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## **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.” Noteworthy, 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**

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- 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?

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

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**Lecture content**

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- “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**

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- “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.”

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### **Classroom atmosphere and interactions**

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

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**Lecture notes**

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- “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**

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- “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**

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- “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.”
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**Table 4. Narratives of views on perceived benefits**

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**Perceived Benefits**

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- “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.”
- “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.”
- “It helps us to build a leadership skill.”
- “The course raises the awareness that every citizen is required to protect and contribute to the country.”
- “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.”
- “It deepened the impression of the establishment of the law and its importance.”
- “The lecture was beneficial because we were able to learn about the law and the difference in the main four offenses.”
- “The lecture helped me know what responsibilities should I take, and to become a responsible and law-abiding citizen.”
- “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.”
- “By learning about different areas of knowledge, it increases my skills of critical thinking, and I will be able to think more comprehensively.”

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**Views on the Effectiveness of Law Abidance Leadership Education**

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- “As a citizen, you must know these.”
  - “This class may help foreign students to understand China better. They will also be better integrated into society.”
  - “It is necessary. Some mainland students are a little worried about the situation in the
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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.”

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### **Whether Law Abidance Leadership Education is Brainwashing**

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- “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.”

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### **Perceptions of the Views of the Classmates**

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- “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.”
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**Table 5. Suggestions for improvements**

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- “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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