

## Chapter 8

### Focus group evaluation of National Education in Hong Kong: Postgraduate students' perceptions

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In this chapter, we investigate 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 program. 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 consolidate students' knowledge of National Security Law and modern Chinese history, as well as nurture their positive attitudes towards law-related issues. The present study demonstrates that an e-learning module is effective in teaching politically sensitive topics to university students.

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### Introduction

In Hong Kong, there was 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 June 30, 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 of 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 the 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 Committee developed national security courses that would be mandatory for graduation by 2022/2023. For instance, the National Security Law Education at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) is a compulsory component of the co-curricular learning program 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 programs 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 national security education programs.

At The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, National Education is provided not only 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 offenses and related penalties in the NSL. In addition to 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 appear to interact with cognitive factors 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 a fully online curriculum on student satisfaction and learning effectiveness is viewed differently by researchers. On the one hand, some researchers argue 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 that 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 the 2022/23 academic year, and examined the research questions below based on students’ perspectives:

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 assessments, 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”?

## **Our study**

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’ 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 catalog 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 program by understanding participants' demands (31).

### **Participants and procedure**

Participants were randomly recruited via email from a list of postgraduate students (including students from the "research postgraduate program", "taught postgraduate program" and "taught postgraduate program 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, the 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 program 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 was 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 the 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 taught postgraduate program (TPg) and research postgraduate program (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 a. A brief history of modern China b. The notion of national security c. Hong Kong National Security Law (HKNSL) 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 verbal data from interviews, and the transcripts were independently read by one student assistant and a project assistant who evaluated patterns and trends among

individuals or groups. Afterward, 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, 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 techniques 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 programs (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.

## **Our findings**

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 program 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 them 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. However, 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, content 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. 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 lives 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 much deeper impression because the video separates different parts talking about the different situations in 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 defense, 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 to be 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 learned how to regulate my daily behavior 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 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 thought some devices could not open this course, maybe some Apple devices. You cannot open this course in Safari or using an iPad, so you cannot start this course book. 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 started 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 that, 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 could type and upload their 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 program. 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 at 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 instilled in a compulsory manner", and "it is unnecessary to learn so much" (i.e., "negative themes"). In particular, a student commented, "I am skeptical 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 university 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 let 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 ideology and the educational mechanism or educational tool that serves 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 programs 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 the 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 from a fresh perspective. 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 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 to better engage in their studies, and gives them fair access to information. Third, the results suggest that students thought the course broadened their comprehension of the NSL and cultivated 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 behaviors, 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 suit their capabilities through visual and audio and promotes 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 understanding students' opinions under such a learning approach.

Fourth, by combining individual interviews with focus groups, this study proves the effectiveness of a 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 programs. In this study, we used individual interviews to collect detailed descriptions of students' attitudes and thoughts about 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 to improve the rigor 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 phases 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 to 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.

## **Acknowledgments**

The development and implementation of the National Security Program as well as this evaluation study were supported by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (52UK and 52U9). The preparation of this paper is financially supported by Li and Fung Endowed Professorship in Service Leadership Education, Wofoo Foundation (ZH2C and ZH4Q) and Research Matching Fund of the Research Grants Council (ZECL). This is a reprint of an article published in the *International Journal of Child Health and Human Development*.

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