UNE, and CA were significantly correlated with the overall course satisfaction, supporting Hypothesis 2b. The strongest correlate of course satisfaction was "understanding of national education and law-abiding behavior" (UNE) ($r = .880$, $p < .001$).

TRable 4

Results of multiple regression analyses are presented in table 4. In Model 1, age and gender were entered as predictors. The results revealed that Model 1 accounted for a small proportion of the variance in overall satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.034$, F change = 26.26, $p < 0.001$). In Model 2, SP, CA, and UNE were incorporated into the model while controlling for age and gender. The addition of these variables considerably enhanced the model's predictive ability for overall satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.791$, F change = 2256.93, $p < 0.001$). As shown in Table 4, UNE emerged as the most significant predictor of overall satisfaction (CA: $\beta = .321$, $t = 16.27$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .177$; UNE: $\beta = .452$, $t = 18.69$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .234$; SP: $\beta = .201$, $t = 10.84$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .079$). The findings supported Hypothesis 2c.

## Discussion

The current study examined students' perceptions and perceived effectiveness of the program entitled "Understanding China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, P.R.C." offered at one Hong Kong university. It contributes to the existing literature on national education in Hong Kong universities by examining the perceptions of taught postgraduate students towards the national education program. There are two unique features. First, it paid particular attention to taught postgraduate students, providing new insights into how national education is perceived by students with different backgrounds, motivations, and plans compared to undergraduate and research postgraduate students. Secondly, the study utilized a three-subscale model to gauge students' perceptions of the course, which demonstrated its effectiveness in predicting students' attitudes toward the course.

A number of observations could be drawn from the findings. First, similar to our previous evaluation studies based on the subjects provided to undergraduate students via different learning mode, the findings suggested that the positive response rates of participants were overwhelmingly high, suggesting that the national education program was well-received by students. One possible reason for the high satisfaction rate could be that the participants in this study were primarily taught postgraduate students, a significant portion of whom came from

mainland China. These students are more likely to have a strong sense of national identity and to have favorable opinions of their home country (22). Nevertheless, it is evident that most participants do not oppose such as national education program. In other words, it dispels the myth that teaching university students about national security education would be a bad experience for them. Meanwhile, negative perceptions regarding various aspects of the program offer opportunities for refinement and enhancement of national education delivery in the future. Overall, the high levels of student satisfaction in this study challenge the criticisms that national education is inherently detrimental and unappealing to students.

Secondly, all aspects of the program, including course attributes (CA), understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors (UNE), and self-paced learning arrangement (SP), were perceived positively by the students. Regarding course attributes, students predominantly agreed that the course design was practical and contributed to their holistic development in various areas, such as problem-solving ability, interpersonal skills, and inclination to become law-abiding citizens and socially responsible leaders. Moreover, most students concurred that the course enhanced their comprehension of China and Hong Kong's history, the concepts and importance of national security, the significance of implementing "the Hong Kong National Security Law", and addressed misconceptions related to the HKNSL. It is worth noting that even for overseas taught postgraduate students who may leave Hong Kong after graduation, this course can also assist them to become socially responsible leaders and law-abiding citizens in their home countries or elsewhere.

Regarding determinants of perceived efficacy, we also investigated which factors could affect students' overall opinion of the program. Results of multiple regression analysis suggested that perceived course design, self-paced learning mode, content on national education and law-abiding leadership, as well as benefits predicted students' overall satisfaction with the online course, although their relative importance varied for different predictors. These results are largely in line with earlier studies showing that students' satisfaction of the program was influenced by how they viewed the curriculum design (23). In addition, the UNE attribute was the strongest predictor for overall satisfaction among all three attributes. According to Shek et al. (10), there exist disparities regarding the views on HKNSL between Hong Kong and overseas contexts, with Western countries constantly framing HKNSL as a threat to the autonomy of Hong Kong. Being affected by such biased discourse, overseas students may adopt a critical attitude toward HKNSL. They may need clarification on the purpose of national education when they begin their study in Hong Kong universities. Consequently, the high student satisfaction rate revealed by the current study has to some extent, indicated that the program had achieved great success in helping taught postgraduate students increase their knowledge in history, national security, and HKNSL, offering them an all-around view on relevant discourses. In future, it would be beneficial to assist students in understanding the advantages and worth of the learning. For example, students can be encouraged to reflect individually on what they have learned and how they have changed due to the course.

Additionally, most students held positive views towards the self-paced online learning mode, as they believed it could enable them to assimilate knowledge more efficiently according to their circumstances. Meanwhile, tangible facts allowed quick access to the course video and lecture notes and to see what moment by moment. As pointed out by Tullis and Benjamin (24), allowing students to allocate their learning time and contents freely can help promote positive learning performance and outcomes while enhancing their memory. Therefore, it can be inferred that students gained a positive learning experience and benefited from the self-paced learning mode,

which is conducive to their learning motivation and outcomes and their understanding of national education. Similarly, as most local students choose to obtain a professional diploma part-time in addition to their regular work, self-paced online learning provides them with flexible time without moving to the site of study. Moreover, Dumford and Miller (25) noted that students taking online courses are more likely to engage in "quantitative reasoning, that is, the ability to think critically about the quantitative evidence in the evaluation, construction, and communication of arguments in public, professional, and personal life" (26). Aldulaimi and his colleagues (27) also regarded self-paced learning as an effective way to improve students' self-efficacy in challenging learning environments where students lack the opportunities to interact with lecturers and peers. Thus, as the students pointed out in the survey, such a self-paced learning mode benefited their independent and critical thinking capacity, thus enhancing their understanding of national security, NSL, and law abidance. In addition, as national education is still considered politically sensitive, online self-learning also grants students a more comfortable learning environment to reflect on sensitive issues such as the HKNSL and the sentencing of related cases. Therefore, this finding provides insights for course designers to involve more self-paced learning in similar programs in the future to achieve better learning and teaching outcomes.

To sum up, the findings mentioned above are consistent with the findings of Shek et al (16). They served as evidence to rebut the claim that Hong Kong university students are recalcitrant to take national education. However, despite the fact that the current study has provided support for the value of the program, it has several limitations. First, because the students participated in the study in a voluntary and anonymous manner, the participants may not be representative of all TPg populations. Hence, we should be careful about the generalizability of the findings. In addition, if a comparison group could be included, it might be more convincing in interpreting the effectiveness of the online course. Secondly, with COVID-related restrictions being lifted, national education is now conducted online and offline, which would involve more face-to-face activities and teacher-student interactions. Therefore, students' perceptions of teachers' performance and class interactions may also be crucial attributes to the overall satisfaction rate of the program, which was not considered in the current study due to the online delivery mode. Thirdly, given the politically sensitive nature of national education at this stage, it is also crucial to understand the attitudes of various stakeholders, including teachers, students, and course designers, in different learning and teaching modes. Last but not least, this study adopted a quantitative approach with a questionnaire survey mostly involving Likert scale questions. Although an open-ended question was included to obtain subjective feedback from the participants, only some responded. Future studies should consider including a qualitative or mix-method approach to obtain more subjective views from students or a longitudinal design with several phases of investigation. In sum, with national education being continuously carried out across Hong Kong universities with growing diversity and coverage, the findings of this study should be constantly reviewed and replicated from various paradigmatic perspectives and with different methodologies.

## Conclusions

This study underscored taught postgraduate students' feedback on a self-paced online program related to national education and law-abiding leadership at a public university in Hong Kong. Findings based on 1,808 post-lecture subjective outcome evaluation forms indicated that most students had favorable learning experiences in the subject in terms of course attributes, understanding of national education and law-abiding behavior, and self-paced learning

arrangement, as well as the endorsement of the lecture benefits in helping them appreciate the significance of abiding by the law, social responsibility, and whole-person develop with problem-solving and critical thinking abilities. The program also helps them to better understand and adapt to the Hong Kong society and culture. These results replicated and validated prior findings obtained in face-to-face and hybrid learning mode (10,16,17) and added to the body of evidence supporting the value of national security education for the taught postgraduate students. Although this study has several limitations, it provides insight direction for future improvement of the subject course and self-paced and online learning mode.

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**Table 1. Descriptive results of students' perceptions of the course**

| Item | N | Mean | S.D. | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | | 6 | | Negative responses 1+2+3 | | Positive responses 4+5+6 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 1 | 1574 | 5.13 | 1.116 | 39 | 2.48 | 24 | 1.52 | 58 | 3.68 | 183 | 11.63 | 538 | 34.18 | 732 | 46.51 | 121 | 7.69 | 1453 | 92.31 |
| 2 | 1577 | 5.09 | 1.094 | 29 | 1.84 | 34 | 2.16 | 53 | 3.36 | 228 | 14.46 | 543 | 34.43 | 690 | 43.75 | 116 | 7.36 | 1461 | 92.64 |
| 3 | 1577 | 5.10 | 1.120 | 28 | 1.78 | 40 | 2.54 | 59 | 3.74 | 222 | 14.08 | 502 | 31.83 | 726 | 46.04 | 127 | 8.05 | 1450 | 91.95 |
| 4 | 1569 | 4.93 | 1.235 | 44 | 2.80 | 45 | 2.87 | 90 | 5.74 | 278 | 17.72 | 458 | 29.19 | 654 | 41.68 | 179 | 11.41 | 1390 | 88.59 |
| 5 | 1574 | 5.02 | 1.161 | 36 | 2.29 | 37 | 2.35 | 67 | 4.26 | 266 | 16.90 | 489 | 31.07 | 679 | 43.14 | 140 | 8.89 | 1434 | 91.11 |
| 6 | 1577 | 5.02 | 1.177 | 39 | 2.47 | 38 | 2.41 | 65 | 4.12 | 263 | 16.68 | 479 | 30.37 | 693 | 43.94 | 142 | 9.00 | 1435 | 91.00 |
| 7 | 1573 | 5.41 | 0.922 | 22 | 1.40 | 9 | 0.57 | 13 | 0.83 | 165 | 10.49 | 408 | 25.94 | 956 | 60.78 | 44 | 2.80 | 1529 | 97.20 |
| 8 | 1574 | 5.38 | 0.931 | 22 | 1.40 | 6 | 0.38 | 19 | 1.21 | 183 | 11.63 | 420 | 26.68 | 924 | 58.70 | 47 | 2.99 | 1527 | 97.01 |
| 9 | 1567 | 5.40 | 0.957 | 22 | 1.40 | 15 | 0.96 | 17 | 1.08 | 167 | 10.66 | 381 | 24.31 | 965 | 61.58 | 54 | 3.45 | 1513 | 96.55 |
| 10 | 1577 | 5.47 | 0.928 | 21 | 1.33 | 11 | 0.70 | 18 | 1.14 | 153 | 9.70 | 334 | 21.18 | 1040 | 65.95 | 50 | 3.17 | 1527 | 96.83 |
| 11 | 1569 | 5.44 | 0.890 | 19 | 1.21 | 7 | 0.45 | 11 | 0.70 | 162 | 10.33 | 396 | 25.24 | 974 | 62.08 | 37 | 2.36 | 1532 | 97.64 |
| 12 | 1578 | 5.40 | 0.962 | 22 | 1.39 | 15 | 0.95 | 22 | 1.39 | 164 | 10.39 | 382 | 24.21 | 973 | 61.66 | 59 | 3.74 | 1519 | 96.26 |
| 13 | 1575 | 5.35 | 0.973 | 24 | 1.52 | 13 | 0.83 | 24 | 1.52 | 175 | 11.11 | 425 | 26.98 | 914 | 58.03 | 61 | 3.87 | 1514 | 96.13 |
| 14 | 1573 | 5.60 | 0.761 | 12 | 0.76 | 4 | 0.25 | 5 | 0.32 | 108 | 6.87 | 318 | 20.22 | 1126 | 71.58 | 21 | 1.34 | 1552 | 98.66 |
| 15 | 1574 | 5.46 | 0.866 | 14 | 0.89 | 7 | 0.44 | 18 | 1.14 | 159 | 10.10 | 381 | 24.21 | 995 | 63.21 | 39 | 2.48 | 1535 | 97.52 |
| 16 | 1576 | 5.41 | 0.894 | 17 | 1.08 | 8 | 0.51 | 22 | 1.40 | 154 | 9.77 | 431 | 27.35 | 944 | 59.90 | 47 | 2.98 | 1529 | 97.02 |
| 17 | 1569 | 5.43 | 0.864 | 13 | 0.83 | 8 | 0.51 | 19 | 1.21 | 157 | 10.01 | 421 | 26.83 | 951 | 60.61 | 40 | 2.55 | 1529 | 97.45 |
| 18 | 1574 | 5.43 | 0.839 | 9 | 0.57 | 9 | 0.57 | 22 | 1.40 | 151 | 9.59 | 453 | 28.78 | 930 | 59.09 | 40 | 2.54 | 1534 | 97.46 |
| 19 | 1567 | 5.34 | 1.007 | 25 | 1.60 | 16 | 1.02 | 38 | 2.43 | 158 | 10.08 | 415 | 26.48 | 915 | 58.39 | 79 | 5.04 | 1488 | 94.96 |

Note. All items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Slightly Disagree; 4 = Slightly Agree; 5 = Agree; 6 = Strongly Agree)

**Table 2. Number, mean, and standard deviation (SD) of age, gender, CA, UNEAB, SPL, and overall satisfaction**

| | N | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 1533 | 25.15 | 5.07 |
| Gender | 1569 | 0.08 | 1.00 |
| SP | 1599 | 9.31 | 0.82 |
| CA | 1604 | 8.92 | 1.06 |
| UNE | 1604 | 9.31 | 0.84 |
| Overall satisfaction | 1586 | 9.24 | 1.01 |

**Table 3. Correlations between age, gender, SPL, CA, UNEAB, and overall satisfaction (item 19)**

| | Age | Gender | SP | CA | UNE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | | | | | |
| Gender | -.081** | | | | |
| SP | -.180*** | 0.006 | | | |
| CA | -.213*** | 0.003 | .698*** | | |
| UNE | -.181*** | 0.025 | .817*** | .835*** | |
| Overall satisfaction | -.182*** | 0.021 | .792*** | .833*** | .880*** |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

**Table 4.** Multiple regression analyses

| Model | Predictors | $\beta$ | $t$ | Cohen's $f^2$ | $R^2$ change | F change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Age | -0.183 | -7.19*** | 0.034 | 0.034 | 26.26*** |
| | Gender | 0.009 | 0.36 | 0.000 | | |
| 2 | Age | 0.005 | 0.44 | 0.000 | 0.791 | 2256.93*** |
| | Gender | 0.011 | 1 | 0.001 | | |
| | CA | 0.321 | 16.27*** | 0.177 | | |
| | UNE | 0.452 | 18.69*** | 0.234 | | |
| | SP | 0.201 | 10.84*** | 0.079 | | |

*** $p < 0.001$

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# Evaluating the effectiveness of an online National Education Program for Research Postgraduate Students in Hong Kong: A multidimensional approach

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***Abstract:*** Social stability is crucial for enhancing the quality of life, as it recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals within the society. To foster students' understanding of the National Security Law and related issues, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University provided an online national education program to research postgraduate students during the 2022/23 Semester 1. The program included a 3-hour self-paced lecture and accompanying learning materials for self-study of three hours. 256 participants were subjected to a 19-item questionnaire to evaluate the program's effectiveness in several ways. We conducted confirmatory factor analyses to evaluate the scale's structure and multiple regression analyses to examine the relationships between different dimensions of students' perceptions of the program and their overall satisfaction. Results of the confirmatory factor analyses revealed three distinct dimensions (perceptions of course attributes, understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors, and perceptions of self-paced learning) that are consistent with previous findings. Results indicated that students generally held positive views of the program across all dimensions. Furthermore, multiple regression analysis demonstrated that these dimensions significantly predicted the overall evaluation. These findings imply that the research postgraduate students appreciated the online program and that it promoted their understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors.

***Keywords:*** Self-paced e-learning, national education, law-abiding behavior, subjective outcome evaluation, Hong Kong

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## Introduction

Human beings are highly social and inter-dependent. Anyone is essentially a part of social systems, ranging from businesses, neighborhood groups, and educational institutions to larger communities like one's city or country (1). Therefore, social stability is a significant predictor of quality of life, as it represents a well-structured life and appropriate social engagement (2). Conversely, absence of social stability can adversely impact the quality of life and public health (3). During 2019-2020, protests by opponents of the "Extradition Bill" eventually triggered social unrest, with two universities were occupied by the protestors (4) and numerous roads closed due to arson, seriously jeopardizing social stability. Previous studies show that social unrest and public health issues have been linked to deteriorating mental health (5,6). Wong and colleagues (7) stated the association between reduced general mental well-being and social stressor, such as social unrest. Accordingly, an increasing prevalence of depressive symptoms and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was observed after the 2019-2020 social unrest in Hong Kong, irrespective of whether they participated in the events (5,8). Ng (9) used "mental health tsunami" to characterize the effects of social unrest, including the exposure to violence, the breakdown of social networks, and the deteriorating economic situations.

In the context of higher education, social unrest also severely affected students' campus lives. First, students actively involved in the protests may have to suspend their studies due to legal sanctions. Second, in times of social upheaval, university students have to face dramatic changes in teaching and learning as well as examinations and struggle with limited resources, which may ultimately exacerbate their anxiety, stress, and frustration (4). Moreover, not only active protesters can be prone to PTSD symptoms (10). In fact, students who learned about the events on the news, lived in the affected areas, or further away from their families and stayed in resident halls in universities of Hong Kong, might experience mental health crisis as well. Their stress-related symptoms can persist for a few days or even decades after exposure to social events (10).

In response to this social event, to help people back to normal life and to rehabilitate law and social order (11), the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" ("HKNSL") was enacted by the National People's Congress for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ("HKSAR") and implemented on June 30, 2020. The enactment of HKNSL significantly impacts the region's social, legal, and political domains by addressing local legislation concerning national security (12,13). Furthermore, Article 10 of the HKNSL emphasizes the importance of cultivating legal awareness among young people and strengthening their commitment to adhering to the law. To achieve this, HKSAR is mandated to promote national security education in various institutions such as schools, universities, social organizations, and through media platforms including the internet (14). This initiative aims to heighten the understanding of national security among Hong Kong residents and reinforce their obligation to comply with the law.

The creation and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of people and communities is higher education's main goal. In light of growing concerns about insufficient law-abiding awareness and legal knowledge among Hong Kong students (15,16), higher education institutions have a crucial role in fostering students' adherence to the law and facilitating adolescents' development of legal beliefs, attitudes, and reasoning abilities (17). Previous

research has indicated that some young people may resist or even violate laws they perceive as unreasonable or unjust, despite viewing legal compliance as a prerequisite for being a socially responsible citizen (18). Moreover, peer influence can significantly impact their understanding of the rule of law (19). To mitigate the risk of students making ill-informed judgments, it is essential to introduce law-related knowledge and emphasize civic responsibility as early as possible (20). Moreover, providing legal education to university students helps maintain social harmony (21). Students could acquire legal thinking and moral sense in the legal concepts via the assimilation of legal concepts and a fundamental understanding of national security, thus amending the legal knowledge gap. If implemented successfully, legal education can cultivate social stability and reduce social unrest.

Therefore, as one of the eight University Grants Committee ("UGC") funded institutions in Hong Kong, a program titled "Understanding China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, P.R.C." was developed at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University to deepen student's understanding of the concepts and importance of national security. The program covers topics of modern China history with the concept of "Century of Humiliation", "overview of the restoration of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997" (including the Basic Law and the constitutional principle of "one country, two systems"), "concept of national security", "the HKNSL and its importance", "four major offenses listed in HKNSL", "issues and myths surrounding HKNSL".

As research postgraduate students have more autonomy, the program is conducted entirely online. Course content includes a 3-hour self-paced e-learning lecture, PowerPoint slides, and 20 lecture notes. To pass the course, students have to take a test with 10 multiple-choice questions and score 8 or above. They are allowed to attempt the test multiple times.

Unlike traditional face-to-face mode, e-learning is the educational approach that uses modern communication technologies to provide students with information intended to support learning (22,23). Apart from several benefits of e-learning, including the ability to study at any time and any place, the potential for considerable financial savings, the absence of crowded transportation, the freedom to make own decisions, and time savings, students are more prone to manage, control and evaluate their learning process (24-26). In other words, the learning process is self-paced, giving students more freedom in learning. In this program, students can log in to the online platform anytime to revisit the learning materials unlimitedly to consolidate their understanding of the program contents. As research postgraduate students, their systematic studies may be filled with a large amount of literature and experiments and are also under tremendous research pressure. Therefore, time management can be a salient concern for them (27). E-learning mode provides them with more extensive flexibility of time in their learning process, which fosters them to develop time management strategies in studying the program. In addition, students' learning experience can also be enhanced by applying a more advanced approach to delivering and receiving the learning resources (28). In particular, as a sensitive and controversial national education program such as the National Security Law, the anonymity feature of e-learning creates an ideal learning environment for students. This online, anonymous learning model minimizes students' pressure and anxiety when answering questions in the class and fosters their cognitive engagement (29). Thus, the participation and comprehension of the students could be improved. Moreover, compared with restudying the key concepts, multiple

testing with feedback can result in enhanced learning (30), and the effect of repeat retrieval can be observed in both the short-term and long-term. This indicated that the multiple attempts feature of the program is helpful for students to recall new concepts. These features suggest that the national security education program developed by our university is expected to be able to foster students in acquiring relevant knowledge. Additionally, according to Faulconer et al (31), assessment designs with many attempts and feedforward bossted information retention and motivated students to try again, and those who repeated testing recalled 80% of the content, compared to 36% or less for their peers (32).

