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Running title: Senior-Year students' focus group evaluation

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

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

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

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### **Introduction**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Methods**

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

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

Table 1

## **Participants**

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

## **Procedures**

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

## **Data analysis**

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

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

Table 2

## **Results**

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

Table 3

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

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

Table 4

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

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

Table 5

### **Content of this program**

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

Table 6

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

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

Table 7

**Perceptions of the multiple-choice assessment**

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

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

Table 8

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

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

Table 9

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

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

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

Table 10

### **Is this NSL education program “brainwashing”?**

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

## **Discussion**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rating	Student Responses
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those materials have helped me to absorb a lot of knowledge. They are quite practical and useful.</li> <li>• In the latter half of the lecture, there are a lot of additional information about national education. Actually, I think they have cleared up some of my own doubts, that is, some doubts about legal regulations.</li> <li>• I think this e-learning module is pretty great on the whole, because you can read the materials according to your own schedule, and you can read them slowly without being rushed.</li> <li>• The materials were detailed containing a lot of information and knowledge. Meanwhile, those real national data were literally presented to us.</li> </ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three hours was a long time.</li> <li>• Maybe because I already have a little knowledge of this aspect (the National Security Law) from the government's propaganda or the internet, I won't be impressed by it after watching the lecture. For me, it is the same as not watching it.</li> </ul>

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

Rating	Student Responses
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It keeps abreast of current events.</li> <li>• All of the materials are already very concise and easy to understand.</li> <li>• I think it has digested much information and reduced a lot of words before being uploaded.</li> <li>• It will be difficult to further shorten the length of the notes. Although my reading speed was relatively slow, I think this length was fine for me.</li> <li>• Using such point form or separating several points made it easier to capture the key points.</li> <li>• In my impression, this note would be better than the video since I could find the information I wanted from the notes at any times.</li> </ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was too long including too many words.</li> <li>• I wonder whether it would be better if the notes were written in Chinese because the tone in English is different from that in Chinese.</li> <li>• Chinese history could not be well interpreted in English.</li> </ul>

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

Subthemes	Student Responses
Law-abiding Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It enhances our law-abiding awareness.</li></ul>
A Brief History of Modern China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It was only after taking this course that I realized that so many different unequal treaties had been signed at that time, and the history of humiliation was so long.</li><li>• I think it is useful because it enhances our senses of national identity and the understanding of history.</li><li>• I didn't pay much attention to this before; however, when it mentioned NSL, it would also remark some related history, then I would know why we would have NSL.</li></ul>
The Concept of National Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It built up our national consciousness.</li><li>• National security is something that some other countries are also working on, not only China.</li></ul>
Hong Kong National Security Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I learned a lot about NSL, from which you know what actions you take will lead to what kinds of consequences.</li><li>• This program has a good educational and warning effect.</li><li>• The news only mentioned about it briefly, but this course explained those law regulations in great detail, such as what a person was accused of and the reason for the defendant. I learned a lot about these.</li></ul>
Myths and Facts surrounding the NSL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There was a time when many people thought that the implementation of NSL meant that we would lose our freedom of speech. We could not say this or that. However, what this course is actually doing now is telling you very clearly what constitutes a violation of NSL. There're still a lot of things you can talk about, which means that you actually still have a lot of freedom. Also, only those words which harm national security and the country or splitting the state could not be said. Meanwhile, you can't do anything provocative or seditious. Otherwise, you will violate the law.</li></ul>

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

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Student Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I was very interested in and impressed by those cases and the notes. For example, I was interested in the Tong Ying-kit Case, the Hong Kong 47 Case and the Case of Apple Daily. Also, I was interested in some substantive cases which involve money laundering or endanger national security. I was impressed by those cases.</li><li>• I'm under the impression that the law section gave you a couple of scenarios where you could choose whether the person was guilty of secession, sedition, or something else. The war part in the history section was really impressive to me. The question was about losing money. It asked how much money China lost in which of those cases.</li><li>• I think what impressed me most was Unit 731, because I had seen a movie about this unit before, and I now realize that these things were actually true and not fiction being bragged by the movie, so I was deeply impressed.</li><li>• What impressed me most were some situation questions, such as those asking you what actions you do would lead to what consequences, which were closer to our current life, so I think this kind of question would be more profound.</li></ul>

