Building Social Justice-oriented Resilience for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education: Propositions from Hong Kong

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Abstract: Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) rhetoric and initiatives are gaining attention in Asian higher education. Yet, these are still underexplored in terms of their potential to bring about cohesive campus climates. As higher education institutions admit students from diverse backgrounds, there is room for examining how DEI might be leveraged to support growing student learning needs, particularly in contexts where cultural diversity is not the norm. Using Hong Kong as an example, this paper probes the genesis of DEI initiatives and sources of deficit thinking in higher education with reference to the experiences of ethnic minority (EM) students. It proposes a conceptualization of resilience theory from a social justice lens to counter deficit thinking and racism, which helps locate DEI initiatives in building culturally inclusive environments.
Keywords: Diversity, inclusion, ethnicity, higher education, social justice, Hong Kong

It is often not surprising to think of cultural diversity alongside internationalization efforts in higher education. Higher education campuses frequently witness global flows of researchers, teaching staff, academic exchanges, and increasing representation of minoritized learners. On average, 13% of student population in OECD countries and economies have immigrant background (OECD, 2023). The increasing contact among different population groups brings unique opportunities and challenges to higher education systems. The extent to which this contact translates into fruitful interaction among students of different groups remains vague, especially when faced with students who may not be used to ways in which domestic students participate in learning (e.g., Wright & Lander, 2003). This trend reflects a discussion that forms the basis of efforts to respond to global trends and shifts in labor markets (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2018).

The responses to cultural diversity are often reflected in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) agendas, which are put forth as a means to promote long-term prosperity and social cohesion (Claeys-Kulik & Jørgensen, 2018). Similar agendas are gaining momentum in globalized Asian regions (Sanger & Gleason, 2020), albeit at a different pace, which raises critical questions about the promises of diverse education environments in fostering intercultural competence amongst learners (Otten, 2003).

The aims of this paper are twofold. First, it aims to discuss the congruence of the DEI agenda related to the presence of EM students. Second, it seeks to propose a social justice-

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oriented resilience framework to address social inclusion brought by cultural diversity in higher education in Hong Kong. This paper is a response to the growing representation of EM students in higher education and attempts to make it more inclusive (Forsyth & Cairnduff, 2015; Gao, 2019; Manning & Yuen, 2023). It canvasses two questions:

1. What is the relevance of the DEI agenda in Hong Kong's higher education?
2. How might resilience help enrich DEI regarding EM inclusion in Hong Kong's higher education?

We begin this paper by examining the broader trends in the DEI agenda in higher education. Then, we critically discuss the "diversity" in Hong Kong to highlight the impediments to promoting greater acceptance of the DEI agenda in higher education. We address the second question by proposing a social justice-oriented resilience theory to conceptualize DEI work in higher education settings.

DEI in Higher Education

DEI began with a response to unequal access of "historically underrepresented students" whose identities are gendered and racialized (Smith, 2014). Thus, one key impetus of DEI in higher education is to improve social mobility, economic opportunity, and societal and academic benefits for students from diverse backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). At a supranational level, UNESCO (2017) has envisioned DEI as aspirations integral to development agendas in national education systems to enable learning opportunities for all learners. Diversity refers to the recognition afforded to individual and group differences along the axes of race, culture, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religious, immigration status, political affiliations, mental and physical abilities (McNair, 2019; UNESCO, 2017). Equity emphasizes concerns with fairness, which seeks to eliminate disparities along the above differences and statuses (Shaeffer, 2022; UNESCO, 2017). Inclusion is processes that mitigate barriers to learners' presence, participation, and achievement (UNESCO, 2017). In aggregate, DEI requires deliberate and intentional engagement with diversity through formal and informal support that forges connection and awareness among individuals, groups, and environments (McNair, 2019). These DEI aspirations for higher education are not far-fetched. Scholars have regarded DEI as a means to build capacity in addressing contemporary inequities in pluralistic societies (Smith, 2014), create a civilized space that champions different perspectives (Gertz, 2018), and enhance student learning (Sanger, 2020a).