Compared with other general education subjects, education related to national security law is relatively new. Consequently, it is essential to carry out a subjective outcome evaluation to address concerns regarding the potential positive impact of the national security education program on research postgraduate students, as well as to respond to societal criticisms about the perceived indoctrination associated with national education. This type of evaluation, which focuses on client satisfaction, has been widely employed in previous studies (33,34). It is also commonly utilized in higher education to understand students' learning experiences and satisfaction in courses (35).

Scholars believe that subjective outcome evaluation in higher education settings has many advantages. First, data collection for evaluation is cost-effective; a large sample size of data can be collected within a short time, with no need for any special skills and equipment for researchers to operate (15). Second, subjective outcome evaluation fosters the refinement of the subject, which is essential for course coordinators to ensure students grasping the message in the learning materials and receive valuable feedback to improve the loopholes in the newly developed course. Furthermore, as many students' comments are collected, researchers can obtain a more reliable picturee. In addition, the use of a a quantitative approach for the subjective outcome evaluation can help to transfer these findings to other populations and domains (36).

In the past, our research team investigated different student groups' perceptions of the national education program, including undergraduate students (37) and the teachers of the undergraduate national education program (38). No matter whether undergraduate students or lecturers, most agreed that the course improved their understanding of HKNSL and law abidance concepts (11, 15, 16, 37-39). However, since postgraduate students took this program via a different mode than undergraduates, their perceptions of the program still need to be evaluated. Therefore, to examine whether different learning modes and students' populations would lead to different results, it is essential to know about the perception of research postgraduate students toward the online national security education program.

All above, this study aims to quantitatively examine research postgraduate students' perception of the online national education program in Semester 1 of the 2022/23 academic year. We aimed to answer the following research questions:

- Research question 1 (RQ1) What are the psychometric properties of the online national education program? With reference to the previous findings (15), we expected the scale to capture students' perceptions of self-paced learning, understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors, and course attributes and be presented in a 3-factor model (Hypothesis 1).

- Research question 2 (RQ2): How do students perceive the online national education program in terms of the benefits of the self-paced online learning mode, students' comprehension of national education and law-abiding behavior, as well as curriculum design? With reference to previous findings (15,16), we expected the program would positively impact students in general and in different aspects of the online program (Hypothesis 2a, 2b, 2c).
- Research question 3 (RQ3): What are the predictors of the overall perception of the course evaluation scale? With reference to previous findings, it was hypothesized that students' scores on all three subscales (course attributes, understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors, and self-paced learning) would be significantly and positively correlated with each other and with their overall evaluation scores (Hypothesis 3a). Besides, we expected all three attributes would contribute to the overall perception of the course evaluation (Hypothesis 3b).

## Methods

This study utilized data from the subjective outcome evaluation collected in the first semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. An online course evaluation questionnaire was administered to research postgraduate students who had completed and passed the online test of the e-learning program. Participants were informed that the information collected would only be used for educational and research purposes, and they provided consent accordingly. The online survey was completely anonymous and optional.

Among the 422 research postgraduate students who passed the online assessment, 256 studnets (64.22%) completed the evaluation questionnaire. The sample consisted of 140 male (54.7%) and 116 female students (45.3%), with an average age of 25.90 years.

### Instruments

The study employed a modified version of the post-lecture evaluation questionnaire developed by Shek and colleagues (16) to assess students' perceptions of different aspects of the online program. The primary distinction between the national education programs for first-year undergraduate and research postgraduate students is the teaching mode. The undergraduate program incorporates face-to-face lectures and facilitates teacher-student and peer interactions, whereas the research postgraduate program is online and emphasizes self-paced learning. Therefore, items related to teachers' attributes and peer interactions were replaced with items of self-paced learning. The modified questionnaire contained 19 items, with responses recorded on a six-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" and 6 = "Strongly Agree"). There are several domains in this scale. The first domain is "Course attributes" with six items:

| | |
|---|---|
| Item 1 | "The design of this course was very good." |
| Item 2 | "There were many opportunities for reflection in this course." |
| Item 3 | "This course is helpful to my personal development." |
| Item 4 | "This course has improved my problem-solving ability." |
| Item 5 | "This course has improved my understanding of the importance of attributes of successful leaders (e.g., critical thinking, moral competence, law abidance etc.)." |

Item 6 "This course has improved my critical thinking."

The second domain is "Understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors" with 9 items:

Item 7 "This course helps me understand the knowledge of the history of Modern China."
Item 8 "This course helps me understand the knowledge of the history of Hong Kong."
Item 9 "This course has helped me understand the concepts of national security."
Item 10 "I understand that national security is important for the stability of a society."
Item 11 "This course has helped me understand the offenses and penalties surrounding the Hong Kong National Security Law."
Item 12 "This course has helped me understand the importance of implementing the Hong Kong National Security Law."
Item 13 "This course has helped me clarify some myths related to Hong Kong National Security Law."
Item 14 "I will try my best to serve as a law-abiding citizen."
Item 15 "I will try my best to serve as a socially responsible leader."

The third domain is "Self-paced learning" assessed by three items:

Item 16 "The self-paced online learning course enabled me to learn more efficiently about this course."
Item 17 "The self-paced online learning course allows me to learn the course materials according to my own situation."
Item 18 "Overall speaking, I like the self-paced online learning experience."

The final domain is "Overall evaluation" using one item evaluated students' overall perception of the course:

Item 19 "Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of this course."

**Data analysis**

Data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. First, positive and negative response rates were calculated, followed by descriptive analyses to determine means, standard deviations (SDs), and correlations between variables. Then, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to verify the construct validity of the online course evaluation questionnaire (40). Researchers contend that for Likert scales with five or more response categories, robust maximum likelihood (MLR) is acceptable (40). Thus, we conducted MLR estimation in the CFA. The goodness of fit of the CFA model was evaluated using various indices, which include chi-square ($\chi^2$), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standard Root Mean Square (SRMR). The cut-off criteria for fit indices were above .90 for CFI and TLI and below .080 for RMSEA and SRMR (41). Furthermore, multiple regression analysis was used to explore the relationships between variables. Specifically, the analysis examined the strength of the different areas covered in the online questionnaire in predicting the overall evaluation.

Figure 1

## Results

Results of CFA indicated that the three-factor model (course attributes, understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors, and self-paced learning) showed a good model fit [$\chi^2$ (109) = 244.37, CFI = .969, TFI = .956, RMSEA = .073, SRMR = .047]. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported, and the CFA model is shown in figure 1. Furthermore, the factor loadings of all items were greater than .60, ranging from .821 to .919 for items related to self-paced learning, from .763 to .930 for course attributes, and from .636 to .933 for students' understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors, respectively, indicating that each item was substantially related to the corresponding latent factor (see table 1).

Table 1

Table 2

Regarding research postgraduate students' perceptions of the online program, descriptive statistical analyses showed that students generally had a positive perception of the course, with positive responses (≥ 4 on Likert scale 1 – 6) ranging from 89.33% to 98.81% for different question items (see table 2). Students held favorable views on course attributes (item 1 to item 6), including the excellent design of the curriculum (93.33%) and the opportunities for reflection (95.67%). Additionally, students found the course helpful in enhancing their understanding of national education and law-abiding behavior (item 7 to item 15). For self-paced learning (items 16 to item 18), the students were satisfied with this learning mode. For instance, over 90% of the participants agreed that the self-paced online learning course enabled them to learn more efficiently about this course, and they appreciated this learning experience. As expected, most students responded positively to the different aspects of the course, supported Hypothesis 2a, 2b, and 2c.

Table 3

Table 3 presents the results of the correlation analyses between students' perspectives on various aspects and their overall evaluation of the course. The findings indicate that students' self-paced learning experiences and their understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors were positively correlated ($r$ = .623, $p$ < .001). Additionally, both students' self-paced learning and their understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors were positively associated with their views on course attributes, with correlation coefficients of .745 and .746, respectively ($p$ < .001). These results suggest that students who reported a positive experience with self-paced learning and a favorable view of the course attributes tend to have a better understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors. Furthermore, the results showed that all three subscales (self-paced learning, understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors, and course attributes) were significantly and positively correlated with each other ($p$ < .001).

Moreover, students' overall evaluation of the course was positively associated with all three subscales: self-paced learning ($r = .733$, $p < .001$), understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors ($r = .756$, $p < .001$), and course attributes ($r = .748$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that students who reported positive experiences with self-paced learning, a better understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors, and favorable course attributes were more likely to have a positive overall evaluation of the course. In addition, the results disclosed that students' age and gender were not significantly correlated with any of the subscales or their overall evaluation of the course. These findings suggest that students' age and gender did not significantly influence their perceptions of the course. Hypothesis 3a was supported.

Furthermore, in terms of the predictors of overall course satisfaction, results of multiple regression analyses suggested that the three subscales significantly predicted the overall evaluation after controlling age and gender (Table 4). Among all attributes covered, course attributes ($\beta = .400$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .234$) were the strongest predictor of the overall evaluation, followed by self-paced learning ($\beta = .318$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .155$), and understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors ($\beta = .225$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $f^2 = .055$). These findings provided upport for Hypothesis 3b.

## Discussion

The study has some unique features. Firstly, the program "Understanding China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, P.R.C." introduces the Hong Kong National Security Law (HKNSL), which is a novel and relatively controversial topic within the subjects offered by universities in Hong Kong. Consequently, individuals may hold a wide range of opinions regarding the related initiatives. Those who support this policy believe that teaching law-related knowledge in the national education program improves students' legal thinking and moral sense (21), lowers the possibility of making illogical judgments (20), and maintains social harmony. On the other hand, the opposition worried that the HKNSL undermines the social, legal, and political freedom of Hong Kong and deepens the ideological conflicts between China and Hong Kong (12). Therefore, we gathered evidence to understand research postgraduate students' perceptions of the program to dispel the myth that the program is "brainwashing". Secondly, concerning education on law-abiding leadership for undergraduate students in different academic years, findings indicated that the related courses delivered via face-to-face or HyFlex mode were appreciated by students (15,16,37). As the course for research postgraduate students was delivered in a self-paced online environment, there is a need to examine the effectiveness of such a learning mode to determine whether this mode is applicable. Although previous studies demonstrated the advantages of e-learning for students, including avoiding the limitations of time and place, higher autonomy in making their own decisions and improving their ability to manage, control and evaluate their learning process (24-26), there were no findings available on the perceived effectiveness of online national security education for research postgraduate students in Hong Kong.

Several oberservations from the current study may be emphasized. First, we validated the course evaluation scale we adapted and modified for this study using confirmatory factor analyses. Results provided support for a three-factor structure of the scale, including three

dimensions: course attributes, understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors, and self-paced learning. Hence, ther results provided support for the factorial validity of the scale as well as modification of the post-lecture evaluation survey. These findings indicate that this scale could be employed in future evaluations of law-related education delivered through online platforms.

Second, descriptive statistical results exhibited that research postgraduate students commonly had positive perceptions towards the online program in different aspects, including learning mode, curriculum design, benefits, and their appreciation of understanding national education and law-abiding behavior. Respondents generally appreciated the self-paced online learning experience, allowing them to learn about the learning contents more efficiently and flexibly according to their situations. Students perceived that the course helped them acquire knowledge of "history of Modern China", "history of Hong Kong", "concepts of national security", "importance of implementing the HKNSL", "importance of national security to the stability of a society", "offenses and penalties surrounding the HKNSL", and clarified "some myths related to HKNSL". Additionally, the students perceived that after completing the course, they would make every effort to uphold the law and act as moral role models. In terms of course attributes, most students appreciated the curriculum design, which allowed for reflection, and helped improve their personal development, critical thinking, and problem-solving ability, as well as deepen their comprehension of successful leaders.

In line with the previous studies (16), the responses from the students refuted the idea that they hold hostility towards the national education program. Instead, their perception of becoming righteous citizens and socially responsible leaders had been strengthened through the learning process. The study also revealed that the self-paced learning mode provided research postgraduate students with greater flexibility in learning (26) and addressed their concerns regarding time management (27). For the subscales "understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors" and "course attributes", the results of this study are consistent with Shek et al (15) and Shek et al (16), with respondents holding a generally positive view of these aspects. Notably, of 422 research postgraduate students enrolled in this program, 256 (64.22%) responded to our online course evaluation questionnaire. The response rate was encouraging , as in the context of teaching evaluation, a response rate of 21% is ideal for a program with more than 100 students (42). Moreover, the response rate of this study was higher than that of other similar studies that collected evaluation from Hong Kong students enrolled in online courses during the pandemic [e.g., 59% in Ng (9) and 18% in (43)].

Third, with regards to the predictors of the overall evaluation with a 3-hour self-paced e-learning lecture (Item 19), multiple regression analyses indicated that all three attributes of self-paced learning, understanding of national education and law-abiding behaviors, and course attributes significantly and positively predicted the overall evaluation of this online program. Among these three predictors, course attributes emerged as the strongest predictor of the overall evaluation, followed by the attribute of self-paced learning and the understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors, respectively. This finding is consistent with our previous studies (15,16). One possible explanation of the subscale course attributes being the most robust predictor is that students found the curriculum design well-structured, enabling them to reflect on the learning process. However, further research is needed to explore which specific elements

within the course design foster personal development among students and enhance their learning process.

Despite the fact that the findings are encouraging, this study has some limitations. First, although using student evaluation questionnaires to assess students' learning experience and overall satisfaction with various programs is a widely accepted practice in higher education (35), the voluntary nature of such evaluations may limit the validity of the results. It is possible that the opinions of students who did not complete the course evaluation questionnaire were not captured. Second, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of the program, it would be beneficial to incorporate a qualitative approach in data collection from research postgraduate students. This could offer a more nuanced understanding of the various elements contributing to the program's different aspects.

To conclude, this present study underscored the perceived effectiveness of the national education program offered to research postgraduate students. Overall, the program received favorable feedback from the participants. The results of our study reinforce the notion that the national education program is a promising possibility for diverse student populations and can be delivered through various channels. These findings have significant implications for the design and implementation of educational policies and programs to enhance university students' learning outcomes.

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# Appendix:

**Figure 1. CFA model**

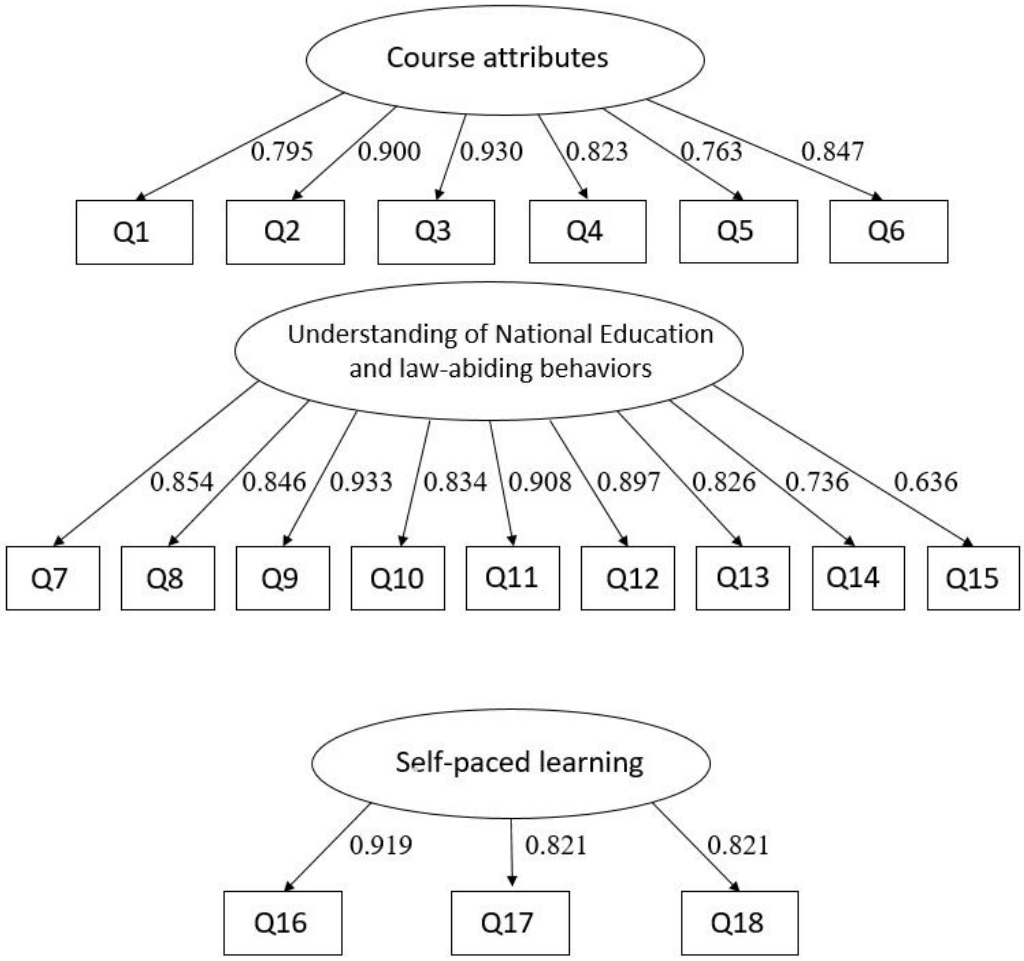

**Table 1. Factor loadings of online evaluation question items**

| | **Factor loading** |
|---|---|
| Factor 1: Course attributes | |
| Item 1 | 0.795 |
| Item 2 | 0.900 |
| Item 3 | 0.930 |
| Item 4 | 0.823 |
| Item 5 | 0.763 |
| Item 6 | 0.847 |
| Factor 2: Understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors | |
| Item 7 | 0.854 |
| Item 8 | 0.846 |
| Item 9 | 0.933 |
| Item 10 | 0.834 |
| Item 11 | 0.908 |
| Item 12 | 0.897 |
| Item 13 | 0.826 |
| Item 14 | 0.736 |
| Item 15 | 0.636 |
| Factor 3: Self-paced learning | |
| Item 16 | 0.919 |
| Item 17 | 0.821 |
| Item 18 | 0.821 |

