

Hong Kong: Academic Freedom Declines Under Security Law

Students, Academics Face Censorship, Harassment, Growing Restrictions on Rights

(Taipei) – Academic freedom in [Hong Kong](#) has severely declined since the [Chinese](#) government imposed the draconian National Security Law on the city on June 30, 2020, Human Rights Watch and Hong Kong Democracy Council said in a report released today.

“Hong Kong students and faculty, accustomed to academic freedom, now have to tread carefully to avoid retribution for what they teach, research, and publish, and even with whom they associate,” said [Maya Wang](#), associate China director at Human Rights Watch. “The Chinese government considers gaining ideological control over Hong Kong’s universities a top priority, and many students and faculty now find themselves in the line of fire.”

University leaders in Hong Kong have enforced abusive policies. University administrations have repeatedly harassed the once influential student unions at all eight universities, so that they can no longer effectively function as elected representatives of the student bodies. They have scrubbed clean notice boards known as “Democracy Walls,” and removed from campuses memorials that are reminders of the Chinese government’s 1989 Tiananmen Massacre of pro-democracy protesters.

University administrations have also penalized students for holding peaceful protests and gatherings; censored student publications, communications, and events; and used university security guards to monitor students in public spaces. None of the eight universities responded to Human Rights Watch’s emailed requests for comments by the deadline provided.

This report is based on interviews with faculty and students from all eight publicly funded Hong Kong universities, and a review of media reports in both Chinese and English.

Many of the faculty members and students interviewed said that since the National Security Law came into effect in June 2020, they regularly self-censor in the classrooms, when they write and publish articles, apply for academic funding, and deliberate over which speakers to invite to conferences and events. Several academics reported direct censorship of their academic articles by university administrators and academic publishers. One said his university reported him to the Hong Kong police for an academic article he wrote that discussed the artwork made during the 2019 protests.

Chinese government-controlled newspapers have targeted several academics perceived as pro-democracy, subjected them to intimidation and smear campaigns that have destroyed their reputations, invaded their privacy, and threatened them with arrest. Hong Kong immigration authorities have denied visas to foreign academics, or refused to extend or renew them. Universities have fired academics perceived to be pro-democracy, denied their tenure, or refused to renew their contracts in opaque circumstances. Fearful of their security and concerned about the city’s political environment, some academics have quietly left their jobs and the city.

The National Security Law’s impact on students and faculty varies depending on who they are, what subject they study, their career status, and the perceived power dynamics vis-à-vis the Chinese government. Those who are from Hong Kong, who are perceived to be pro-democracy, and those whose scholarship focuses on Hong Kong and China socio-political issues bear the brunt of this pressure.

The Hong Kong government should immediately repeal the National Security Law and the second national security law it passed in March 2024, the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance. It

should release from custody all those arbitrarily detained for peacefully exercising their basic human rights, including students and faculty arrested and imprisoned.

Concerned governments and foreign universities with partnerships with Hong Kong universities should actively track instances of censorship and threats to academic freedom on Hong Kong university campuses, speak up for affiliated academics and students who suffer intimidation, and regularly review these partnerships to avoid becoming complicit in human rights violations.

“The decline in academic freedom in Hong Kong has global implications as Hong Kong universities have long been an essential window to the world about China, and vice versa,” said [Anna Kwok](#), executive director at the Hong Kong Democracy Council. “Foreign governments and universities with joint programs with Hong Kong universities should evaluate these programs, to make sure their academic work is not being manipulated and controlled by the Chinese government’s assault on academic freedom.”

Select quotes:

The University of Hong Kong Student Union has long been notorious for its evil path of anti-China and sowing chaos in Hong Kong. Especially after the introduction of the National Security Law ... the student union’s cunning heart is still determined ... to spread reactionary ideas in an attempt to lure more students to board the pirate ship and tie universities to the chariot of crime.... These people are not students at all, but thugs hiding on campus.

—*People’s Daily* editorial, “Remove the malignant tumor of HKU student union to return peace to campus,” April 19, 2021

The university and the dean ... defined academic freedom very narrowly and I was told that basically I could teach anything I wanted as long as it wouldn't encourage students to act upon it.... [W]ell, if I'm teaching, say, something having to do with democracy in the classroom, how am I to know if they're going to go out into the public sphere and post artwork or try to assemble?... Basically, as soon as a student acts upon what they've learned in the classroom, that's when we potentially become endangered because we are potentially inciting them to break the law.

—Academic “F,” October 28, 2022

After the NSL [National Security Law] hotline [was set up], everyone worries: If I fail a student or give them bad grades because their assignments are not up to standard, will there be any consequences [for me]? In the past, students can use normal procedures, like appealing their grades or leave us bad teaching evaluations, but after the hotline everyone thinks: If I fail a student, would they report us to the hotline?

—Academic “T,” May 17, 2024

At the 11th hour, the editor told me she can't publish it because the head of the school told her it's too dangerous now. She didn't want to put the editorial team at risk. And later [the head of the school] told me that every day ... he received emails and messages from the Liaison Office ... apparently [they] dropped my article because of pressure from the central government’s liaison office in Hong Kong.

—Academic “A,” October 23, 2022

[The authorities] don’t have to go through the national security bureau to harass you. They don’t need to use the law, but they will use the Party media to name people.... [T]here were a number of editorials that directly criticized several academics by name ... involving several universities ... and they all left their jobs after a very short time. I knew some of them: They left because it was a very big blow. Because you don’t know whether they will follow it up and act against you.... [This] has created an atmosphere.... If you stay, would you be in trouble? Or this time it was not about me,

but would I be next?... If you're afraid you'd have left, and if you haven't left then they have erected a barrier in your head [to self-censor] because you don't want to be next.

—Academic “L,” November 3, 2022