As the foregoing definitions suggest, concerns around student diversity in higher education are not simply about improving faculty teaching but more about creating opportunities to "foster deeper learning for our students and ourselves" (Sanger, 2020b, p. 31). Denson (2009) showed that curricular and co-curricular activities may reduce racial bias. These activities, for example, include diversity, ethnic, and gender-related courses, workshops, and interventions. They provide opportunities to (1) expose learners to content-based materials that help shift people's perspective of their relations with others to reduce bias against views that regard minoritized groups as a threat and (2) interact with different cultural groups to promote the benefits of cross-racial interactions where all group members are positioned equally to work together. These results illustrate that diverse learning environments promote effortful thinking through cognitive disequilibrium (i.e., struggles and self-reflection that learners experience when exposed to new ideas) (Bowman, 2010). Bowman's meta-analysis reveals that interactions with racial and non-racial diversity, diversity coursework, and workshops are related to cognitive growth. Among these interactions, interpersonal interaction with racial diversity was strongly connected to cognitive growth. Pascarella et al. (2014) showed that

diversity experience contributed to critical thinking skills. In contrast to supporting the outcomes of diversity interactions, Roksa et al. (2017) found that negative interactions (e.g., racism) are detrimental to student development, such as causing students of color to feel excluded from their institutions. These worrying findings lend credence to the need for higher education learning environments to be sites in which a "sense of belonging can be activated" (Murray et al., 2019, p. 5), regardless of staff and students' cultural backgrounds.

As will be explained in the next section, our paper takes ethnic minorities as a point of departure in our discussion of DEI in Hong Kong's higher education. One reason for this is that DEI is very broad as a concept. Proponents do not necessarily attach the same meaning or value to DEI. Van Bommel et al. (2023) provided telling evidence that the scholarly literature on DEI is most highly represented in developed countries. They have also revealed that most of this literature, particularly in the business sector, has focused on gender diversity. This finding leaves important considerations around how the concept of DEI might be approached for empirical research, such as deciding on which elements of DEI should be addressed and analyzed. This consideration itself is a thorny issue and largely depends on what pressing matters are confronting a particular organization, such as the influx of gender-diverse and/or ethnically diverse staff. Furthermore, DEI is arguably a "Western" concept (e.g., Carter & Groopman, 2021, December; Price, 2020; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2019). Interpretations of diversity are partly driven by demographic challenges, such as graying populations, declining birth rates, and balancing migrants' contribution to economic prosperity (Nagy, 2014). The impetus behind the adoption of DEI initiatives in the region is far from clear and predictably varied across countries due to population structures, national policies, and extant cultural norms. These issues could be the subject of empirical studies, yet what is clear thus far is that DEI initiatives in wider Asia have seen recent strides in, for instance, the growing female workforce in Japan, LGBTQ+ rights in India, disability rights in South Korea, and multiculturalism in Singapore (Gaudette, 2023). How much of the DEI literature, including its rhetoric, connects to Asian higher education settings is still a subject of inquiry (Sanger, 2020a). The subtext of much DEI literature pertains to race, at least in North American contexts (Sanger, 2020a), and is possibly parochial in its conception.

Within the broader Asian region, Hong Kong makes an intriguing case regarding the uptake of DEI initiatives. In Hong Kong, race is not a prominent aspect of state education and policy developments (Gube & Burkholder, 2019), which risks concealing the need to harness learners' capacities to study and work in culturally diverse situations (Forsyth & Cairnduff, 2015). While the city ranked third in PISA's Global Competence in 2018, the Education Bureau (EDB) notes that "more work could be done to improve our students' perspectives in appreciating different cultures and their adaptability to multicultural environments" (The Government of the Hong Kong SAR, 2020, para. 6). This remark was aimed at the K-12 setting, but the impetus for DEI work to be extended to higher education cannot be ignored, given the need to engender a learning environment in which the contribution of EM students can be valued (e.g., Kennedy, 2012). Putting DEI into action requires intentionality (Sanger, 2020a) or deliberate and thoughtful efforts. Hence, an equally important task here is an attempt to gradually move away from DEI rhetoric that often operates within the intellectual ambit of Western scholarship and corporate strategies. By implication, critically engaging with this rhetoric demands carefully contextualizing DEI strategies in ways that take up their value and cultivate deeper connections with local situations. There is thus a potent need to examine the prospects and challenges of diversity initiatives to promote the inclusion of learners from non-Chinese heritage in Hong Kong's higher education system.