**Table 2. Descriptive results of students' perceptions of the course**

| | N | Mean | S.D. | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | | 6 | | Negative responses 1+2+3 | | Positive responses 4+5+6 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 1. The design of this course was very good. | 255 | 5.11 | .999 | 3 | 1.18 | 5 | 1.96 | 9 | 3.53 | 27 | 10.59 | 110 | 43.14 | 101 | 39.61 | 17 | 6.67 | 238 | 93.33 |
| 2. There were many opportunities for reflection in this course. | 254 | 5.09 | .909 | 1 | 0.39 | 5 | 1.97 | 5 | 1.97 | 39 | 15.35 | 113 | 44.49 | 91 | 35.83 | 11 | 4.33 | 243 | 95.67 |
| 3. This course is helpful to my personal development. | 253 | 5.17 | .915 | 2 | 0.79 | 3 | 1.19 | 6 | 2.37 | 32 | 12.65 | 107 | 42.29 | 103 | 40.71 | 11 | 4.35 | 242 | 95.65 |
| 4. This course has improved my problem-solving ability. | 253 | 4.83 | 1.122 | 2 | 0.79 | 13 | 5.14 | 12 | 4.74 | 49 | 19.37 | 99 | 39.13 | 78 | 30.83 | 27 | 10.67 | 226 | 89.33 |
| 5. This course has improved my understanding of the importance of attributes of successful leaders (e.g., critical thinking, moral competence, law abidance etc.). | 256 | 4.98 | 1.046 | 2 | 0.78 | 8 | 3.13 | 9 | 3.52 | 47 | 18.36 | 98 | 38.28 | 92 | 35.94 | 19 | 7.42 | 237 | 92.58 |
| 6. This course has improved my critical thinking. | 254 | 5.02 | 1.029 | 2 | 0.79 | 7 | 2.76 | 11 | 4.33 | 37 | 14.57 | 105 | 41.34 | 92 | 36.22 | 20 | 7.87 | 234 | 92.13 |
| 7. This course helps me understand the knowledge of the history of Modern China. | 252 | 5.52 | .728 | 1 | 0.40 | 1 | 0.40 | 0 | 0.00 | 19 | 7.54 | 74 | 29.37 | 157 | 62.30 | 2 | 0.79 | 250 | 99.21 |
| 8. This course helps me understand the knowledge of the history of Hong Kong. | 251 | 5.51 | .771 | 1 | 0.40 | 1 | 0.40 | 4 | 1.59 | 15 | 5.98 | 71 | 28.29 | 159 | 63.35 | 6 | 2.39 | 245 | 97.61 |
| 9. This course has helped me understand the concepts of national security. | 253 | 5.52 | .754 | 1 | 0.40 | 1 | 0.40 | 3 | 1.19 | 15 | 5.93 | 73 | 28.85 | 160 | 63.24 | 5 | 1.98 | 248 | 98.02 |
| 10. I understand that national security is important for the stability of a society. | 253 | 5.60 | .737 | 1 | 0.40 | 2 | 0.79 | 1 | 0.40 | 13 | 5.14 | 60 | 23.72 | 176 | 69.57 | 4 | 1.58 | 249 | 98.42 |
| 11. This course has helped me understand the offenses and penalties surrounding the | 253 | 5.53 | .737 | 1 | 0.40 | 1 | 0.40 | 1 | 0.40 | 18 | 7.11 | 71 | 28.06 | 161 | 63.64 | 3 | 1.19 | 250 | 98.81 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hong Kong National Security Law. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. This course has helped me understand the importance of implementing the Hong Kong National Security Law. | 252 | 5.49 | .811 | 1 | 0.40 | 3 | 1.19 | 2 | 0.79 | 17 | 6.75 | 72 | 28.57 | 157 | 62.30 | 6 | 2.38 | 246 | 97.62 |
| 13. This course has helped me clarify some myths related to Hong Kong National Security Law. | 253 | 5.36 | .883 | 1 | 0.40 | 4 | 1.58 | 4 | 1.58 | 23 | 9.09 | 82 | 32.41 | 139 | 54.94 | 9 | 3.56 | 244 | 96.44 |
| 14. I will try my best to serve as a law-abiding citizen. | 252 | 5.67 | .703 | 1 | 0.40 | 2 | 0.79 | 1 | 0.40 | 9 | 3.57 | 50 | 19.84 | 189 | 75.00 | 4 | 1.59 | 248 | 98.41 |
| 15. I will try my best to serve as a socially responsible leader. | 254 | 5.52 | .753 | 1 | 0.39 | 1 | 0.39 | 2 | 0.79 | 18 | 7.09 | 70 | 27.56 | 162 | 63.78 | 4 | 1.57 | 250 | 98.43 |
| 16. The self-paced online learning course enabled me to learn more efficiently about this course. | 253 | 5.43 | .746 | 1 | 0.40 | 1 | 0.40 | 0 | 0.00 | 23 | 9.09 | 88 | 34.78 | 140 | 55.34 | 2 | 0.79 | 251 | 99.21 |
| 17. The self-paced online learning course allows me to learn the course materials according to my own situation. | 252 | 5.49 | .739 | 1 | 0.40 | 2 | 0.79 | 1 | 0.40 | 12 | 4.76 | 89 | 35.32 | 147 | 58.33 | 4 | 1.59 | 248 | 98.41 |
| 18. Overall speaking, I like the self-paced online learning experience. | 252 | 5.44 | .783 | 1 | 0.40 | 2 | 0.79 | 2 | 0.79 | 18 | 7.14 | 87 | 34.52 | 142 | 56.35 | 5 | 1.98 | 247 | 98.02 |
| 19. Overall speaking, I have a very positive evaluation of this course. | 252 | 5.37 | .853 | 1 | 0.40 | 4 | 1.59 | 2 | 0.79 | 22 | 8.73 | 88 | 34.92 | 135 | 53.57 | 7 | 2.78 | 245 | 97.22 |

**Table 3. Descriptive and correlational analyses**

| | | N | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Age | 247 | 25.90 | 3.346 | | | | | |
| 2 | Gender | 256 | - | - | -0.085 | | | | |
| 3 | Self-paced learning | 254 | 5.451 | 0.696 | 0.030 | 0.048 | | | |
| 4 | Understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors | 256 | 5.032 | 0.883 | -0.100 | 0.019 | 0.623*** | | |
| 5 | Course attributes | 255 | 5.527 | 0.667 | 0.005 | 0.058 | 0.745*** | 0.746*** | |
| 6 | Overall Evaluation | 252 | 5.369 | 0.853 | 0.019 | 0.091 | 0.733*** | 0.756*** | 0.748*** |

*** $p < 0.001$.

**Table 4. Multiple regression analyses for overall evaluation**

| Model | Predictor | β | *t* | Cohen's $f^2$ | $R^2$ change | F change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Age | 0.026 | 0.40 | 0.001 | 0.007 | 0.89 |
| | Gender [a] | 0.084 | 1.30 | 0.007 | | |
| 2 | Course attributes | 0.400 | 7.44*** | 0.234 | 0.703 | 192.09*** |
| | Understanding of National Education and law-abiding behaviors | 0.225 | 3.60*** | 0.055 | | |
| | Self-paced learning | 0.318 | 6.06*** | 0.155 | | |

*Note*. In model 2, age and gender were statistically controlled.

[a] 0 = male, 1 = female

*** $p < 0.001$

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Running title: Undergraduate students' focus group evaluation

# Qualitative evaluation of law abidance leadership education for undergraduate students in Hong Kong: Focus groups

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***Abstract:*** As national education programs (including "the Hong Kong National Security Law") have been implemented among different universities in Hong Kong, there is a need to understand students' perceptions of such programs. To understand how undergraduate students in Hong Kong universities perceive "National Security Law education" and to remove some of the "myths surrounding NSL education" in Hong Kong, a qualitative evaluation study using semi-structured focus group interview was carried out. Findings based on 11 focus groups involving 51 undergraduate students indicated that students generally demonstrated positive views towards this program, including the lecture, lecture notes, videos, assessments containing 20 multiple-choice questions, perceived benefits, and views on the benefits and effectiveness of "law abidance leadership education." Meanwhile, students also offered suggestions for improving "the law abidance leadership education program." The results are in line with previous evaluation studies and further confirm that NSL education is not perceived as "brainwashing" by students. In fact, students viewed that the program was beneficial to promote their law abidance leadership. We also discuss the limitations of current study and implications for national education programs.

***Keywords:*** Law abidance leadership education, undergraduate students, qualitative study, Hong Kong

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## Introduction

"The 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement" in Hong Kong resulted in widespread property damages and public disorder. It highlighted the vulnerability of post-handover Hong Kong in dealing with national security threats (1,2). Furthermore, the involvement of people from diverse backgrounds and social classes, including university and secondary school students, further exacerbated the situation (3). Two government-funded universities in Hong Kong, "The Chinese University of Hong Kong" (CUHK) and "The Hong

Kong Polytechnic University" (PolyU) suffered significant damages to their campus properties during violent clashes between protesters and police officers. Consequently, regular teaching orders were disrupted during the protests (3,4). By June 2022, 10,278 individuals had been arrested by the Hong Kong Police Force with students accounting for 39% of the arrestees (5). The charges against the protesters included rioting, unlawful assembly, arson, and desecrating the national flag and so on (6). These incidents highlighted the lack of law abidance and insufficiency of legal and civic education in Hong Kong, particularly among young people (7,8). Some critics pointed out that citizenship and law education have not been performed satisfactorily in developing students' national identity, citizenship, and legal consciousness since Hong Kong's return to China (8,9). There was even an "anti-patriotic education movement" formed by groups of young activists in 2012 to go against national education in Hong Kong (10).

To address these issues and amend the legal vacuum regarding national security in Hong Kong, "The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region," commonly known as the "Hong Kong National Security Law" (NSL), was passed by the National People's Congress (NPC) and implemented in Hong Kong on 30 June 2020 (11). Most importantly, Article 10 of the NSL requires educational institutions in Hong Kong to provide national security education for students to "raise the awareness of Hong Kong residents of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law" (12). Given that the demonstration movement was not only "sustained by the energy of school and university students, but also radicalized by the violence of a minority of them" (4), the NSL serves as a timely response to the long-standing inefficiency of citizenship and law education for Hong Kong students, as well as a window for facilitating the sense of law abidance and national identity of young people in Hong Kong (7-9). In addition, it is argued that modern universities should operate as a part of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to guide public opinions to protect hegemonic interests instead of imposing violence and suppression (13). As such, universities should take an active role in educating students in a manner that sustains the normal functioning of society, including educating students to become good citizens contributing to the common good (14,15).

In light of the requirement of NSL, universities in Hong Kong also have the responsibility to provide NSL education to students (16). Consequently, public universities in Hong Kong, including "The University of Hong Kong (HKU),"), "The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)," "The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST)," "The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU)," "Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU)," and "The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK)," have now integrated NSL education into their curricula as an essential part of the graduation requirements (17). For instance, HKBU has made the National Security Law education a compulsory component of the co-curricular learning program, requiring undergraduate students to attend a 2-hour in-person lecture, spend 2 hours on assigned reading materials, and pass a quiz (18). Similarly, HKU has introduced a non-credit-bearing compulsory course called "Introduction to the Constitution, the Basic Law and the National Security Law" with pre-recorded lectures and study materials for all full-time and part-time undergraduate students (19). CUHK has also introduced two compulsory modules, namely "Understanding China" and "Hong Kong in the Wider Constitutional Order," as its national security education program for undergraduate students, consisting of introductory lectures, video lectures, online assignments, and final examinations with a Distinction/Pass/Failure grading scheme (20).

At the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), NSL education is implemented through the "Law-abiding Leadership" module as a part of the Leadership Education and Development curriculum for undergraduate students. The module covers "fundamental concepts and theories related to laws and law-abidance and socially responsible leadership," "the concept and importance of national security," "the Hong Kong National Security Law," "overview of the four major offences in the NSL," "issues and myths surrounding the NSL," a brief introduction of the "Century of Humiliation" and "Restoration of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997," including "the Basic Law and the constitutional principle of 'one country, two systems'." In addition to the 3-hour face-to-face lecture, 60 lecture notes and two videos providing an overview of modern Chinese history, the Constitution, the Basic Law, and the Hong Kong National Security Law are distributed to students. Students are required to spend 7 hours of self-study on the materials mentioned above. Upon completion of the study, students are required to complete an assessment composed of 20 multiple-choice questions allowing multiple attempts (21). There are several intended learning outcomes of the "law-abiding leadership" module. These include 1) understanding the basic concepts and theories related to law-abiding leadership and socially responsible leadership; 2) understanding the importance of law-abiding leadership and socially responsible leadership to diverse professionals as well as their normal lives; 3) developing law-abiding leadership and socially responsible leadership; 4) understanding modern Chinese history, the Constitution and the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China; and 5) understanding the background and provisions of the Hong Kong National Security Law and related issues.

Previous studies have reported that a growing number of young people are prone to unlawful and criminal acts due to a lack of knowledge of the law and the importance of abiding by the law (22-24). For example, Thomas and Shihadeh (24) believed that insufficient resources and opportunities for civic participation might lead to institutional isolation of youth, thus increasing their likelihood to engage in crimes such as "homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and burglary." Meanwhile, Yeon et al. (25) deemed that the increasing enforcement of the law on youths may result from the lack of awareness and understanding of law among the young population. It has also been noted that the lack of legal consciousness among youth, especially during economic crisis and social instability, will hinder them from taking an active civic role beneficial for society (26). Therefore, implementing national security education is timely and crucial to help young people, especially university students in Hong Kong, gain a profound comprehension of law and cultivate their respect for law abidance (27). Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that legal education in universities is no longer exclusive to law students only but delivered across various majors such as business, social work, and engineering (28). For instance, incorporating law modules in the Business discipline can make students and organizations recognize the impact of law on their field to promote their work ethics and moralities (28, 29). As for NSL education in Hong Kong, studies have also indicated that most university students who have received NSL education have had positive learning experiences. They have agreed that the lectures have helped them in multiple aspects, including promoting psychosocial capability and whole-person development, enhancing their understanding about law-abiding behavior and national security, developing readiness to become socially responsible leaders (27), realizing the significance of law abidance and national security (30), and nurturing positive attitudes towards law abidance (16).

However, further investigations into students' perceptions of such education are still needed for several reasons. Firstly, biases on NSL education among the public, students, and teachers in

Hong Kong still exist. For instance, the NSL is often framed as "resulting in the truncated autonomy and exerting controls over the society, education, and the judiciary" (31). Some even claimed that university managements have been "disciplining students, monitoring faculty, and cleansing universities" according to NSL (32), thus completely misapprehending and stigmatizing the purpose of NSL. To echo different voices and break the myths about NSL through evidence-based results, it is necessary to systematically evaluate the NSL program using scientific data. Secondly, teachers may feel anxious when being assigned to teach NSL due to limited teaching experiences, uncertainty about students' reactions and attitudes in class, and doubts on learning outcomes (33). Therefore, understanding students' experiences of the NSL program would help enhance teachers' confidence in teaching and improve teaching quality. Thirdly, though previous studies have investigated students' feedback on NSL education using post-lecture surveys (e.g., 16, 30), several deficiencies of such a methodology were noted. For instance, previous evaluation findings were based on post-lecture surveys conducted right after the lecture, thereby unable to capture students' feelings towards their self-learning experiences and assessments (30). Although the findings of Shek et al. (30) revealed that the satisfaction rate of the lecture was high, learners' satisfaction during the class cannot fully reflect the overall satisfaction of the whole program, as satisfaction is often affected by not only the lecture attributes but also non-lecture attributes such as supplementary learning materials (34) and form of exam (35). Moreover, the nature of survey methodology made it difficult for researchers to ask follow-up questions to obtain more detailed or in-depth comments. Since there exist controversies regarding national education, such as accusing it of being an instrument for "brainwashing" (36) and of negatively impacting students' political well-being (16), gathering direct opinions from students who have been involved in national education is the most appropriate way to investigate whether such education is really "brainwashing" or brings negative impacts to students. Consequently, to further replicate previous findings and demonstrate the importance of NSL education in Hong Kong universities in a more convincing manner, focus group is an optimal methodology to carry out this study. Although Shek et al. (16) published a related paper using focus group method, showing that students generally viewed the program favorably and gained benefits and enhancements, there is a need to replicate and consolidate the findings.

Existing course evaluation studies primarily focus on examining three major attributes including course attributes, teacher's performance, and perceived benefits of the course (e.g., 37, 38, 39). These attributes are considered basic in evaluating perceived learning processes and outcomes (39). With reference to such a three-attribute framework and previous evaluation studies on national education (16, 30), we propose the following research questions:

- Research question 1: How do undergraduate students perceive their learning experiences of the 3-hour lecture, including the lecture content, classroom atmosphere, interactions between teacher and students, interactions among students, and teacher's performance?
- Research question 2: How do undergraduate students perceive the teaching materials including the lecture notes, videos, and assessments?
- Research question 3: How do undergraduate students perceive the effectiveness and benefits of Law Abidance Leadership education?
- Research question 4: What are undergraduate students' suggestions for improving the Law Abidance Leadership program?

- Research question 5: What is undergraduate students' subjective satisfaction rate of the Law Abidance Leadership education program?

## Methods

Focus group interview was conducted in this study. According to Gibbs (40), focus group is particularly effective in eliciting respondents' attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and reactions, the information more likely to be revealed through social gatherings and group interactions. It is also capable of extracting individual beliefs partially independent of a group or its social settings. Additionally, Guest et al (41) suggested that focus group is more likely to lead to disclosure on feelings on sensitive topics compared with individual interviews, which makes it suitable for the current study as it involves controversial topics such as the National Security Law.

The participants of the focus groups are Year 1 undergraduate students from 19 classes who took "Law abidance leadership education" module under a leadership subject entitled "tomorrow's leaders" at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University during Semester 1, 2022/23 academic year. The course instructors randomly selected three students from each class to participate in the focus groups upon course completion. The idea that the sample size for a qualitative research should be broad and diverse in terms of participants' background is often emphasized (42). Therefore, we ensured that the chosen participants were from different majors and different countries or regions to improve the generalizability of the study results. Consequently, 65 students were invited, and 51 (43.1% males) agreed to participate in the focus groups, with a response rate of 78.5%. The participants were from the following faculties/schools, including "Faculty of Construction and Environment," "Faculty of Engineering," "Faculty of Health and Social Sciences," "Faculty of Humanities," "Faculty of Science," "School of Fashion and Textiles," and "School of Hotel and Tourism Management."

A total of 11 focus group interviews with 4 to 8 students in each were conducted in December 2022 and January 2023. According to Carlsen and Glenton's (43) review of 220 focus group studies, the mean and median number of focus group sets were 8.4 and 5, respectively. However, the number of groups should be determined by actual research context and avoid poor and inconsistent reporting (43). Based on the total number of students attending the NSL program, the number of focus groups in this study is within a normal range of focus group sets. Regarding the size of each group (i.e., the number of participants in each group), Mishra (44) claimed that "the optimum size for a focus group is six to eight participants (excluding researchers), but focus groups can work successfully with as few as three and as many as participants." Therefore, the number of participants in each group meets the optimum size of focus group in the current study. All the focus groups were conducted online via Zoom with meetings recorded under participants' consent, due to the social distancing policy under COVID-19 pandemic. We collected as little personal information as possible to protect students' privacy and encourage their active participation. The only demographic information collected was gender of students. When students joined the focus groups, they were anonymized with codes assigned to them. Informed consent was delivered to each student, and all participants had completed written consent before the focus group sessions. Meanwhile, ethics approval was acquired from the university prior to data collection. Each session was hosted by one Assistant Professor with a PhD degree, and one project assistant who was present to address administrative issues such as

technical problems during the session, contacting the participants before the session, and reminding the participants to fill in the consent form. Each focus group lasted for 60 – 150 minutes, and the participants were rewarded cash vouchers at HK$100 (roughly US$12.82) per hour upon completion as a token of appreciation.

**Focus group interview script**

Following Adams's (45) argument that semi-structured interview is suitable when involving probing and open-ended questions on sensitive topics where the respondents might feel uncomfortable to disclose their authentic opinions (45) while they are with peers in a focus group, we conducted semi-structured focus groups to elicit feelings of participants on various aspects of "law abidance leadership education" program. The conceptual frameworks of previous evaluation studies (38, 39) were used to guide the development of 12 questions that covered topics such as students' views on the 3-hour lecture (including "lecture content," "classroom atmosphere," "interactions between teacher and students," "interactions among students," and "teacher's performance"), views on the lecture notes, videos, and assessments, their perceived benefits and effectiveness of "law abidance leadership education," and their suggestions for improving the program. To better validate the benefits and effectiveness of "law abidance leadership education," we also asked participants about whether they think the program is brainwashing and their perceptions of the views of their classmates. Consequently, a total of 12 questions were employed to guide the focus groups, as demonstrated in table 1.

Table 1

**Data analysis**

Three research assistants used Microsoft Excel to capture the transcriptions of the Zoom sessions with each page including the comments on one question. Based on these transcripts, we conducted thematic analysis of all participant comments. According to Ghoreishi et al. (46), thematic analysis is "a process for analyzing texts and transforming diverse data into rich and detailed information," which is employed to "both state and explain a fact." It is also a universally applied method in evaluating students' learning experience (47,48). A commonly adopted categorization strategy in the thematic analysis is to decide themes based on subjects' sentiments (49,50), i.e., positive, neutral, and negative, which is effective for eliciting and evaluating attitudes and views of subjects. Consequently, we coded the themes as positive, neutral, and negative based on this strategy. We then identified the keywords in the comments and fit them into the corresponding categories. One project assistant assigned comments to specific themes. To avoid intercoder bias, we also asked another two project assistants to cross-check. Finally, consensus was reached through discussions between the three project assistants. We present several examples here to illustrate our coding scheme better. For instance, comments containing words such as "helpful," "accessible," "well-arranged," and "meaningful" were regarded as positive. Comments with words such as "relevant," "nothing bad happened," "not bad," and "normal" were considered neutral. Comments containing words such as "embarrassment," "too much," "tense," and "not clear" were considered negative.

Table 2-5

## Results

In the following sections, we present the detailed findings regarding the focus group questions, which concern students' perceptions of the 3-hour lecture, lecture notes, videos, assessments, perceived benefits, their views on the necessity and effectiveness of law abidance leadership education, and their suggestions for improving this program. Examples of related narratives can be found in table 2 through table 5.

### Students' lived learning experience

In general, students viewed their learning experience on the lecture of "law abidance leadership" as "meaningful," "useful," and "interesting" (see table 2). Some interviewees expressed that they "enjoyed the lecture" because "it was highly participatory and the format is abundant." However, a few students indicated the space for further improvement, such as the pace of the lecture (e.g., "the course is rather rushed"), and lecture content (e.g., "the concepts introduced are too lengthy and complex to understand," "some cases are far from real life, and it was difficult for the students to find resonance"). Several students concerned that the lecture content was too specific about Hong Kong and China while not very relevant to international students.