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

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Student Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It was not difficult to finish the self-study, however, it was a little difficult to pass the examination.</li><li>• We were using English, so it might be a little confusing. Some of the names of two different wars or terms were exactly the same in English, so there would be confusion. If it was written in Chinese, it would be more precise and clearer.</li><li>• The sense of substitution would be stronger if you use Chinese.</li><li>• It would be hard and tiring if we watched the whole three-hour video at once.</li><li>• It was too full of content in the video, which was a challenge for me, so I only watched the key information.</li></ul>

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

Rating	Student Responses
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I don't think that these 20 multiple-choice questions were difficult, but they were not easy as well. The degree of difficulty is moderate.</li><li>• I think these questions can solidify the knowledge. Sometimes you won't remember the knowledge by just watching the video. However, if you do this test a couple of times, you will remember it pretty well. Besides, if I search the internet, I will learn more things.</li><li>• I also agree that there was no problem (when doing the assessments), because the questions were written very clearly and readably. I can fully understand the questions. Also, I can find all the information I need easily from the lecture notes.</li><li>• The week when we finished the tests, these kinds of questions would come up in the daily chatting between me and my friends.</li></ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I think the questions in the history section were relatively difficult and too detailed.</li><li>• I think the test was difficult because some regulations or the names of some historical events were similar, then I would remember them wrong or I would be confused.</li><li>• The passing requirement of the assessment was pretty high. It might be a little difficult for me, since each round of questions were different and there might be some unclear knowledge points which I would answer wrong every time. In that case, I would be a little frustrated.</li><li>• I think a Chinese version of all these questions should be provided.</li></ul>
Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• From my perspectives, whether we could pass the test actually depended on luck because the questions were randomly selected, among which some might be easy while some would be relatively difficult. In addition, some questions might change the positions or were asked in a different way. And then when you search the answers from the notes, some might be easier to find the answer, while some would be more difficult to understand and find the answer.</li></ul>

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

Rating	Student Responses
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I think the current version is already very great.</li><li>• At least in this module, you can adjust your own progress which is more flexible.</li><li>• It is great because I can learn a lot of knowledge via this e-learning module while my schedule won't be imposed.</li><li>• You can do this an infinite number of times, which is nice.</li><li>• Every student had his/her own learning schedule, so using this module would be more convenient.</li></ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It was a little bit oppressive when I logged in and saw so many files need to do because there were a lot of materials more than just one. I think you could upload the materials in batches rather than sharing all the materials at once. It would be a little messy if there are so many files.</li></ul>

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

Rating	Student Responses
Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In fact, as university students, we should know some related knowledge because we college students have great influences. Hence, we should at least learn some basic knowledge.</li><li>• The more related knowledge we know, the less of us would violate the law by committing such crimes.</li><li>• It is necessary to have a clear understanding of this topic, or at least some basic understanding, because it is in order to protect ourselves and the country.</li><li>• We are all Hong Kong citizens, and are all Chinese, so we actually need to know such knowledge. Especially after all of these social upheavals, students should be trained in this aspect of knowledge more than ever.</li></ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I don't think so. Especially since I am majoring in a subject of this nature, I've already been exposed to related knowledge.</li><li>• I don't think it is necessary, because this is for child to learn.</li><li>• If college students also need to purposely learn this news which is actually common sense, it would appear a little deliberate or intentional. But I think if you want us to know more about our country, you don't need to teach us modern Chinese history.</li></ul>
Neutral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personally, I also think it is necessary to learn this; however, if there's a choice, I will not take the initiative to learn because it is time-consuming.</li></ul>

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

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