Regarding the lecture content in particular, we observed some positive keywords including "impressive," "easy to understand," as well as "promotion of understanding." Nonetheless, some students reported that "lecture content was somewhat unclear," "it was difficult to concentrate because the content was far from people's daily life," and "the duration of the lecture was too long and the contents was too many."

Regarding teacher's performance, students disclosed overwhelmingly positive narrations. For instance, students claimed that the teachers were "very good," "great," "did a really good job," "not too pushy," and taught "with great care and responsibility." They believed that the teachers "had a deep understanding of the topic," "delivered concepts and presented the teaching materials clearly," and "made clarifications on students' questions." Most importantly, many students mentioned that the teachers were "delivering objective facts, not personal feelings." Even for some students who negatively perceived some parts of the lecture such as the contents and classroom atmosphere, they agreed that the teachers tried to make the class "interesting" and "respect every student's idea." Some also claimed that the teachers "tried to make this kind of difficult serious topic look easier." However, one of the students deemed that the teacher was "rushing in delivering the lectures."

Another observation concerns the classroom interaction. Several students reported that the lecture environment was "lively," "relaxing," and "not stressful." They believed that "the lecture atmosphere of such law-related course was no difference with other courses." On the other hand, as the topic was rather sensitive to some students, some of them reflected that the atmosphere was "a little bit of embarrassment," "more serious," and "tense." For classroom interactions, most students claimed that the lecture was "participatory," and there were "mutual encouragements among students," and the teacher "would also choose the language we are good at to communicate with us," and "would guide us to think." A few negative comments were also identified, such as "the interaction was not that often as other lectures," "there is no interaction." One of the students expressed that "everyone was very nervous because we might be named in class." For interaction amongst the students, some students shared that "the group members discussed actively," "everyone was free to express their own opinions" and "the interaction was enough to the law-related issues." On the other hand, some students reflected that they were

"rather keen on listening" and "not willing to interact or communicate actively compared to other lectures."

**Perceptions of the teaching materials**

Regarding the 60 lecture notes, students generally perceived that the contents were "detailed," "interesting," "comprehensive," and "useful in consolidating knowledge on Chinese history and building the basic understanding of NSL." On the other hand, a few students felt that despite the lecture notes were "a little helpful in passing the quiz," they were "boring" because "the contents were too many and too complicated." In addition, a few respondents felt that the content should be more coherent and practical by further emphasizing how these historical events led to NSL instead of merely presenting a timeline. For example, one of the students said "The history of China, from the wars to the different treaties during the struggles with the British, did not explain very well how they are connected with the National Security Law. Moreover, there were many descriptions in this history, and I am not sure that we need to know the details while I understood that there is a necessity to study NSL."

Meanwhile, some students regarded the videos as "a good part for course preparation" with "high quality" and "great continuity." In contrast, few students felt that the videos were "not very useful," and "the content was similar to the lecture notes." Surprisingly, two students expressed that they did not watch the two videos without disclosing reasons.

Lastly, regarding the assessment involving 20 multiple-choice questions, while most students shared that the assessment was "easy to pass," "meaningful and helpful in enriching and consolidating relevant knowledge," and "more impressive than lecture notes and videos," a few students reflected that the quiz was "too difficult" and involved many details that can be easily missed. Meanwhile, some claimed that they completed the test to satisfy the graduation requirement and did not really take it seriously, as they pointed out that they basically relied on "external help such as Google" to pass the exam, and eventually "remembered nothing" about the knowledge offered in this program (see table 3).

**Effectiveness and benefits of this program**

Table 4 shows some narratives on students' perceived benefits and effectiveness of this program. Generally, the benefits can be concluded as five aspects. First, students believed that the program helped enhance their legal consciousness, such as "helping students to develop better ideas and values in future," "assisting newcomers to Hong Kong to be familiar with the laws and culture so that they can better integrate into the society," "having a clearer understanding of compliance with the law." The second aspect is to improve students' understanding of national security and the necessity of enacting "National Security Law." The third aspect is to deepen students' understanding of modern Chinese history through "providing them with an opportunity to revisit major humiliating historical events." The fourth aspect is the encouragement of positive attitudes, including "promoting their sense of national identity and patriotism," "enriching the political awareness," "improving recognition of cultural differences," "fostering their law-abiding attitude and determination to become a law-abiding citizen," and "leading them to understand the people and incidents around them in a positive manner." Finally, students said the lecture assisted in "developing critical thinking skills" and "better preparing for a career."

For the perceived effectiveness, students agreed that it is "reasonable" and "practical" for university students to understand Chinese history and the NSL. They believed that this program had allowed a clear understanding of "civic responsibility" and could help them "integrate into

Hong Kong culture," "avoid violating these laws or regulations," and "feel the attitude of the university and increase the sense of security in my heart." On the other hand, students with reservations argued that they felt "the political or law-related education was boring," and "these pieces of knowledge are not very helpful for future studies or works, so there was no need to link it to grades." In addition, they thought "it was not necessary to know too much about Chinese history." Noteworthily, as we asked specifically about whether the program is considered "brainwashing," the respondents overwhelmingly denied that the program was brainwashing because all course materials were "objective" and "neutral." It introduced "common sense and facts in nature."

Furthermore, we also asked about students' perceptions of their classmates' opinions to obtain more all-round views. Students reported that most of their classmates agreed that requiring the undergraduates to take the related education is reasonable. Students from mainland China found it very useful to know some of the situations in Hong Kong. However, a few shared that "though some Hong Kong and foreign students were not against this course, they did not show large interests either. It is just like completing a task for them." Finally, other students were not sure about the opinions of their peers, as their discussion mainly revolved around the test. They cared about if they were able to fulfil the requirement within the required time and how to do it more efficiently, but there were very few opinions about the curriculum or the law on its own right.

**Suggestions for improvement**

Despite the fact that respondents' opinions of the program on law-abiding leadership were largely favorable, they provided some valuable suggestions on how to improve this program from different aspects. Some students advised "increasing the proportion on National Security Law or focusing on NSL" for the lecture's subject matter. Others recommended "adding more information about Hong Kong or something related to students' daily life, in addition to China's new modern history and the National Security Law," and "to connect the content with global citizenship." In addition, a few students suggested that "teachers should be more familiar with the topic and more confident in their teaching," "to teach more elaborately with examples to build upon the existing law and to explain cases," and pay more attention to pace to make sure everyone as going at the same pace." Some students indicated "the bullet points could be used in teaching and learning materials (e.g., PowerPoint or lecture notes) to make them easier to read."

As for the curriculum arrangement, several students considered that "the course can be postponed or advanced for a few weeks" or "shorten the duration for each lecture." Some students suggested "to split the lecture into several different parts, as the content was too broad to be covered in one three-hour lecture" or "to take the most important parts of the lecture and discuss it more deeply." In addition, a few students proposed "to use Chinese as the medium of instruction," "to provide an option to choose one's preferred language," and "to add some Chinese annotations to the title or video, especially the annotations on proper nouns." Furthermore, students hoped "to have more interaction, like feedback questions at the end of each section or some small games," "to add an online forum for students to share their opinions anonymously," "to group students in teams to understand other students' perspectives better," and "to stimulate students' learning motivations by organizing some workshops or seminars." For the assessment, most students suggested "to make it easier," "to lower the passing requirement," and "to provide current answers and explanations for students to improve their next attempt." A few students suggested "enriching the format of assessments such as using

group presentation or short essay." They believed "it will be better if the test includes application-based questions to improve the student understanding and application of the subject." Table 5 demonstrates some of the narrations on suggestions for improvement.

**Overall satisfaction of the program**

Finally, based on the feedback collected through Question 10 (i.e., "Overall speaking, are you satisfied with the arrangement of the law abidance leadership education? If the full mark is 10, ranging from 1 to 10, how much will you give?"), the respondents showed generally positive evaluation of lecture's overall satisfaction, with an average score of 6.98 out of 10 (1 = very unsatisfied; 10 = very satisfied).

## Discussion

This study evaluated the "law abidance leadership program" based on students' perceptions and experiences, particularly regarding the National Security Law (NSL). The study found that most participants had positive opinions on diverse aspects of the program, such as the lecture, lecture notes, videos, assessments, and perceived necessity and advantages of "law abidance leadership education," especially regarding NSL. In addition, this study sheds light on some of the myths of and introduces facts about law-abiding leadership education, especially regarding the NSL, and reaffirmed the findings of previous studies (16, 30). Notably, no participant in this study believed that such education is brainwashing, which counters the criticisms doubting national education as a brainwashing tool (30).

Firstly, this study found that students' learning experience on various aspects of the 3-hour lecture is generally positive. Most students believed that the lecture contents were interesting, relevant, and easy to understand. Although a few students deemed that the contents were complex and not well related to their life, this observation is in line with previous evaluation studies (16, 30), which supports that the lecture on the law abidance leadership program has been well-received by most students. Furthermore, students also perceived the classroom atmosphere and intra-class interactions positively, claiming the class to be encouraging and participatory. As Martens and Gainous (51) argued, an open classroom climate is crucial in fostering students' sense of citizenship and civil responsibility, students' satisfaction with the classroom atmosphere in our study well indicates the success of learning and teaching the law abidance leadership program. However, based on some negative narratives, the study identified two major factors that may negatively affect classroom interaction: sensitivity of the topic and cultural background of the students. Some students worried that the topics about NSL might generate conflicting views, and they wish to "avoid unnecessary arguments." Previous studies have indicated that establishing and maintaining a good classroom atmosphere is conducive to teaching sensitive and controversial topics (52, 53). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how to establish and maintain a good classroom ambience that allows most students to appreciate and participate in class discussions. Meanwhile, some international students considered "whether it was fit for them to talk about a country that they have never lived in before, although they were keen to know some of the views of their local classmates in Hong Kong and the reasons why some people had pretty strong opinions on NSL." As Tavares (54) highlighted when individuals who identify with various cultural groups or who follow various cultural norms participate in a debate on legal problems, the instructor should design the lecture strategically so that students have opportunities to analyze legal issues from diverse perspectives and to share their thoughts in the class (54). In addition, the instructor could involve opportunities for students of various backgrounds to

discuss issues related to the national security of their home countries when delivering topics related to NSL.

Additionally, students' feedback on teachers' performance was overwhelmingly positive, praising the teachers' capacity of delivering the contents, organizing in-class activities and discussions, and utilizing digital tools to make the lecture intriguing and more interactive. It has also come to our attention that many students mentioned teachers' efforts in promoting the classroom atmosphere. As Turanlı (55) indicated, teachers' social and emotional support could encourage students to appreciate the classroom atmosphere. Hence, the study highlighted the interrelationship between teachers' behaviors and classroom atmosphere, which played a crucial role in promoting students' satisfaction rate with the learning environment. The findings from the current study contribute to the development and refinement of the theoretical models of predictors of students' satisfaction with the law abidance leadership program.

Secondly, students also expressed positive feelings regarding the learning experiences apart from the lecture, i.e., the self-learning of 60 lecture notes, videos, and conducting online assessments. Many students have claimed that they enjoyed reading the lecture notes because the contents were interesting and summarized the lecture contents well. Some also mentioned that the lecture notes served as a good supplement for the lecture and were very helpful for the assessment. The videos, most students also thought they were helpful for them to better understand some parts of the lecture contents. However, we noticed that a few students thought there are many overlaps between the lecture notes and videos, which makes either one of them unnecessary. Several students even said that they did not watch the videos. Even though many previous studies have indicated that using multimedia supplementary materials, such as videos, can improve students' learning motivation (56, 57), there is a need to understand why some students do not appreciate their learning experience with these materials. As for the assessment, since the quiz allowed multiple attempts and students were permitted to search for relevant information in the lecture notes, videos, and other sources, most students believed it was easy to pass and could help them consolidate their knowledge and fill the knowledge gaps. This observation rejected the criticism on the effectiveness of employing multiple-attempt test on national education (58), and validated that open-book exams allowing for multiple attempts can facilitate students' engagement, learning performance, and outcomes (59, 60). For example, Karpicke and Roediger's study (61) found that students who repeated testing recalled 80% of the learning materials, while their counterparts recalled 36% or less. Stratling (62) generally supported using repeated testing to improve students' understanding of learning materials and their performance. In addition, Faulconer et al. (63) also found that assessment design with multiple attempts incorporating feedforward encouraged students to try again and benefited their knowledge gaining and retaining.

Thirdly, our findings showed that students perceived the law abidance leadership education as effective and beneficial. Most students believed that knowing the history and laws of Hong Kong and China can help university students develop a better sense of citizenship and law abidance leadership. However, some international students were unsure about the purpose of this program, highlighting the need to clarify the program's objectives explicitly. Our standpoint is that the primary purpose of requiring international students to attend this lecture is to improve their understanding of Hong Kong and the legal system, to benefit their academic and daily experience during their sojourn and future lives in Hong Kong. Some participants also recognized such importance during the focus group sessions, who agreed that the program would be vital to their development. As for the perceived benefits, they were centered on the following

aspects: understanding the importance of abiding by the law, establishing a sense of social responsibility and leadership, raising the awareness of protecting and contributing to one's home country, and dispelling some myths surrounding National Security Law. These observed benefits align with those found in previous evaluation studies (27, 30, 64). Based on an exploratory factor analysis study on Hong Kong students' perception of being "good citizens," Kennedy (65) concluded three factors of good citizenship, including "legal obligations related to civil authorities, personal obligations to support other members of the community, and patriotic obligations to support the nation-state" (65). Consequently, students' perceived benefits of law abidance leadership education in the current study also corresponded to these three factors, indicating that this program is beneficial in nurturing students into responsible leaders with good citizenship and awareness of law abidance.

Fourthly, when it comes to students' suggestions for improvements, this study has introduced different feedback compared to a previous evaluation (16). While some participants in the previous study believed that the emphasis of this program should be on national security and legal issues and questioned the necessity of comprehensively covering modern Chinese history (16), we retain our stance that covering modern Chinese history would be helpful for students to appreciate the importance of national security and understand why Hong Kong National Security Law is needed (16). We would like to add that the rationale behind the law-abiding leadership program is that only by learning to abide by the law can a person become influential leaders for the society (27). Since NSL is still relatively new to Hong Kong, it is essential to introduce more concerning the contents and mechanisms of NSL. Nevertheless, as this program continues to be delivered, we accept the possibility of improvements based on future evaluations like this study.

Finally, the overall score of students' satisfaction with the law abidance leadership program in the current study is 6.98/10, which indicates a relatively high satisfaction rate. Previous studies have suggested that qualitative comments are positively related to quantitative scores in satisfaction evaluations, as positive comments, compared to the negative ones, are more likely to associate with high quantitative scores (66). Given that most students in the current study perceived positively towards various aspects of the law abidance leadership program, it is reasonable that the overall satisfaction rate is also high.

Taken as a whole, the findings triangulated with the previous quantitative and qualitative evaluation studies that the national education program was well-received by the respondents who completed the post-lecture evaluation (27,30). Most importantly, the findings echo the qualitative findings based on focus groups in a previous study (16) that the students perceived benefits and value of the national education program.

## Limitations, implications and conclusion

Even though the current study has successfully attested to the findings of previous inquiries on students' perspectives on NSL education and obtained new insights, some limitations should be noted. First, the current study was based on data from 11 focus groups involving 51 participants only. Although the students were randomly selected, most students in the same group came from the same class taught by the same instructor, which may more easily lead to biased views due to various situational constraints and social pressures within the group (67, 68). Future studies on similar topics should optimize the sampling process regarding sampling method and sampling size. Secondly, since one of the salient purposes of this study is to reply to the questions and challenges regarding NSL education using hard evidence, it would be more warranted if the study could involve other stakeholders about this program, such as teachers. Though previous

studies have examined teachers' experiences in law-abiding leadership using qualitative methods (16, 30, 64, 69), it would be helpful to combine both qualitative and quantitative methods in future studies to obtain all-round views on NSL education from different perspectives. Last, as NSL education goes on across universities in Hong Kong, further studies, such as comparative studies involving course evaluations from different universities, should be conducted to replicate the current findings and explore further into NSL education in Hong Kong.

Despite the abovementioned limitations, this study has provided valuable implications for both research and practice. Firstly, as various national education programs are continuously delivered to students at different levels, our study suggests that there is a strong need for evaluation studies and comparative studies in future involving different methodologies and designs. Secondly, this study has some pedagogical insights for implementing similar programs across tertiary education institutes across Hong Kong. Since National Security Law is still regarded as a sensitive topic and students may not fully understand the purpose of taking such education, including information such as Chinese and Hong Kong history, or infusing NSL contents as part of a larger frame of civic education programs such as Leadership Education and Development, linking NSL with the development of qualities such as a sense of leadership and social responsibility would be a warranted way to improve the effectiveness of such education programs. Meanwhile, our findings suggested that students would prefer these education programs to be more closely relevant to their daily life. Therefore, choosing examples that are more related to students' daily life to elaborate on NSL and involving more in-class and outside-class activities could make these programs more interesting and attractive.

Overall, this research investigated students' insight of the law abidance leadership education program based on data collected through focus groups. Our findings revealed that students generally demonstrated positive attitudes towards various aspects of the program, including the lecture, lecture notes, videos, assessments, perceived benefits, and views on the benefits and effectiveness of law abidance leadership education. The study also replicated findings of previous evaluation studies on law abidance leadership education (16, 30), and further proved the effectiveness of national education programs in Hong Kong in fostering university students to become law-abiding leaders.

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**Table 1. Questions for the focus group interviews**

- Taken as a whole, what are your experiences about the lecture on Law Abidance Leadership (including the three-hour lecture, 60 lecture notes, two videos, and assessment)? Please share your experience and thoughts.
- What are your views on the following aspects of the three-hour lecture? - a. Lecture content; b. Classroom atmosphere; c. Interaction between the teacher and students; d. Interaction amongst the students; e. Teacher's performance
- What are your views on the 60 lecture notes? What have you learned from the material? Do you enjoy reading the materials?
- What are your views on the two videos? What have you learned from the materials? Do you enjoy watching the two videos?
- What are your views on the assessment involving 20 multiple-choice questions? Is it too easy or too difficult? Can it consolidate your knowledge about the topics covered in the three-hour lecture, 60 lecture notes, and the two videos?
- What are the views of your classmates on National Security Law education? Do they think it is reasonable to require students to receive the related education?

- Do you think university students should have a clear understanding of the concept of law-abiding leadership, the concept of national security, the National Security Law, modern Chinese history and major humiliation historical events?
- Do you think the National Security Law education benefit your learning and development? In particular, does it help to improve your understanding in terms of - a. concepts of law-abiding leadership; b. importance of law abidance leadership; c. concepts of national security; d. modern Chinese history (including major humiliation historical events); e. National Security Law (NSL) content; f. myths and facts surrounding NSL.
- There is the view saying that National Security Law education is brain-washing. Based on your learning experience of this lecture including the lecture, lecture notes, videos, and assessment, do you have the experience of being "brain-washed"?
- Overall speaking, are you satisfied with the arrangement of the law abidance leadership education? If the full mark is 10, ranging from 1 to 10, how much will you give?
- To benefit your learning and strengthen your understanding of specific topics, do you have any suggestions to improve the law abidance leadership education (including the three-hour lecture, 60 lecture notes, two videos, and assessment)?
- What else would you like to share?

**Table 2. Narratives of views on the perception of the lecture**

| **Lecture content** |
|---|
| • "For me personally, I'm interested in this topic." |
| • "It was an interesting lecture, the content had the potential to be very interesting, the lecture removed any misconceptions we have and introduced the topic and give it a firm foundation. So, the topic and the different aspects of it were interesting." |
| • "Overall, it's definitely something that I want to revisit later on and I think I am glad that the university provided a comprehensive guide to the history of Hong Kong even if it doesn't encompass everything. I think that just having that can be beneficial to us and our knowledge…" |
| • "In general, the leadership is an important part, and we should try to be as careful as possible in terms of the NSL, so I would say that content was easy to understand." |
| • "The content was objective and neutral." |
| • "The content was historically relevant." |
| • "The whole course is coherent, from the establishment of the National Security Law to terrorist activities, and then to cases, and finally leads students to do a reflection." |
| • "The cases gave me a strong impression…" |
| **Teachers' performance** |
| • "Has a deep understanding of the topic, especially when he tried to ask students about their own opinions." |
| • "I think the teacher was really great, and she delivered a good quality lecture and I definitely gain new knowledge about the national security." |
| • "The teacher was pretty clear about what she was teaching." |
| • "The teacher did use the online platform to remove the misconceptions that students may have and introduce the basics of the National Security Law and what it is intended for." |
| • "The teacher was very good, and he kept emphasizing that he would respect every |

student's idea."

- "The teacher spoke very good English with no accent. He also did not follow the PPT exactly, but incorporated his own life."
- "The lecture was taught with great care and responsibility."
- "The teacher was very attentive and would go into each group to interact with us."
- "When there was a question, she was expected to ask, if there was no response, or if nobody wanted to speak, she was not too pushy in that regard."

**Classroom atmosphere and interactions**

- "There were some basic and common terms written and explained by the instructor, which eased the atmosphere of the class."
- "People were genuinely excited to share their thoughts especially when the conversation was centered around their opinions about how Hong Kong runs things and the government."
- "The atmosphere is good. Before the class started, the teacher said that the topics discussed today might be relatively private, and everyone can speak boldly, he would not make any comments."
- "It is no different from other courses. Everyone had a very positive attitude to understand the National Security Law."
- "The overall atmosphere was not particularly tense or boring, I think it is still within the normal range."
- "I think that it is the mutual encouragements among the students that make the course more favorable."
- "The course was more participatory and we were often asked to answer questions to increase the interactivity in class."
- "Maybe at some point trying to make it interesting. So, I think the interaction was good, because there are same opinions, same points of view interactions, I don't think there are any contradictions about the topic."
- "Nothing bad really happened, we didn't have any fights or big disagreements, but the students were answering the teacher's questions and they did have their own opinions."
- "It's a bit different from what it used to be, but the overall effect is OK."
- "The discussion was quite good and people were quite outspoken, so it was quite a relaxed atmosphere, even though it was a rather serious matter."
- "Our group as a whole had a very lively atmosphere with active discussions."
- "The communication in this lecture was good, because most of them had a same point of view regarding the National Security Law."

**Table 3. Narratives of views on the lecture notes, videos, and assessments**

| |
|---|
| **Lecture notes** |
| • "The lecture notes were necessary, which were equivalent to going through the modern history of China and introducing why National Security Law was established in Hong Kong. It was a great help to understand the history..." |
| • "These sixty notes are really important for local and Mainland students. I'm not sure if it's really important for me, but it was interesting because I'm interested in history and historical events such as revolutions and wars. By this reason, some parts of the sixty notes were really interesting for me and it wasn't like something difficult and boring. I think it's a quite good material." |
| • "When answering the questions, notes gave me a lot of help, and I could quickly find what I need. The coverage was quite broad. Overall, I felt very good about using it." |
| • "I think the previous section on Chinese history was well done, and the main events were marked in Chinese and English, which allowed me to understand them clearly and quickly." |
| • "The part of modern Chinese history was mainly in the notes, and the lecture did not cover too much of it. You can draw inferences or think about these things by reading by yourself, which I think is quite good." |
| • "As a part of course preparation, the lecture notes are very good. They are helpful in understanding what will probably be covered in the lesson." |
| • "Overall, it was very good, summarizing the content of lecture more effectively…" |
| **Videos** |
| • "The continuity of the video is strong." |
| • "The video is of high quality." |
| • "It's like watching YouTube, there are animations to accompany the text. And the voiceover is so clear. It's very impressive." |

- "I think the video is pretty good. At least it seems like someone to lead you to watch the PowerPoint."
- "The content was similar to the lecture notes."

**Assessments**

- "It is relatively easy. Because it allows for a long time, and you have many opportunities to do the search, it is actually very easy to pass."
- "Some questions are quite helpful. For example, it gives some contextual questions, which can help you analyze which behaviors violate the law. So, I think it is helpful for the understanding of the law."
- "The 20 questions are quite meaningful, and the process of answering the questions has enriched my understanding of relevant knowledge."
- "The 20 multiple-choice questions can help us consolidate our knowledge, and check for knowledge gaps then fill these gaps."
- "Because it was so detailed, I think it allows students to understand the questions more. Maybe they didn't digest it a lot, but for me personally, while taking the test it allowed me to understand the questions a lot more, allow me to understand the laws. While I don't remember majority of what I learned, it was still something that I enjoyed taking and I think the test was a good idea."
- "The workload of this assessment is not too heavy and will not put too much pressure on students or make them feel more negative about the law-related education."

**Table 4. Narratives of views on perceived benefits**

| **Perceived Benefits** |
| --- |
| • "As an international student, you do need to understand how this country operates and what's important to know and what tools should be followed, especially if the changes are recent and they have not existed before. So, I would say that has actually given information about its importance here."<br>• "It told us why we should abide the law from a perspective of western responsibility, and broadened our horizon and our understanding of the law."<br>• "It helps us to build a leadership skill."<br>• "The course raises the awareness that every citizen is required to protect and contribute to the country."<br>• "For Mainland students, it may be in terms of fostering a sense of patriotism and national pride, or having a deeper understanding of the history."<br>• "It deepened the impression of the establishment of the law and its importance."<br>• "The lecture was beneficial because we were able to learn about the law and the difference in the main four offenses."<br>• "The lecture helped me know what responsibilities should I take, and to become a responsible and law-abiding citizen."<br>• "It helps to dispel some of the myths that may be associated with the National Security Law, such as whether the law restricts your freedom."<br>• "By learning about different areas of knowledge, it increases my skills of critical thinking, and I will be able to think more comprehensively." |
| **Views on the Effectiveness of Law Abidance Leadership Education** |
| • "As a citizen, you must know these."<br>• "This class may help foreign students to understand China better. They will also be better integrated into society."<br>• "It is necessary. Some mainland students are a little worried about the situation in the |

Greater Bay Area. But after this class, I felt the attitude of the school and increased the security in my heart. On the other hand, you can also know what behaviors and speeches may have potential hazards."

- "I think it is even more necessary in an environment like Hong Kong, where there is so much freedom of expression."
- "It is very necessary. PolyU is a relatively diverse environment. There are students from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and foreign countries. To integrate into local life and study, you must have a certain understanding of relevant laws and knowledge."
- "I would still call the information informative. It was good to know the details that the law was changing something around here. Overall, I understood the importance of it."
- "We need to know some legal knowledge as we will enter the workplace soon."

**Whether Law Abidance Leadership Education is Brainwashing**

- "There is no feeling of being brainwashed. We were just listening and stating a fact, instead of being forced to accept a point of view."
- "I don't think it was brainwashing. Actually, it just gave me is another perspective to think about something."
- "How can you call it brainwashing when you understand the history and culture of your own country?"
- "It can't be called brainwashing at all, because it is actually a brief introduction to some specific content of the National Security Law to prevent you from violating the law in your daily life."
- "Brainwashing does not exist. It's just stating the facts. It just introduces certain historical knowledge and some existing laws to let you know their importance."
- "I think the lecture was not necessarily brainwashing, because it gives us a foundation for the existence of national security law, and its existence in other countries and their versions of national security law to establish the need for the national security law. And it's also important to learn and follow the laws and the rules of the land."
- "I don't think that I learned enough to change my opinions and really be brainwashed…"
- "For me, I don't think it is brainwashing. I don't really feel any pressure, but conversely, I feel educated positively, because it is all for our own benefit."

**Perceptions of the Views of the Classmates**

- "Based on my observation as an international student, most of my friends are local and I think they really value and cherish Hong Kong and I see some of them really understand the law and it shows that they truly care about the well being resolved from the law itself."
- "It is reasonable for PolyU to require students to take National Security Education."
- "Mainland students actually do not have large opinions on this course."
- "My foreign fellow students were quite happy to learn. They think it is a good thing to know the law, and they also want to know more about the cultural regulations in Hong Kong, and want to know a little more about China."
- "Their attitudes are relatively positive."
- "Nobody mentioned about it. So, I think they do not object it."

**Table 5. Suggestions for improvements**

- "More interactions can be added, so that people can pay more attention."
- "Should clarify the connections between history and law."
- "Maybe the content could be split into parts, so that students could really understand and learn and have a really deep understanding."
- "The notes can be developed into a timeline with hyperlink attached, so that the content won't be that boring."
- "The 60 lecture notes can include more contents close to daily life."
- "Add more stories in historical events."
- "The test can be closer to daily life instead of historical events."
- "The type of questions can be more versatile."

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# Online National Security Law (NSL) education in Hong Kong: Qualitative evaluation based on focus groups

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***Abstract:*** To enhance students' understanding of national security and Hong Kong National Security Law (HKNSL), an online course based on the framework of Law Abidance Leadership was developed, with a 3-hour self-paced online lecture plus seven hours of self-study materials. In this study, we invited 20 Senior-Year students to participate in semi-structured focus group interviews to share their learning experiences of national security education in an online environment. Results showed that the coding had high inter-rater reliability, and students generally held positive views on this self-paced online course. In addition, although students raised different comments and suggestions, most of them perceived the benefits and value of the course and acknowledged the need for undergraduate students to learn NSL-related knowledge. Most importantly, they did not perceive that the related education was brainwashing. Overall, the findings suggest that students appreciate the e-learning mode of NSL education, and the present findings echo the previous findings that the participants perceived NSL education to be beneficial.

***Keywords:*** National Security Law education, law-abidance leadership program, e-learning, focus group methodology

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## Introduction

Salakhova et al (1) defined law-abiding leadership as a leader's adherence to significant social norms while preserving individuality and seeking to maintain public order. In addition to excellent communication and problem-solving skills, law-abiding leadership is crucial for a successful and effective leader, as non-compliance with social norms and regulations can harm individuals and society (2,3). However, it is not rare for youths to engage in deviant behavior, such as cheating in examinations or plagiarism, which has become a growing global issue (4,5). Furthermore, if university students are not trained in law abidance, such misconduct may develop into more severe wrongdoings or even crimes in the long run, not to mention how disastrous the consequences for

society would be if they became leaders. Moreover, as citizens, university students must to fulfill their civic duties and demonstrate law-abiding citizenship in their daily deeds (6). Hence, to develop students' citizenship and to cultivate responsible leaders of tomorrow for our society, it is essential to prepare leadership training for youngsters through the much-neglected yet vital law-abiding leadership (7,8).

The importance and urgency of cultivating law-abiding leadership among individuals can be comprehended by analyzing the impacts of two large-scale social events/movements that occurred in Hong Kong over the last decade: the "Occupy Central Movement" in 2014 and the "Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement" from March 2019 to mid-2020. These movements were initially peaceful but then developed into violence, vandalism, and sieges, causing detrimental effects on people's studies, work, and life. The damage inflicted on campuses and public facilities, including railway stations, traffic lights, railings, and airports, significantly impacted citizens' schooling, safety, and travel. Additionally, the movements caused widespread alienation and counteraction among people, resulting in assaults, doxing, and victimization of individuals with opposing political views or those who did not support the movement. Property, such as shops or cars, was also in danger of vandalism. Hong Kong's economy and tourism suffered due to the ensuing turmoil, as the city was perceived as hazardous (9). In response to such social instability, "*The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*", commonly known as "Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL)", was enacted by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, under the "*Decision of the National People's Congress on Establishing and Improving the Legal System and Enforcement Mechanisms for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to Safeguard National Security*" of the National People's Congress (NPC).

NSL is governed by the general principles of upholding Hong Kong citizens' legal rights and responsibilities, preserving Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, and safeguarding national security (10). The enactment of NSL is significant to the public's quality of life. Firstly, the law profoundly shapes a safe and orderly living environment, ultimately contributing to the public's overall health (11). Second, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs posits that safety needs, such as the security of body, health, and property, are fundamental for people to pursue higher-ranking psychological and self-fulfillment needs (12-14). Therefore, ensuring people's physical safety is a prerequisite for their pursuit of love, esteem, and self-actualization, ultimately enhancing their quality of life. Indeed, laws about national security are globally practiced to ensure social stability and national security (15), which are the foundations of individuals' quality of life.

Along with these laws and acts came related education practices. National security education has been incorporated as an integral part of the high school curriculum in several countries, including the US (16), the UK (17) and Singapore (18). Such education is primarily in the form of citizenship and civic education, which serves as a conduit for promoting students' knowledge, attitude, and behavior related to national security (8). Based on Stoewen's (19) eight dimensions of well-being, national security education is conducive to the intellectual, emotional, social, environmental, and other aspects of the well-being of youngsters and society.

There is also a need for national security education in Hong Kong. Recent social events in the territory have led to social unrest and posed threats to national security, highlighting some participants' lack of awareness of legal issues. Drawing on the Social Learning Theory (20), Differential Association Theory (21), and General Strain Theory (22), Shek et al. (3) concluded that non-law-abiding behavior might develop in some Hong Kong adolescents through interaction with their intimate peers (23) and imitation of those who were similar or superior to them (24),

especially when they are experiencing stress related to vocation, housing, and economics (25,26). More importantly, the primary reason for such non-law-abiding behaviors could be students' insufficient legal knowledge and cognizance regarding the significance of law observance, making them susceptible to external influences and prone to violate the laws to release stress (3). Hence, it is imperative to cultivate Hong Kong youngers' awareness of national security and law abidance.

In response to the abovementioned needs and to encourage law-abiding leadership among university students, a new initiative has been implemented at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University starting from the 2021/2022 academic year. All Year 1 undergraduate students are required to attend a 3-hour face-to-face lecture entitled "Law-Abiding Leadership", plus 7 hours of self-study with provided materials, namely, the national education program that is incorporated in a general education subject on "Leadership education and development" (LEAD). The lecture and self-study materials cover a range of topics, including "law-abidance", "the concept and importance of national security", "the National Security Law (NSL)", "major offenses in the NSL", "issues and myths surrounding the NSL", "the 'Century of Humiliation' in the modern Chinese history", "the Constitution", "the restoration of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997", "the Hong Kong Basic Law" and "the constitutional principle of 'one country, two systems'". To demonstrate their understanding of these materials, students must pass a test consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions covering all of the abovementioned content. A minimum score of 16 out of 20 is required to pass the test, and students can make multiple attempts to achieve the best score. Studies showed that this assessment format can help students to consolidate their knowledge of the subject matter (27).

Over the past year, we have successfully implemented the national education program for undergraduate students and conducted various studies to evaluate its effectiveness and impact. Evaluation studies revealed positive findings based on the data collected in two semesters in 2021/2022. Post-lecture evaluation surveys showed that students in hybrid or face-to-face teaching modes believed the lecture advantageous in enhancing their psychosocial competence and promoting whole-person development. Additionally, the lecture strengthened their knowledge of national security and HKNSL and prepared them to assume leadership roles that reflected social responsibility (3,8). Moreover, focus group interviews with 52 randomly selected students revealed positive feedback. In addition to the generally positive views on various aspects (i.e., content, arrangement, lecture notes, and assessment) of the lecture, students also spoke highly of teachers' interaction with students and their performance (28). The students had a positive learning experience and did not view the lecture as brainwashing. Instead, they regarded the lecture as beneficial and valuable, such as enhancing their understanding of law-abidance leadership and nurturing positive attitudes (29-31).

From the 2022/2023 academic year, university students who are not required to take the LEAD subject (e.g., Senior-Year intake students) must complete an e-learning module on national education. The e-learning module includes online learning materials mirroring the aforementioned 3-hour face-to-face lecture in the LIPD subject and seven hours of self-study materials as well. After completing the e-learning module, they must also gain at least 16/20 in the multiple-choice questions test to pass the test. In other words, the learning materials and assessment requirements are the same between the face-to-face teaching for the full-time 4-year program students and online national education programs.

Despite the same curriculum design and assessment scheme in the face-to-face and online national education programs, self-paced e-learning faces several opportunities and challenges compared to physical classroom learning. The advantages of online learning, such as its easy

accessibility, flexibility, and affordability, have been praised by many practitioners and researchers (32). However, probably due to the lack of interaction between students and teachers and among students in the self-paced study mode, students tended to have dissatisfaction with technological, pedagogical, and social issues relevant to online learning approaches, such as a lack of motivation, engagement, interaction, self-regulation, and learning disposition (32-35). Both advantages and challenges may jointly shape students' feelings toward and achievement in an online learning program (36).

Although students' experience in the face-to-face national education program (adopting face-to-face lectures or synchronous online learning or hybrid module) has been investigated (3,8), students' experiences with the self-paced e-learning program and their learning experiences still need to be discovered. We have yet to determine whether students also hold positive opinions toward the online national education program and whether they are satisfied with the learning materials, approach, and achievement. To fill this research gap, the current study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the online program by analyzing the qualitative data collected from focus group interviews.

## Methods

In the present study, we adopted a qualitative research strategy via focus group interviews to explore students' subjective perceptions of the e-learning national education program (28,37,38). Group discussion helps study participants' internal opinions and emotional perceptions by emphasizing exploring individuals' thoughts, experiences, knowledge, and feelings.

We attempted to study Senior-Year students' experiences and perceptions of the self-paced e-learning national education program consisting of 3-hour video lectures and 7-hour self-learning. A semi-structured interview method was used in the focus groups to let students share their subjective feelings and perspectives regarding the content, mode of presentation, assessment, and outcomes of the online national education program. Specifically, we asked students to share their views on the 3-hour e-learning lectures, 7-hour self-study, assessment, and the self-paced online module. Second, we asked their views on the benefits, difficulties, impressive points, and necessity of this e-learning program. Third, we collected students' suggestions to further improve this program and the learning procedure. Table 1 lists the questions included in the semi-structured interview guide.

Table 1

### Participants

A total of 20 students voluntarily joined the focus group interview after they completed the e-learning and passed the test. Among these participants, 11 (55%) were males, and 9 (45%) were females. Since all the participants speak Cantonese as their first language, in order to encourage students to share more thoughts and suggestions, the focus groups were conducted in Cantonese. Due to difficulties in finding suitable time slots for interviewers and interviewees, participants were divided into six groups, with the number of participants in each group ranging between 3-6. All participants were well informed of the purpose, confidentiality, and compensation of the focus group interviews and then provided their consent to participate. The project was approved under the Institutional Review Board under "Tomorrow's leaders" coverage. Their demographic information was not collected to minimize their concerns about participating in the focus group interviews.

**Procedures**

Due to social distancing requirements during COVID-19, all interviews were conducted through Zoom by an assistant professor at the authors' university. One research assistant was present at the beginning of the interview to take care of the arrangement of the focus group interview. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent. The duration of the interviews was around one hour. Once they completed the interviews, all participants received a HK$100 supermarket coupon per hour in appreciation for their time and efforts.

**Data analysis**

In the present focus group study, we collected and analyzed the verbal data of participants' narratives in the group discussion using the thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is a commonly used and effective method of analyzing qualitative data, including interview narratives (28). We first transcribed the recorded discussions into textual data for formal analyses. According to the essential procedures in thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (39), an experienced research assistant completed initial analyses following five steps: a) getting acquainted with the data, b) identifying themes, c) evaluating themes, d) describing and labeling themes, and e) coding positivity of student responses under each theme. For positivity coding, participants' answers would be identified as "positive", "negative", or "neutral". For instance, when being asked about the overall learning experiences with the e-learning module, students' responses such as "practical", "useful", or "detailed" that show their positive feelings would be coded as "positive". In contrast, responses such as "boring" that denote negative learning experiences would be coded as "negative". Responses including both positive and negative elements or which could not be coded would be rated as "neutral".

To ensure the reliability of data analyses, another well-trained research assistant checked the initial transcriptions and completed the aforementioned five coding steps individually. The result showed that the inter-rater reliability was as high as 95%, indicating a very high level of reliability in the current analysis. After the two research assistants discussed and resolved their disagreement and achieved a consensus on coding, a well-trained Postdoctoral Fellow further checked and reviewed the emerging themes and coding. Based on these thematic analytic procedures, nine relevant themes were confirmed with details presented below.

Table 2

## Results

Students generally showed positive feedback toward the 3-hour online lecture videos on national education, although some students also displayed negative responses. Table 2 shows some example narratives of their views. Although students can pause the video anytime, some might still habitually watch the entire video at once. Hence, some students reported that the video was "too long" and "covered too much information". Nevertheless, this feature was also considered an advantage by some students. For instance, they thought the video was "useful", "detailed", and "rich in knowledge". Meanwhile, they appreciated this model of online self-study since "there is no need to rush to watch the video".

Table 3

**Views on the 7-hour Self-Study**

Example narratives on students' views on the 7-hour self-study are shown in table 3. While some students were dissatisfied as "the notes included too many words", some expressed their understanding that "it was difficult to shorten the length of the notes further since it listed many up-to-date cases with useful details". Due to its complicated and comprehensive nature, "it was easier for students to look up for keywords" and re-read the information when they wanted to recall a small piece of knowledge. As to the format of the self-study notes, students appreciated the point form used in the notes since "it was clearer to capture the key points". However, the English language used for the self-study notes caused students' dissatisfaction as they preferred to read Chinese self-study materials. Since the medium of instruction in the researchers' university is English, the notes must be organized in English, which some students regarded as causing "confusion and inadequate interpretation of Chinese culture and history".

Table 4

**The benefits of e-learning modules and self-study on students' learning and development**

Regarding the benefits of the e-learning module and self-study, most students highlighted the benefits related to the HKNSL, which was the program's primary focus. Table 4 displays several examples of students' narratives on each aspect. In general, this module enhanced students' legal awareness and enabled them to avoid "stepping on the red line". Students not only gained knowledge of modern Chinese history but also developed "a sense of national identity" by understanding "the sufferings and hardships" experienced by the pioneers behind the country's history. The program improved students' understanding of national security and related laws and led students to be "more cautious about their behaviors" by illuminating the consequences of law-abiding behavior. Moreover, the program clarified myths surrounding the NSL, dispelling the misunderstanding that "the law limited citizen's freedom of expression and speech". Through the lecture, students comprehended that "fair comment and discussions are accepted" and that they "still possess a great degree of freedom within the scope of the law". Revealing this myth conduces to students' better understanding and easier acceptance of the NSL.

Table 5

**Content of this program**

In this study, we sought to better understand the aspects of lectures and notes that impressed students and how these aspects could be improved to enhance the learning experience. Through analyzing the responses of students (several examples are presented in table 5), we found that students were particularly impressed by events that "were closely related to their daily lives", had severe consequences or tragic processes, or were based on "real cases". For instance, hypothetical questions that stimulated real-life situations allowed students to understand the program content more deeply by analyzing and answering them. Additionally, students were impressed by some "historical events in China", such as the Treaty of Shimonoseki, and "substantive offenses", such as the Tong Ying-kit Case and the Hong Kong 47 Case. While students may "not be able to remember every detailed information of these events", they would "still have a lasting impression of events and the course itself". By understanding the features of the lectures and notes that most impress students, future courses' content and structure may be revised and enhanced to serve students' requirements better.

Table 6

**Difficulties students encountered in completing the whole learning module**

Table 6 presents the difficulties reported by students. Three main difficulties were identified: a) language barriers, b) excessive content, and c) difficulties passing the examination. Language barriers were the most frequently mentioned difficulty, with students stating that using Chinese would be preferred. Nevertheless, the learning materials should be delivered in English based on university regulations. In addition, excessive content was also noted as a challenge, with students finding it tiring to complete the 3-hour e-learning course at one time. The exam's difficulty will be discussed in the next section, along with students' opinions on the multiple-choice assessment. Briefly speaking, students shared that meeting the required score to pass the exam was challenging. These results help create future courses that better fulfill students' requirements by illuminating the difficulties that students confront in self-study and online learning.

Table 7

**Perceptions of the multiple-choice assessment**

Table 7 presents students' diverse views on the assessment involving 20 multiple-choice questions, especially their perspectives on its difficulty level. Students expressed varying opinions on the assessment, with many stating that "the difficulty level was moderate and appropriate" to their learning needs. They appreciated that the questions were "written clearly and readably" and stimulated reflection and critical thinking". Students also found the assessment process valuable for consolidating and expanding their knowledge. They reported that searching for answers on the internet or in lecture notes helped them learn more about the course content. Surprisingly, some students even mentioned that the assessment contents had come up in their daily extracurricular conversations. These findings suggest that the multiple-choice assessment effectively enhanced students' engagement and knowledge acquisition.

Despite the positive feedback, some students held negative opinions regarding the assessments. Some students deemed it "meaningless to set the questions in the Chinese history part too deep or too detailed" since they "could not remember those details even after searching for answers". Additionally, the language and form of the assessment also impacted students' experiences to a certain degree. Similar to the lecture notes, students suggested that Chinese should replace English as the language of the multiple-choice exams to ensure better comprehension. However, most students' negative feedback was about the passing rate. Passing the exam was viewed by students as one of the program's challenges, as each round consisted of 20 randomly selected questions from a question pool. The difficulty for each round was different. Students were required to achieve a minimum score of 16/20 to pass the test; otherwise, they were obligated to start a new round. Students complained that "the passing requirement was too high", and that some of their classmates took the test a dozen times to achieve the required score. Some students who held neutral standpoints said frankly that "whether they could pass the test depended on luck", as some questions might be "easy to understand and the answers could be tracked down from the notes while some might not".

Table 8

**Perceptions of the self-paced online mode**

The current self-paced online mode was widely praised for its "convenience", "flexibility", and "indefinite duration". Students appreciated the arrangement of allowing them to review lectures and notes and redo assessments as often as necessary. The online lecture had no time limit for each section, and the progress bar of videos could be dragged forth and back. Furthermore, some students highlighted that this mode was "convenient" and "flexible" for all learners because "every student could tailor their learning schedule" to their unique needs and progress at their own pace while acquiring a wealth of knowledge. One student euphemistically suggested that "the materials could be uploaded in batches", as seeing so many files simultaneously was initially overwhelming.

Table 9

**The necessity to have a clear understanding of NSL**

Table 9 exhibits some examples of students' narrative responses to this question. Most students acknowledged that "it is certainly necessary for students in universities to have a clear understanding of NSL-related knowledge", "particularly after recent social upheavals". Their reasons for supporting this notion included: a) "college students have great influences (on this society)"; b) the more related knowledge they possess, "the less likely they would be to violate this law by committing such crimes"; c) "we are all Hong Kong citizens as well as Chinese, therefore, we need to know that knowledge"; and d) having some basic understanding of related topics is also helpful for "protecting students themselves and the country". One student honestly admitted that "he/she would not take the initiative to learn it if this was an elective course" (i.e., a neutral position). However, he/she also recognized that "understanding the knowledge related to NSL was still essential".

A minority of students viewed NSL-related knowledge, particularly certain components such as modern Chinese history, as unnecessary. A student who majored in a related subject expressed that he/she "had already been exposed to related knowledge", and therefore felt that there was "no need" to revisit it. Some other students indicated that these concepts were actually "common sense" and that they had already "got some information from the news". Consequently, they believed that it would seem "intentional" to pursue this knowledge purposely.

Table 10

**Is this NSL education program "brainwashing"?**

The students expressed disagreement with characterizing the course as a form of "brainwashing". They argued that the multiple-choice assessment and accompanying videos were too brief to have such effects. Furthermore, they posited that "the undergraduates had already established their basic values" and were not easily swayed or indoctrinated. The primary objective of the program, as they understood it, was to augment the students' understanding of legal and historical knowledge, and this objective was far removed from any notion of brainwashing.

## Discussion

The present study evaluated the effectiveness of the e-learning module of national security education using a focus group methodology. Senior-Year students shared their self-paced e-learning experience, perceptions, opinions, and suggestions on the program and e-learning module.

Generally speaking, the findings indicated that students had a favorable impression of the NSL course.

While some students found the total length of videos and notes (three hours and seven hours, respectively) too long, most participants expressed their understanding of the necessity of such length. They regarded the content of both the video and lecture notes as detailed and valuable, not only for completing the multiple-choice test but also for arousing their self-development of citizenship, sense of national identity, and law-related awareness. Such outcomes were among the primary purposes of this program. Although some people expressed concerns that the NSL would undermine Hong Kong citizens' liberty and legal rights, such as the freedom of speech and press freedom, the present results suggested that students dismissed such myths through learning the NSL program. Furthermore, participants disagreed with the notion that this online program was brainwashing, which is consistent with prior research. In previous studies, students reported that the lecture content merely conveyed historical facts, law-related knowledge, and examples of unlawful acts without expressing any subjective or coercive views (28). These findings are similar to those reported by participants in the present study. The significance of this conclusion lies in the fact that it satisfactorily addresses concerns raised about the NSL and associated activities being carried out in Hong Kong.

The present findings align with previous evaluation studies related to the NSL program, including two evaluation studies based on student perceptions of programs delivered via HyFlex, online and face-to-face modes (3,8), one focus group study on the perspective of students (28), and three qualitative studies on teachers' reflection of their teaching experience in law-abiding leadership curriculum (29-31). Previous post-lecture evaluation studies of similar programs revealed that students had a favorable impression towards NSL-related courses and lecturers. They also remarked that the program fostered their national identity and law-abiding awareness and enhanced their readiness to be responsible, law-abiding leaders (3,28). The present study supplemented and triangulated the results of previous studies with a new sample. From the perspective of replication, the triangulated findings verified the benefits of the program and the positive learning experiences brought to students. Additionally, the importance of utilizing multiple data sources and methods to improve the validity of the results was highlighted. Using qualitative and quantitative methods from different samples can ensure the completeness of data and identify potential similarities and differences.

Moreover, the present study is unique as it explored the effectiveness and advantages of the e-learning module of the NSL program. Students identified several advantages, including flexibility, self-adaptive and self-controlled pace, and unlimited viewing frequency and duration. While some research suggested significant differences in students' cognitive outcomes between face-to-face learning and e-learning (40), other studies found that students prefer face-to-face learning due to more interactions between teachers and students or among students (41). Gherheș et al (41) believed that interaction with peers was an important path of socialization vital for students' psychological health. However, the lack of interaction did not cause dissatisfaction among students in this study.

Some students remarked that they would actively discuss the contents with their peers. Therefore, for students, communication was open to more than space. Instead, they believed online learning protected their right to anonymity, allowing them to speak out more freely and to share their insights bravely. Besides, some previous studies indicated that the lack of teacher-student communication would lead to another problem: students' questions cannot be solved promptly, and they must go through the whole instructional video to find the answer (42). Nevertheless, given

that the current program was multimedia-based (i.e., using text, image, sound, and video as media), some students shared that they could easily search for the information they wanted by looking for keywords in the uploaded notes rather than scrolling through the entire video repeatedly. Meanwhile, for the convenience of answering questions, students could participate in the regular Q&A tutorial sessions or email the responsible instructor at any time. In addition, students said they felt comfortable with the self-paced learning style in the online environment. They did not have to worry about whether their learning process was behind their peers, and they did not feel compelled or stressed. At the same time, such a flexible self-study agenda also provided them with more space for independent exploration. Many students mentioned searching for additional information on the internet to learn more. Overall, the flexible e-learning module was recognized and praised by students in this program, and their preferences for this e-learning module contributed to the positive outcomes of the evaluation.

In addition to feedback on the different aspects of the program, students provided suggestions for improving the existing program. As the program will continue for a long time and be constantly improved according to the needs of students and society, some suggestions would be considered carefully. For instance, most participants suggested that Chinese should be used instead of English in the current program because much information might be explained more clearly in Chinese. However, since the official medium of instruction adopted in Hong Kong's universities is English, it will only be practical to partially use Chinese in this program. Nevertheless, it is acceptable to add some Chinese annotations as explanations for those topics that may need to be explained. As for other suggestions, while some of them are reasonable, they are challenging to implement. The first reason is that students held different views on the same point. For example, while some students suggested shortening the notes, some thought they could not be further shortened since they should be detailed. The second reason is that some settings had pedagogical implications which students might need help understanding, such as the need to elaborate on modern Chinese history. It is vital to cover modern Chinese history since it could help students to understand the historical context of national security and NSL. The third reason is that some suggestions were unconstructive since they were made without being familiar with the requirement of the program.

Despite its pioneering nature, there are several limitations to the study. First, the participants may not be representative of the Senior-Year student population. The results would be more comprehensive if more Senior-Year students could be recruited. Second, as the focus group method may create group pressure, it would be helpful to conduct individual interviews to triangulate the findings arising from focus group interviews. Nevertheless, the present snapshot based on focus groups does help us understand the questions we posed at the start of the study. Third, the long-term effects of this program still need to be explored. Hence, it would be valuable if follow-up studies combined with students' law-abiding leadership could be conducted. Finally, future research could evaluate the result with quantitative data to provide a more holistic evaluation.

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**Table 1. The semi-structured interview guide for the current focus group interview**

| No | Question |
|---|---|
| 1 | Taken as a whole, what are your experiences with the 3-hour e-learning module on National Education? Please share your experience. |
| 2 | Taken as a whole, what are your experiences with the 7-hour self-study on National Education? Please share your experience. |
| 3 | Do you think the e-learning module and self-study benefits your learning and development (free responses first)?<br>Prompt: does it help to improve your understanding of…<br>a. Law-abiding leadership<br>b. A brief history of modern China<br>c. The concept of national security<br>d. Hong Kong National Security Law<br>e. Myths and facts surrounding the NSL |
| 4 | Can you recall the most impressive content (e.g., video clips, notes)? Why are they impressive? |
| 5 | Have you encountered any difficulties in completing this e-learning course and self-study? If yes, what are they? How do you overcome these difficulties? Can you provide some examples? |
| 6 | What are your views on the assessment involving 20 multiple-choice questions? Is it too easy or too difficult? Can it consolidate your knowledge about the topics covered in this e-learning module and the lecture notes? |
| 7 | What are your experiences in this self-paced online module? Can it enable you to learn effectively at your own pace? Any suggestions for improvement regarding the self-paced online mode? |
| 8 | Do you think university students should have a clear understanding of the concept of national security, the National Security Law, modern Chinese history, and major humiliation historical events? Please share your thoughts. |
| 9 | There is a view saying that National Security Law education is brainwashing. Based on your experience of this e-learning module, reading of the lecture notes, video clips, and assessment, do you have the experience of being "brainwashed"? |
| 10 | Overall speaking, are you satisfied with this e-learning module and self-study requirement? If the full mark is 10, ranging from 1 to 10, how much will you give? |
| 11 | To benefit your learning and strengthen your understanding of specific topics, do you have any suggestions to improve the e-learning module (e.g., video clips, lecture notes, assessment, etc.)? |
| 12 | What else would you like to share? |

**Table 2. Examples of narratives of views on the 3-hour e-learning lectures**

| Rating | Student Responses |
|---|---|
| Positive | • Those materials have helped me to absorb a lot of knowledge. They are quite practical and useful.<br>• In the latter half of the lecture, there are a lot of additional information about national education. Actually, I think they have cleared up some of my own doubts, that is, some doubts about legal regulations.<br>• I think this e-learning module is pretty great on the whole, because you can read the materials according to your own schedule, and you can read them slowly without being rushed.<br>• The materials were detailed containing a lot of information and knowledge. Meanwhile, those real national data were literally presented to us. |
| Negative | • Three hours was a long time.<br>• Maybe because I already have a little knowledge of this aspect (the National Security Law) from the government's propaganda or the internet, I won't be impressed by it after watching the lecture. For me, it is the same as not watching it. |

**Table 3. Examples of narratives of views on the 7-hour self-study notes**

| Rating | Student Responses |
|---|---|
| Positive | • It keeps abreast of current events.<br>• All of the materials are already very concise and easy to understand.<br>• I think it has digested much information and reduced a lot of words before being uploaded.<br>• It will be difficult to further shorten the length of the notes. Although my reading speed was relatively slow, I think this length was fine for me.<br>• Using such point form or separating several points made it easier to capture the key points.<br>• In my impression, this note would be better than the video since I could find the information I wanted from the notes at any times. |
| Negative | • It was too long including too many words.<br>• I wonder whether it would be better if the notes were written in Chinese because the tone in English is different from that in Chinese.<br>• Chinese history could not be well interpreted in English. |

**Table 4. Examples of narratives of the benefits of e-learning module and self-study**

| Subthemes | Student Responses |
|---|---|
| Law-abiding Leadership | • It enhances our law-abiding awareness. |
| A Brief History of Modern China | • It was only after taking this course that I realized that so many different unequal treaties had been signed at that time, and the history of humiliation was so long.<br>• I think it is useful because it enhances our senses of national identity and the understanding of history.<br>• I didn't pay much attention to this before; however, when it mentioned NSL, it would also remark some related history, then I would know why we would have NSL. |
| The Concept of National Security | • It built up our national consciousness.<br>• National security is something that some other countries are also working on, not only China. |
| Hong Kong National Security Law | • I learned a lot about NSL, from which you know what actions you take will lead to what kinds of consequences.<br>• This program has a good educational and warning effect.<br>• The news only mentioned about it briefly, but this course explained those law regulations in great detail, such as what a person was accused of and the reason for the defendant. I learned a lot about these. |
| Myths and Facts surrounding the NSL | • There was a time when many people thought that the implementation of NSL meant that we would lose our freedom of speech. We could not say this or that. However, what this course is actually doing now is telling you very clearly what constitutes a violation of NSL. There're still a lot of things you can talk about, which means that you actually still have a lot of freedom. Also, only those words which harm national security and the country or splitting the state could not be said. Meanwhile, you can't do anything provocative or seditious. Otherwise, you will violate the law. |

**Table 5. Examples of narratives of students' most impressive content**

| Student Responses |
| --- |
| • I was very interested in and impressed by those cases and the notes. For example, I was interested in the Tong Ying-kit Case, the Hong Kong 47 Case and the Case of Apple Daily. Also, I was interested in some substantive cases which involve money laundering or endanger national security. I was impressed by those cases.<br>• I'm under the impression that the law section gave you a couple of scenarios where you could choose whether the person was guilty of secession, sedition, or something else. The war part in the history section was really impressive to me. The question was about losing money. It asked how much money China lost in which of those cases.<br>• I think what impressed me most was Unit 731, because I had seen a movie about this unit before, and I now realize that these things were actually true and not fiction being bragged by the movie, so I was deeply impressed.<br>• What impressed me most were some situation questions, such as those asking you what actions you do would lead to what consequences, which were closer to our current life, so I think this kind of question would be more profound. |

**Table 6. Examples of narratives of difficulties students encountered**

| Student Responses |
| --- |
| • It was not difficult to finish the self-study, however, it was a little difficult to pass the examination.<br>• We were using English, so it might be a little confusing. Some of the names of two different wars or terms were exactly the same in English, so there would be confusion. If it was written in Chinese, it would be more precise and clearer.<br>• The sense of substitution would be stronger if you use Chinese.<br>• It would be hard and tiring if we watched the whole three-hour video at once.<br>• It was too full of content in the video, which was a challenge for me, so I only watched the key information. |

**Table 7. Examples of narratives of perspectives on the 20 multiple-choice questions**

| Rating | Student Responses |
|---|---|
| Positive | • I don't think that these 20 multiple-choice questions were difficult, but they were not easy as well. The degree of difficulty is moderate.<br>• I think these questions can solidify the knowledge. Sometimes you won't remember the knowledge by just watching the video. However, if you do this test a couple of times, you will remember it pretty well. Besides, if I search the internet, I will learn more things.<br>• I also agree that there was no problem (when doing the assessments), because the questions were written very clearly and readably. I can fully understand the questions. Also, I can find all the information I need easily from the lecture notes.<br>• The week when we finished the tests, these kinds of questions would come up in the daily chatting between me and my friends. |
| Negative | • I think the questions in the history section were relatively difficult and too detailed.<br>• I think the test was difficult because some regulations or the names of some historical events were similar, then I would remember them wrong or I would be confused.<br>• The passing requirement of the assessment was pretty high. It might be a little difficult for me, since each round of questions were different and there might be some unclear knowledge points which I would answer wrong every time. In that case, I would be a little frustrated.<br>• I think a Chinese version of all these questions should be provided. |
| Neutral | • From my perspectives, whether we could pass the test actually depended on luck because the questions were randomly selected, among which some might be easy while some would be relatively difficult. In addition, some questions might change the positions or were asked in a different way. And then when you search the answers from the notes, some might be easier to find the answer, while some would be more difficult to understand and find the answer. |

**Table 8. Examples of narratives of perspectives on the self-paced online mode**

| Rating | Student Responses |
|---|---|
| Positive | • I think the current version is already very great.<br>• At least in this module, you can adjust your own progress which is more flexible.<br>• It is great because I can learn a lot of knowledge via this e-learning module while my schedule won't be imposed.<br>• You can do this an infinite number of times, which is nice.<br>• Every student had his/her own learning schedule, so using this module would be more convenient. |
| Negative | • It was a little bit oppressive when I logged in and saw so many files need to do because there were a lot of materials more than just one. I think you could upload the materials in batches rather than sharing all the materials at once. It would be a little messy if there are so many files. |

**Table 9. Examples of narratives of students' understanding of concepts related to NSL**

| Rating | Student Responses |
|---|---|
| Positive | • In fact, as university students, we should know some related knowledge because we college students have great influences. Hence, we should at least learn some basic knowledge.<br>• The more related knowledge we know, the less of us would violate the law by committing such crimes.<br>• It is necessary to have a clear understanding of this topic, or at least some basic understanding, because it is in order to protect ourselves and the country.<br>• We are all Hong Kong citizens, and are all Chinese, so we actually need to know such knowledge. Especially after all of these social upheavals, students should be trained in this aspect of knowledge more than ever. |
| Negative | • I don't think so. Especially since I am majoring in a subject of this nature, I've already been exposed to related knowledge.<br>• I don't think it is necessary, because this is for child to learn.<br>• If college students also need to purposely learn this news which is actually common sense, it would appear a little deliberate or intentional. But I think if you want us to know more about our country, you don't need to teach us modern Chinese history. |
| Neutral | • Personally, I also think it is necessary to learn this; however, if there's a choice, I will not take the initiative to learn because it is time-consuming. |

**Table 10. Examples of narratives of whether this program was brainwashing**

| Rating | Student Responses |
|---|---|
| Positive | • This is not brainwashing.<br>• None of this is brainwashing, since it was just a multiple-choice assessment and the video was three hours long at most, which did not amount to much brainwashing.<br>• Your brains are normal and you have your own consciousness. Especially when you are already in your twenties, basically you have already had basic knowledge and you also have freedom, so I believe that your value concept systems are well formed and there will be no brainwashing problem.<br>• I think this is something that needs to be learned and should be known, so it does not lead to a brainwashing problem.<br>• This course is just letting you know more legal knowledge and history. It is not brainwashing at all. |

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# Focus group evaluation of national education in Hong Kong: Postgraduate students' perceptions

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***Abstract:*** This paper investigated the effectiveness of a program on National Education in higher education institutes in Hong Kong. This study utilized a post-lecture evaluation strategy to gather data from graduate students during the first semester of the 2022/23 academic year at one university in Hong Kong. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, we carried out individual interviews and focus group interviews with 96 postgraduate students to understand their subjective views of the related education. Several observations can be highlighted. Firstly, the students displayed a generally positive attitude towards the program. Secondly, the students expressed different views on various aspects of the e-learning module, such as video content, lecture notes, assessment, arrangement, self-study experience, perceived benefits, and the necessity for national education. Thirdly, most students considered the lecture beneficial and meaningful. Fourthly, despite the positive comments, some students also provided suggestions for further improvement. Fifthly, contrary to the common worry, the relevant education was not perceived by students as brainwashing. The results suggest that the program can enhance and consolidates students' knowledge of National Security Law and Chinese modern history, as well as nurture their positive attitudes towards law-related issues. The present study demonstrates that e-learning module is effective in teaching politically sensitive topics to university students.

***Keywords:*** NSL education, Post-lecture evaluation, Hong Kong National Security Law, Postgraduate students, E-learning, Self-study

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## Introduction

In Hong Kong, there had been a serious lack of national security education in the education system until 2020. This has become a critical issue following the 2019 "Social event" in reaction to the "Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement", which posed significant challenges to national sovereignty, security, and development interests. This event also threatened the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong and the practice of "One country, two systems". As a result, there

is an urgent need to strengthen national security education and raise public consciousness of law-abiding behaviors in Hong Kong society. On 30 June 2020, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) passed the "Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region" (also known as the "Hong Kong National Security Law" or "NSL") and officially implemented in Hong Kong (1). The goal is to "establish and improve the legal system and implementation mechanism of the special administrative region to maintain national security" (2), revealing the significant vulnerability from the lack of Article 23 legislation in the Basic Law (3).

According to Article 10 of NSL, "the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall promote national security education in schools and universities and through social organizations, the media, the internet and other means to raise the awareness of Hong Kong residents of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law" (1). Thus, universities are being urged to raise students' law-abiding consciousness (4,5).

Legal awareness is crucial for public compliance and responsibility (6). Fairbrother (7) emphasized that in China, "legal education directives call upon schools not only to teach attitudes and practices of obedience to the law and acting according to the law, but also to foster a legal consciousness" (7). Law-related education, as part of citizenship education, positively impacts youth development and well-being. By promoting legal awareness and understanding, law-related education can enhance the responsiveness of youth towards others and society, foster a positive sense of independence, self-esteem, and impulse control, and thus contribute to social and psychological well-being (8-10). Scholars stress the role of education in building national identity through citizenship, connecting individual and national identities.

Education's role in fostering national identity is globally recognized. Western countries use civic education programs to strengthen citizens' national identity, especially among youth. Post-9/11, national security concerns led to development of bills for enhanced civic education. Law-related education is often integrated into high school curricula through citizenship and civic education, promoting legal and political awareness (5). For example, the curriculum of civic education at Indiana University includes civic knowledge, civic skills, civic virtue, and homeland security. In Singapore, national security is part of national education, addressing recent history and development challenges (11). England incorporates legal themes into mandatory citizenship education to promote "British values" and reduce radicalization (12,13). Prefrey and Kelley (14) pointed out that most people believe these courses significantly contribute to the quality of life in communities.

In Hong Kong, general education in universities is an important part of civic education. Following the NSL enactment, all eight universities funded by the University Grants Committeee developed national security courses mandatory for graduation by 2022/2023. For instance, the National Security Law Education in Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) is a compulsory component of the co-curricular learning programme for all undergraduate students, which includes a 2-hour face-to-face lecture and 2-hour assigned reading materials. Lingnan University, City University of Hong Kong (CityU) and The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK) integrate national security elements into their existing common core program (or General Education Foundation course) for all new entrants of undergraduate programmes in the forms of seminars and workshops. The undergraduates at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) are required to register in a non-credit-bearing online course entitled "Introduction to the Constitution, the Basic Law and the National Security Law" (15). The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) has also introduced two compulsory modules, namely "Understanding

China" and "Hong Kong in the wider constitutional order", as its national security education for undergraduate students, consisting of introductory lectures, video lectures, online assignments, and final examinations. Furthermore, some self-financed tertiary institutions also have their own national security education programs.

At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, national education is not only provided to all undergraduate students but also to postgraduate students. The program is mandatory for all postgraduate students, including 3-hour e-learning lecture videos covering the concept of national security with its manifestations in various fields (such as economic, environmental and political security), the importance of national security for Hong Kong, and the consequences of national security risks regarding the historical events in modern Chinese history, as well as four major offences and related penalties in the NSL. Besides the 3-hour lecture video, the students are also required to spend 3 hours studying 20 lecture notes by themselves. The course aims to help students gain a basic understanding of China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), especially assisting non-local students in adapting to the new environment. To assess students' comprehension, multiple attempts are permitted on a 10-question multiple-choice examination with a passing score of eight correct responses. Research supports this test format for reinforcing learning (16-18). Davis et al (18) found that unlimited attempts in quizzes effectively assess students' learning based on longitudinal research examining the relationship between attempts, test time, and exam results. Additionally, Faulconer et al (19) discovered that multiple-choice assessments encourage students' persistence while enhancing learning and memory.

Previous research has revealed that undergraduates have generally responded positively to the NSL lecture, finding it beneficial for their well-being, psychosocial competence, and readiness to become socially responsible leaders (5). However, no evaluation studies have been conducted for postgraduate students. These students with diverse backgrounds may lack an understanding of HKSAR and the PRC. Steinberg and Cauffman argued that "psychosocial factors that appear to interact with cognitive factor to influence adolescent reasoning about legal and law-related issues" (20). Thus, it is essential to provide NSL education to postgraduates and evaluate its impact on their development as responsible citizens. This includes examining their understanding, attitudes, and behavioral intentions regarding the National Security Law and assessing their successful adjustment to life in Hong Kong (4,21).

Furthermore, different from the HyFlex learning mode (i.e., face-to-face lecture plus online learning) for undergraduates, the course for postgraduate students is conducted online using a self-paced learning approach. In fact, the impact of fully online curriculum on student satisfaction and learning effectiveness is viewed differently by researchers. On the one hand, some researchers argued that online learning can increase information retention, eliminate distance barriers and save time, benefiting a broader audience (22). It provides equal access to resources and communication channels with instructors and peers (23). Additionally, online learning can protect students' anonymity and encourage active engagement without fear in sensitive topics (4,24). McCarthy (25) suggested that distance learning is suitable for teaching sensitive topics, as these subjects often involve emotionally charged content. On the other hand, some scholars question online learning's effectiveness, arguing that it does not promote deep and sustained learning (26). Students lacking self-motivation may struggle with online learning. Understanding student reactions and assessments of self-study online is crucial for improving online learning quality and identifying opportunities for innovation in higher education. By exploring student perspectives, educators can address areas for improvement and provide

necessary support and resources. According to Wong et al (27), evaluation can "demonstrate the continuous efforts to improve the quality of education and reveals strengths and weaknesses and thus influences the allocation of resources, especially where development is needed" (27).

As the National Security Law Education is a "top-down" initiative which is politically sensitive, some people argue that NSL education has undermined Hong Kong's democracy and human rights, and even damaged academic freedom. Thus, it is necessary to explore whether such kind of instruction is perceived as "brainwashing" from the viewpoints of college students. The perceptions and responses that students have to NSL education are, to some extent, an essential component of their academic life and quality of life both on and off campus.

With the above background, we conducted qualitative interviews during Semester 1 of 2022/23 academic year, and examined research questions below based on students' perspective:

1. What are the views of the students on the self-study e-learning module on National Education, including its content, arrangement, and learning experience?
2. How do students feel about the e-learning module, including its advantages and corresponding benefits to their personal development, as well as their comprehension of the subject matter?
3. What are the students' opinions on course materials, such as video clips, lecture notes, and assessment, in consolidating their knowledge about the topics?
4. What are the biggest difficulties students encounter during online self-study? How did they overcome them?
5. What are the students' suggestions for improving the efficiency of such a self-paced online module?
6. What are the students' perceptions of NSL education? Do they regard it as "brainwashing"?

## Methods

This study concentrated on students' perceptions after they completed the e-learning module about National Security Law Education, including perceived course materials and learning experience, as well as an appreciation of personal development through combining individual interviews and focus group discussions. As Loiselle et al (28) mentioned, the combination of various approaches within a single research is commonly designated as triangulation. "It is based on an epistemological position that underscores the importance of various types of knowledge to obtain a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena" (29). These two methods use similar techniques – open-ended interview guidelines with inductive probing of responses that are accessible for researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes, beliefs and interests of the target audiences (30,31). However, as they are structured differently, the two methods have different implications for data collection. Some scholars posited that individual interviews can collect in-depth and thorough descriptions of participants' personal thoughts, feelings and knowledge regarding a particular phenomenon (28,32-35). Other researchers asserted that the interpersonal and interactive data resulting from focus group discussions contribute to a wider range of views and ideas.

As a result, we included both individual interviews and focus group discussions as complementary methods due to " 1) pragmatic or practical considerations, 2) the need to compare and contrast participants" perspectives (parallel use) and 3) striving toward data completeness and/or confirmation (integrated use) and avoiding the 'surface' data collected by a

single method" (29). For instance, when it comes to sensitive topics, some people may be reluctant to participate in focus groups, and individual interviews provide them with the opportunity to participate, thus reducing the likelihood of refusals or withdrawal. In addition, individual interviews help to understand personal experiences in a detailed way, whereas focus groups may be used to catalogue the variety of participants' experiences as well as examine participants' perceptions and beliefs about a specific phenomenon (36,37).

Overall, "compared with other collecting data techniques such as questionnaires, observations, and so on, individual or group discussions can be a valuable source to explore the internal views and emotions of individuals, interviewing with participants is highly suitable for knowing because it focused on feelings, thoughts, perceptions, sensitive matters, experiences, and knowledge of the members" (38). Combining individual interviews with focus group discussions can enrich the data while maximizing the depth and breadth of research themes. And such "bottom-up" approach is effective to promote the education programme by understanding participants' demands (31).

**Participants and procedure**

Participants were randomly recruited via email from a list of postgraduate students (including students from "research postgraduate programmes", "taught postgraduate programmes" and "taught postgraduate programme in Chinese") who had already completed the e-learning module. All participation was voluntary. A total of 120 students responded to the email to indicate their willingness to participate, and 96 students eventually participated in and completed individual interviews or focus group discussions, yielding an 80% response rate. Each participant was briefed on the purpose of the study, anonymity of data collection as well as the confidential use of data. Consent forms were collected from all participants before any data were gathered. Most importantly, the Institutional Review Board gave their approval to this study under the Leadership subject.

Among the 96 participants, there were 57 female and 39 male students. Based on their native languages, interview preferences and programme types, five individual interviews (two in Mandarin and three in Cantonese) and 19 focus groups (15 in Mandarin, three in Cantonese and one in English) were formed. Because of an unexpected time conflict, the number of participants in each cohort were different, ranging from 3 to 10. Due to the possibility that group size may affect interview strategy and outcomes, researchers were cautious in interpreting data from groups of varying sizes, especially those with fewer participants (21).

All interviews were conducted at the end of the first semester of 2022/23 academic year, and participants submitted their written permission to participate in focus groups at the beginning of each interview online. Due to the social distancing measures under the COVID-19 pandemic, and considering students outside of Hong Kong, the sessions were moderated by one Assistant Professor familiar with individual interviews or focus groups via Zoom. One project assistant who was responsible for the logistics and arrangement was present during each session. Interviews were videotaped with the consent of all participants. The duration of the interviews varied from 45 to 120 minutes. Participants were given a HK$100 (roughly equivalent to US$12.82) voucher per hour of appreciation as a token of attending the interview.

We used semi-structured interview guidelines in both individual interviews and focus group discussions to explore participants' subjective experiences regarding National Education, which could potentially influence their well-being (refer to table 1 for interview questions). Specifically, we utilized a rating scale ranging from 1 to 10 as a closed-ended survey question to assess

students' perceptions of the e-learning module and self-study requirements. The collected responses indicated a generally positive evaluation of overall satisfaction with the lecture, yielding an average score of 7.93 out of 10. The ratings for TPg and RPg students were 7.91 and 8.0, respectively.

We chose semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection in this study because of two main considerations. First, the approach facilitates in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and attitudes on complicated and sensitive matters, and obtains more information. Second, as respondents come from different countries and regions and have different social and cultural backgrounds, the traditional standardized interviews may not be fully applicable. According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (39), the main benefit of semi-structured interviews is that they allow for a focused interview while giving the investigator space to adjust, thereby better exploring and understanding the unique perspectives of the participants.

**Table 1. Interview guideline**

| No | Question |
|---|---|
| 1 | "What are your overall impressions of the e-learning module on National Education? Share your experience, please." |
| 2 | "What are your overall impressions of the self-study on National Education? Let us know about your experience." |
| 3 | "Do you believe that the e-learning module and self-study benefits your learning and development? Does it help to improve your understanding of<br>a. A brief history of modern China<br>b. The notion of national security<br>c. Hong Kong National Security Law (HKNSL)<br>d. Myths and facts concerning the NSL" |
| 4 | "Can you recall the most impressive content (e.g., video clips, notes)? Why are they impressive?" |
| 5 | "Have you encountered any difficulties in completing this e-learning course and self-study? If yes, what are they? How do you overcome these difficulties? Can you provide some examples?" |
| 6 | "How do you feel about the assessment consisting of 10 multiple-choice questions? Is it too simple or too complicated? Can it reinforce your understanding of the matters presented in this e-learning module or lecture notes?" |
| 7 | "What are your experiences in this self-paced online module? Can it enable you to learn effectively at your own pace? Any suggestions for improvement regarding the self-paced online mode?" |
| 8 | "Do you believe that university students should have a clear understanding of the concept of national security, the National Security Law, modern Chinese history, and major humiliation historical events? Please share your thoughts." |
| 9 | "There is a view saying that National Security Law Education is brainwashing. Based on your experience of this e-learning module, reading of the lecture notes, video clips, and assessment, do you have the experience of being 'brainwashed'? " |
| 10 | "Overall speaking, are you satisfied with this e-learning module and self-study requirement? If the full mark is 10, ranging from 1 to 10, how much will you give?" |

## Data analysis

In this study, we only used the verbal data of interviews, and the transcripts were independently read by one student assistant and a project assistant who evaluated patterns and trends among individuals or groups. Afterwards, two or three research staff summarized the ideas expressed in the transcripts and, together with the interviewer, reviewed and analyzed these summary statements according to the methodology described by McMillan and Schumacher (40).

With reference to McMillan and Schumacher (40), qualitative data analysis is a systematic procedure involving selection, classification, comparison, synthesis and interpretation, in which the researcher plays a subjectively involved interpretative role by constantly alternating between the primary data and the tentative analytical framework, refining the analysis and interpretation, and returning to the research field for consultation and validation if necessary, in order to extract the common patterns implied by the data (40). Accordingly, for the framework of in-depth data analysis, thematic analyses utilize various interview questions to facilitate the analysis of the narratives. Thematic analysis is considered a fundamental method in qualitative studies due to its flexibility, and it is helpful to reflect and clarify reality through involving finding and distinguishing similar threads running across an interview or a series of interviews (41,42). It minimally organizes and describes the (rich) details of the dataset (43).

After fully transcribing the content of each interview, a written chart of relevant questions and an inventory of all responses were created to compare the summarized statements from individual interviews and focus group discussions. Then, we explicitly identified the thematic modules under each interview question. For example, for questions to understand participants' perceptions or opinions, we categorized all responses according to positive or negative themes. Participants' responses such as "useful", "helpful", "clear or easy to understand", "reasonable", and "consolidated and deepened my knowledge/understanding" could be considered positive narratives. Results were combined when the responses were the same or similar.

To understand the reliability of the analyses, 20 randomly selected responses were given to a project assistant who had not engaged in the coding process to thematically categorize the responses. The inter-rater reliability reached a high level of 85%. For questionable or inconsistently classified coding, researchers sought solutions through discussions. To guarantee the accuracy of the data, conventional translation and back-translation techiniques were utilized for those citations used in this paper where the original responses were not in English.

Among the 96 participants, 76 (79.2%) were taught postgraduate students (TPg) and 20 (20.8%) were enrolled in research postgraduate programmes (RPg). A general principle for determining sample size in qualitative research is that *N* should be large enough and varied to clarify the purpose of the study (44). Normally, at least two groups are required for each defining demographic characteristic (45), and the sample size of this study is significantly greater than the average number of focus groups in 220 studies examined by Carlsen and Glenton (46). Furthermore, students were nominated at random from different majors and different countries or regions to improve the generalizability of the study results.

## Results

In the subsequent sections, we will present our findings regarding questions included in the interview guideline.

### Theme 1: General learning experience

First, students generally perceived experiences with the e-learning module on National Education as novel, meaningful and reflective. Some respondents expressed that they enjoy the online learning programme because it is flexible. For example:

- "I feel this course is very flexible and intuitive. It is my first time learning from the video but I can try to replay the video many times to let me understand the terms and the knowledge that I am not familiar with. I think the online course is a good platform to help me understand the terms. Maybe in the actual classroom, the teacher will talk about them once and then pass on, but I will not actually get what they are thinking about. But through the online video, I can replay for many times to make me understand it." (TPg)
- "This course is meaningful to some extent, as it makes both local and mainland students feel a sense of belongingness." (TPg)
- "At the beginning, I also thought that the course should not be difficult since I have learned all the historical knowledge before. But when I skipped the course handouts and related notes and did the exam directly, I realized that many things were forgotten. So, after that, I re-learned the entire course carefully, reviewing the past and learning the new. It feels like a great harvest." (TPG)
- "I think the online form module is pretty easy to navigate, you could do it anytime, and it tells you which questions you got wrong. So, if I do it for the first time, I look for the question that I got wrong, and look at the lecture notes to learn more about that point. Even though the question is not the same every time, you kind of learn more based on your mistakes. I think that's pretty good in terms of the given materials." (TPg)
- "It is relatively novel. For example, contents about the development of Hong Kong and the NSL. In addition, some Hong Kong history or (Chinese) modern history and cases are also interesting, which promotes our understanding of the connectivity between Hong Kong and the mainland." (RPg)

However, several students remarked that "the focus of the lecture content is not clear enough", and "the duration of the lecture is too long and the content is too much" (i.e., "negative themes"). A few respondents voiced their concerns that some contents were a bit too theoretical and not quite friendly for students who are new to this knowledge.

- "The course duration is too long, and it makes people feel a bit lengthy and boring to learn. After three hours of study, I was very tired and could not assimilate all the knowledge." (TPg)
- "If you see it carefully, you will feel a little bored, because the presentation was kind of dropping by. And I was also sort of wondering why, like why are we going into such detail in these historical events pertaining to the reason behind this video." (TPg)
- "For the online mode, it seems a little challenging to students who learn for the first time. I think even though the lecture has given important notes on what they're talking about, without some explanation, maybe somehow it is difficult to understand what exactly it means. The listener may have some difficulties to know about the whole picture of what they are talking about. So, I think it ONLY suits for knowing some basic knowledge." (TPg)

- "Video treats every knowledge point, every question, and every piece of information equally, so it is not clear which key knowledge needs to be mastered." (RPg)

Second, regarding their self-study experience with lecture notes, the narratives were overwhelmingly positive (e.g., "useful", "convenience", "novel", "efficient" and "logically clear"). Respondents stated,

- "The framework and logic of the notes are very clear as a summary or refinement of certain knowledge points. It effectively strengthens and consolidates knowledge points." (TPg)
- "Through self-studying, it facilitated patriotism and national identity. I also learned more about this country, Hong Kong, and some rules contained in the National Security Law." (TPg)
- "Lecture notes are relatively novel. Although each piece of history is introduced in a familiar language, unlike the Chinese version learned in mainland China before, in which the notes provided were in English. Notes can help me learn the English expression of some content. Meanwhile, I could read some online materials and compare them with the contents of the notes to study together. So, the overall feeling is that the study of this part is more in-depth." (TPg)
- "Notes are more efficient than video, as the course content can be understood more clearly. The lecture notes were pretty comprehensive, including a lot of key answers to those questions. I probably could pass the quiz by reading lecture notes ONLY." (TPg & RPg)

According to the respondents, the only shortcoming is that the lecture notes are written in English. Therefore, the language barrier may cause some students to have difficulty or bias in understanding some contents. However, these can be overcome by looking up the dictionary or searching online.

**Theme 2: Lecture materials (i.e., video clips, notes) and assessment**

Overall, the lecture materials were largely viewed by students as "useful in consolidating knowledge on Chinese history and building the basic understanding of NSL", with "logical" and "systematic" content, and some of them were "impressive". They also found that the materials helped to raise the cognitive level of the individuals. Respondents expressed the cases shared in the lecture linked the knowledge to their daily life, and helped them to integrate into Hong Kong society in the future. For instance,

- "The content is rich." (TPg)
- "The logic of the whole video is excellent, and well conforms with the logic of one's desire to explore. At the same time, it also offers you plenty of useful knowledge." (TPg & RPg)
- "I have more deep impression because the video separates different parts talking about the different situations on which is illegal with some examples. I think this part is good because they give me a scenario to let me know in what situation, it is illegal and why they cannot do that. And they give some defence, they decide some cases

happened and the people who did that and it's illegal, so I think they help me to remember the issue part." (TPg)

- "The logic of lecture notes is clear. It's like a glossary with the dated events, and also descriptions of the important events that happened in China. So, it gives you an overview of what happened, the most important events where you kind of have a general idea of the history." (TPg)
- "The content of the law in the video is close to current events. A lot of them are happening right now or relate to our daily lives, which everyone pays attention to. Now that they can be discussed in class, I feel good." (TPg)

On the other hand, some students found the content of video clips or notes are mostly similar. Besides, some commented that it is difficult to understand legal cases by purely textual content. In addition, a few respondents felt that the content should be more applicable by putting even greater emphasis on the potential for growth in Hong Kong after the NSL was enacted instead of the history (e.g., . "Yeah, I mean some of the historical stuff was very detailed, and I don't remember that" (i.e., "negative themes"). Surprisingly, a number of students said that they were unaware that there were lecture notes, or never read them, although as the course requirement, it is explicitly included in the course syllabus and clearly indicated on Blackboard or websites.

Similarly, students also had divergent views on assessments. Some respondents perceived the multiple-choice quiz as "complicated" and "meaningless". They pointed out, "It couldn't possibly be a supplement, in my opinion, and I forgot all of them after the test. Or, instead of saying it facilitated my learning ability, I would prefer saying that it facilitated my ability to use Google". A few students believed that "the design of the questions is not very accurate. There was a question about the "Three Great Battles", but this one did not appear in the video clip about "Modern Chinese History". The options were strange, and I even couldn't find the right answer on Google" (i.e., "negative themes"). Conversely, most students felt that the assessment was "appropriate", "straightforward", "challenging", and "consolidated their knowledge" (i.e., "positive themes").

- "The difficulty is moderate, and it can consolidate and deepen my understanding. During the test, I would take the initiative to look up the knowledge and think." (RPg)
- "The test allows for multiple attempts, and I have learned some knowledge through constantly repeating the test, which is more impressive than just watching online classes." (TPg)
- "Watching videos with questions, checking the notes, purposefully choosing to absorb, and then explore, which will strengthen the memory." (TPg)
- "There is a certain degree of difficulty. Because the video is too long and detailed, it is difficult to extract key information efficiently, so it is indeed difficult to do multiple-choice questions (MCQ). When encountering difficulties, most of the time I choose to find relevant information through search engines (Google or Baidu), and occasionally return to the video itself to find the answer. But sometimes the search engines don't necessarily provide accurate answers, or I need to extract key information from large texts by myself. All in all, MCQ is challenging and meaningful." (TPg)

Finally, two students commented on the number of questions. They suggested that "ten questions are slightly short. History is a long book covering many points and areas, and ten questions can only serve as a selective examination and may not even be useful. We can have more questions; for example, expand it to around 20 questions".

**Theme 3: Perceived benefits**

Respondents overwhelmingly perceived the lecture was beneficial to their personal development in four aspects. The first area is a concise comprehension of modern Chinese history, such as "revisiting Chinese history", "enhancing knowledge of Hong Kong's history", and "filling in some gaps in knowledge". The second area is to raise awareness of the notion of national security. For instance, "enhancing national awareness" and "realizing many facets of national security". The third aspect is fostering students' positive attitudes towards NSL, including "strengthening legal consciousness", "enhancement of students' understanding of NSL", "improving the learning motivation", and "promoting one"s national identity". Finally, students remarked that the course answered some of their questions and myths about establishing the National Security Law and sharpened their minds.

- "I mean, since we're new to Hong Kong, getting the history of Hong Kong is a great idea." (TPg & RPg)
- "It provided me with a new perspective, a new angle, and a more objective view of some historical events. Looking at China's previous history from the perspective of Hong Kong, or what foreigners think about China's development and the law of China, gave me a whole new perspective on these things. My critical thinking has been greatly improved, and my ability to view issues from multiple perspectives has been developed. It also enhanced my thinking capacities." (TPg)
- "It enhanced students' sense of national consciousness, identity and belongingness to the country, especially for students in Hong Kong." (TPg & RPg)
- "My deepest feeling is that I can now be in a very safe and protected environment because there are many people who walk in silence and do a lot of things. A speech claimed that one positive thing about being a citizen of the PRC is that you don't need to be an excellent individual to have a sense of security at the national level." (TPg)
- "The course gave me my first official grasp of the NSL. Now, I have known how to regulate my daily behaviour and to guide and command my thoughts. Let yourself behave in a better and more positive direction." (TPg)
- "The NSL has helped me the most by making me more steadfast in my conviction and inner philosophy." (TPg)
- "We cannot have a home without a country. You can have your own right to freedom of speech, but you can't incorrectly guide or incite others to establish incorrect values. So, I think National Security Law comes before the guarantee of human rights or anything else. Freedom of speech must be guided and guaranteed by a very correct legal foundation, and then we can talk about other rights." (TPg)
- "The HKNSL does not restrict citizens' freedom of expression, but rather maintains social stability, and better protects people living in Hong Kong." (TPg & RPg)

**Theme 4: Difficulties encountered**

Although most students perceived the implementation of the e-learning module as generally smooth, and had successfully completed the course requirement in their first semester, some of them indicated that they had encountered critical challenges and difficulties, such as the technical problems caused by Blackboard or electronic devices, the overload of course content, and the lack of interaction. Moreover, for the majority of students, the biggest difficulty and challenge was the language problem.

- "I remember when I first time tried to start the course, I think some devices cannot open this course, maybe some Apple devices. You cannot open this course in Safari or using iPad, so you cannot start this course books. And sometimes it will lag in the middle of the video, which means that you try to watch the video, but in the middle, you will have a shutdown. So, maybe the question is that the system is not stable, so it was the first problem when I learn this course." (TPg)
- "I think for me, when I finished the quiz, it was a little bit unclear if I was done. I'm not sure whether you need a stronger message to announce you've done a new task or if you need to have a certificate or something. Because I still kept checking back to see the indication of, someone had received my score or something, and I didn't really get that. So, then you guys sent me an email about the focus group. Yeah, like a badge or certificate or something, just very clear so you know when it comes the time to graduate, you have evidence to show." (TPg)
- "The video is too long. I can't remember it after watching it. And the content, sometimes if I remember right, the sound in the video is not the being said, it sounds like a robot telling a story. The style makes me sleepy and tired. It's hard for me to focus more on this video." (TPg)
- "The language was a big problem because the Chinese description is quite different from the English description. Learning history in English is really difficult. When I watched the video, I had to translate all titles via Google because I had no idea what was being discussed." (TPg & RPg)
- "Some terminology is difficult for non-history or law students to understand." (TPg)

**Theme 5: Views on the learning approach**

Regarding the self-paced online mode, students have quite different opinions. Most respondents preferred this mode, and considered it an effective way to learn law-related issues. This approach enhanced their comprehension of the material and encouraged them to introspect their own experience. It effectively alleviated the tension brought by their main studies or research and helped them feel comfortable. According to respondents, such a learning approach provides them flexibility in time and pace of study.

- "I think that if you study independently, the effect may be better (the form is very good). I feel that there is no such strong sense of oppression, and it is freer. It allows students to control their time and efficiency to learn independently without taking up too much time, which makes students take it more easily, and be more attentive, then the effect will be better." (RPg)
- "You can control it, make it convenient for yourself." (TPg)

- "At undergraduate or graduate level, regardless of the forms of learning, self-consciousness is involved. Universities all over the world emphasize the ability of independent learning." (TPg)

Meanwhile, some students questioned the time effect of the self-paced learning mode. They believed that mere self-study was perceived as less effective. They stated that "flexibility is the advantage of this learning mode, but it is also its disadvantage. Because it is so flexible, it is easy to overlook its importance". Furthermore, respondents commented that "the biggest issue is that the interactions between teacher and students or amongst the students were limited. For example, when finding some issues during self-study, you may not be able to ask questions immediately. So, it would be better if there was a comment area next to critical thinking so that everyone can type and upload their own ideas. Because when I think about the answer to my critical thinking, I am uncertain as to whether I'm headed in the correct way with my thoughts. At the same time, I also want to learn some ideas from others to enrich my thinking".

**Theme 6: Area(s) for improvement/suggestions**

Although respondents generally gave high ratings to the National Security Law Education, they provided some valuable advice on how to improve different aspects of this programme. For the lecture content, some students suggested "to make it more theoretical or de-emphasize it", "to expand some knowledge related to the environment we are facing at the current stage or cultural history, in addition to China"s new modern history and the National Security Law", "to add some interesting events, shorten the actual viewing time of the video, and leave room for students to actively explore knowledge", "to further refine the details of modern history", and "to cover more information about economic policies related to our further studies in the Mainland, or career development in the Greater Bay Area". For the arrangement, most taught postgraduate students suggested "to use Chinese as the medium of instruction", "to provide an option to choose one"s preferred language", and "to add some Chinese annotations to the title or video, especially the annotations on proper nouns". Some students suggested "to modularise the course", "to organize some seminars for a deeper understanding or to provide some opportunities for a certain amount of patriotic education", and "to increase field study".

Regarding instruction, students recommended "to use more cases to make the course content more vivid", "to let the older generation share their personal experiences", and "to be more mindful of the various learning paces of students, and the different needs of student from China Mainland, Hong Kong or foreign countries". Moreover, most of the students suggested "having more interaction, like feedback questions in the end of each section to test our knowledge about the content or refresh the minds", "adding a comment area in the video for students to share their opinions", and "giving the correct answers to the wrong questions directly, as well as an explanation regardless of whether the answer is right or wrong". Some research postgraduate students suggested "enriching the format of assessments, such as group discussion, group assignment, or short essay". They believed that "if the assessment on the module was an essay rather than multiple choice because that would help students show their real thought process and understanding of the issues". In addition, they also suggested "enhancing the publicity and promotion of the curriculum and National Security Law through more activities".

**Theme 7: Opinions on NSL education and whether it is brainwashing**

Students generally agreed that the notion of national security, the NSL, modern Chinese history, and important episodes of national humiliation should be well-versed by university students, because it is "necessary" and "meaningful". They believed that "maintaining national security is also a necessary responsibility of every citizen of the country". Understanding Chinese history and NSL could help them better integrate into Hong Kong society. "If we're coming to Hong Kong and studying in Hong Kong, of course, we should know some crucial things about it. Conceptually on the whole, yes, of course, I think you should have something like this. Especially if you're attending college in Hong Kong, it is always better to know more about the society you're living in, the history, the loss". Furthermore, some students believed that as Chinese, we must be familiar with the history of our country. "It can enhance students' sense of national consciousness and national belongingness". A student narrated that "As Hong Kong was under the British rule, it was easier to accept Western ideas, and the understanding of Chinese history is relatively weak, which leads to different perspectives on things, and the integration with the mainland is weak. Most Hong Kong students have limited knowledge of Chinese history. When they encounter some prejudiced remarks in the university, their values will be easily distorted. Therefore, supplementing the relevant knowledge is important to the growth of university students in Hong Kong" (i.e., "positive themes").

Alternatively, some respondents who had reservations mentioned that "national education cannot be instelled in a compulsory manner", and "it is unnecessary to learn so much" (i.e., "negative themes"). In particular, a student commented that "I am sceptical whether this kind of national education can really help local students grasp the development trend of the country and familiarise them with the history of the country" (i.e., neutral themes).

Similarly, the majority of respondents did not believe that the course was a form of indoctrination because of the "objective" and "neutral" nature of the material covered. It introduced "common sense and basic factual in nature, something that should have been followed in the first place". For example,

- "They will not control my thinking, and they are telling us why we need NSL in Hong Kong. It's trying to present a context and sort of an idea of why it's in place." (TPg)
- "I think the videos are just telling about the current situation, including the law and the history in Hong Kong, so I believe it's important knowledge for undersity students to have. I do not believe it to be indoctrination, because I remember in my undergraduate study, we also have similar content. Because I studied in Macao four years before and my university also has one course about the Basic Law in Macao, and it was interesting every semester. And both the local students and international students need to learn about this law. So, I think it is like that, the school and government here want to make university students know about the current situation, including the law here. So, it seems to me like a gentle reminder of some information they deem important for university students to be aware of." (TPg)
- "Every country has its own ideology and the educational mechanism or educational tool that serve such ideology." (TPg)
- "Not in my opinion. Because first of all, I think for college students, we all should have some degree of, like self-critical ability, and also like the laws. The law is already here, so it's better to know than not know it, so I think it is better to present it to the students." (TPg & RPg)

In addition, two students enrolled in research postgraduate programmes have opined that the "definition of brainwashing" determines whether or not this constitutes brainwashing.

- "Brainwashing needs to be defined, and feeling brainwashed could be feeling dissatisfied with the way the course is being taught. Because if you are an adult, you should actually have your own judgment. I think the expansion of publicity is to let everyone familiarise themselves, think, and know more about it."
- "Education itself is a process of brainwashing. If instilling this knowledge is conducive to the healthy development of the country, even if it is brainwashing, I don't think there is any problem."

## Discussion

The study evaluated the efficacy of National Security Law Education implementation and its perceived effectiveness amongst postgraduate students at one public university in Semester One of 2022/23 academic year based on individual interviews and focus group discussions. While diverse perspectives on various facets of the e-learning module (including video, lecture notes, assessment, and arrangement) exist, self-study experience, perceived benefits, and the necessity for national education were observed, the results generally indicate a straightforward and successful launch of the e-learning course. It enhanced and consolidated students' knowledge in different areas, and promoted their whole development. Most significantly, the results dispel any notion that the relevant instruction constituted any kind of indoctrination for university students. In conjunction with the evaluation studies focused on the undergraduates (4, 5, 9) and teachers (47-49), we can conclude that the national security education programs are well-received by the students, at least in those who participated in the evaluation studies.

First, students generally perceived a positive attitude toward the lecture. They had a good general impression of the program. This finding of the current study is similar to previous research. Kennedy and Chow (12) stated that "older students were more positive about law and law-related issues than their younger counterparts" (p.95). Because postgraduate students have certain life experiences and are more mature in their thinking, they are less susceptible to socialized thinking or prejudiced ideas. Their maturity allows them to see this complicated and delicate subject in a fresh perspectives. The rich and practical content and flexible learning mode were highly welcomed by them, and they opined that the program had achieved the intended learning outcomes. In contrast, previous studies have noted that undergraduate students demonstrated fewer information literacy skills, i.e. the capacity to accurately evaluate and use the information (50), than postgraduate students (51), which may lead to less desirable learning outcomes. Moreover, it has been noted that undergraduate students tend to engage less in analyzing complex problems and discussing national issues than postgraduates (52).

Second, most students considered the lecture beneficial and meaningful. According to the results, we found that NSL education is crucial for university students in many ways. First, understanding history can strengthen an individual's sense of identity with the country and foster cultural confidence. Second, understanding and respecting the law is a prerequisite for law-abiding. In fact, cultivating a culture of legal compliance takes time. The only way to promote justice is for everyone to obey the law. According to Kennedy and Chow (12), compared with their Mainland counterparts, the youth in Hong Kong lack a good grasp of the complexities involved in adhering to the law. Thus, to a certain extent, the course brought students a greater

understanding of how the rule of law influences national security policy-making and maintains social justice.

Moreover, combined with our previous evaluation studies conducted amongst the undergraduates, the current findings imply that the course promotes students' well-being from different aspects. First, as the content of the lecture is politically sensitive, it is widely believed that students may experience negative emotions. However, students in this study did not claim that participating in the course made them feel anxious and stressed. Instead, they reported that the flexibility of self-paced learning kept them away from the feeling of being overwhelmed and made them relaxed and comfortable. Heath et al (53) stated that creating accessible learning opportunities and experiences can achieve better learning outcomes by taking full account of the sensitive nature of the topic and its possible influence on students. In other words, instead of stress, it affords students the chance to comprehend the human dimension of the law; to understand the value and meaning of its existence in terms of historical and practical factors, and to help them learn to manage their own emotions and respect for the values of others by changing prejudices and misconceptions. Second, students' academic well-being was improved by good learning experiences and perceived advantages. A previous study indicated that students' academic well-being comes from their increased personal perceptions, such as self-efficacy, self-confidence and locus of control, and the perceived "fairness" of the assessment (54). The e-learning module protects the anonymity of the students, which allows them better engage in their studies, and gives them fair access to information. Third, the results suggest that students thought the course broadens their comprehension of the NSL and cultivates their positive attitudes and self-control/regulation abilities that would help them maintain motivation and complete their studies effectively and successfully, even without the guidance of teachers and classmates. Fourth, if students do not understand NSL, then they will be at risk of having to face negative consequences because of engaging in antisocial behaviours, which will harm their well-being. Additionally, "legal consciousness" has practical ramifications for people and social civilizations alike (12). Thus, law-related education can contribute to students' cognitive health and psychosocial health, as well as social integrity and the contribution to the community environment (9,55)

Third, based on the preceding interpretations, the current study underscores the value of e-learning modules in teaching law-related issues. It enables students to receive systematic and detailed materials that suited their capabilities through visual and audio and promoted their participation without the fear or humiliation of being judged by their peers or instructors. It also considers students' ability to comprehend and understand through assessments. Moreover, the present study also highlights the importance of conducting post-lecture evaluation for understandingstudents' opinions under such a learning approach.

Fourth, by combining individual interviews with focus groups, this study proves the effectiveness of qualitative technique for evaluative purposes in the field of higher education, and demystifies the conventional view that qualitative research is subjective and "non-scientific". However, it should be noted that interviews have been considered an effective strategy for understanding the opinions of different stakeholders because of the rich and fluid information that can be obtained during the interview process. Therefore, the method has been widely used in higher education research (56). In particular, researchers often use interviews to understand the effects of programmes. In this study, we used individual interviews to collect detailed descriptions of students' attitudes and thoughts about the NSL education, while interaction data generated from discussions among participants were used to broaden the scope of the

investigation and to explore content that is assumed to be less accessible in individual interviews or quantitative studies. Meanwhile, we intentionally justified the sample size as well as the method of sample recruitment in order to improve the rigour of this study. In this paper, we provide a detailed account of the data collection process. To avoid possible bias, we arranged for project assistants to be involved in different phrases of the work to reduce systematic bias. Multiple rounds of calibration on thematic analyses by different colleagues were also allowed to ensure inter-rater reliability. Moreover, the combination of focus group discussions and individual interviews not only ensured the integrity of the data, but also prevented respondents from choosing to conceal or deliberately embellish certain descriptions during individual interviews, thus enabling triangulation of the study results.

Fifth, although the findings are generally encouraging, several additional improvement areas were also identified, such as the weighting of the history section and the diversity of the language of instruction. These will be discussed in more detail later on and improvements will be proposed accordingly. In addition, in response to the suggestion of "enriching the content of NSL", we have adopted the "teaching from the headlines" approach to keep the trial of relevant cases up-to-date, so that the lecture notes can be closely related to political issues. On the other hand, we have invited guest speakers who have extensive experience working in a particular field relevant to the laws and policies of Hong Kong to share their experiences through seminars. According to Silliman (57), "a course in National Security Law is best taught as a small seminar rather than a large 'lecture' class" (p.3). In the future, under the framework of flexible teaching and learning, we will also try to enhance the level of service provided by online teaching and improve the interactive experience for students.

Although this is the first known study on national security education for postgraduate students in Hong Kong, there are a number of limitations of this study. Firstly, because of the small number of students in some focus groups, the views obtained may be influenced by personal factors, and therefore cannot adequately represent the diverse views of students. It is noteworthy that the sample may not be representative of those students who did not opt to join the study. Secondly, due to the absence of a control cohort in this study, it was not possible to fully understand the perceived differences in the effectiveness of NSL education across age groups and educational backgrounds. It might have been helpful to include a comparison group for curriculum enhancement. Thirdly, we have only conducted one phase of research on the postgraduate e-learning module so far. More relevant research in the future would be helpful. Finally, to further understand the effectiveness of the course, it was necessary to conduct a process evaluation and to combine quantitative and qualitative data for a more in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, the present study delivers preliminary evidence that NSL education is effective in fostering postgraduate students' holistic development and well-being. Given the paucity of literature on the assessment of law-related courses in Hong Kong, the current study represents a significant contribution to the field.

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