This paper explores some impediments to taking up DEI agendas in higher education. If Hong Kong is to be more inclusive (Resolve, 2018, February 25), there may be merit in

probing what diversity means. To do this, we discuss the ethno-demographic context of Hong Kong and interrogate whom we are addressing in DEI strategies. We highlight what might inhibit the more general acceptance of DEI work. For the purposes of our paper, we focus on the EM students due to the increasing attention to their access to Hong Kong's higher education (Gao, 2019). We conclude by discussing the role of resilience in promoting social justice in Hong Kong higher education contexts.

Hong Kong's Diverse Population

Hong Kong, a former colony of Britain, now a Special Administration Region (SAR) of China, is mainly Cantonese-speaking, with a population of 7.4 million. 8.4% comprised population groups generically referred to as "ethnic minorities" (EM), as listed in Table 1. EMs are people who do not share the cultural background of the dominant ethnic group in a geographical setting, or as the official census terms it: "persons of non-Chinese ethnicity" (Census and Statistics Department, 2022, p. 157). In scholarly literature, however, the term EM is contested. Carmichael (2009) argued that the term creates "polarisation of opposites into "self" and "other," in which the Chinese majority is the "non-ethnic" norm, while non-Chinese are the "ethnic" other" (p. 7). Iwasaki (2019) suggested that each society has different EM groups with different lived experiences, and the term may have different connotations in other contexts. Domestically, and more specifically than what the official census definition suggests, EM as a term is used to "address nominally working class locally born South Asian populations," which at times sidelines white, Japanese, Korean, and other non-Chinese population groups that are lesser represented in the policymaking contexts (O'Connor, 2018, p. 263). While it is important to draw attention to the contested connotations of "EM," it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine it in greater depth or attempt to resolve it. For this paper, EM is used to refer to people of non-Chinese descent unless otherwise specified.

Table 1
Number of Non-ethnic Chinese Population in 2016 and 2021 (Census and Statistics Department, 2022, p. 20)

Ethnicity	2016	2021
Filipino	184081 (31.5%)	201291 (32.5%)
Indonesian	153299 (26.2%)	142065 (22.9%)
Indian	36462 (6.2%)	42569 (6.9%)
Nepalese	25472 (4.4%)	29701 (4.8%
Pakistani	18094 (3.1%)	24385 (3.9%)
Other South Asian	4847 (0.8%)	5314 (1.7%)
Thai	10215 (1.7%)	12972 (2.1%)
Japanese	9976 (1.7%)	10291 (1.7%)
Korean	6309 (1.1%)	8700 (1.4%)
Other Asian	4847 (1.4%)	10574 (1.7%)
White	58209 (10%)	61582 (9.9%)
Mixed	65255 (11.2%)	66732 (10.8%)
Others	3731 (0.6%)	3392 (0.5%)

EM students are not highly represented in Hong Kong's higher education institutions. Following this, only 1 to 2% of "students whose ethnicity and/or spoken language at home is

not Chinese" out of the total pool of applicants received study offers from publicly funded university bachelor's degree programs from 2016/17 to 2021/22 academic years (see Table 2). This is a small figure, but a few notes of caution must be made. First, local authorities have not kept or made available the number of total EM students applying through the central admission route, known locally as the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS). No direct comparison can thus be made between the rates of EM and Chinese students who received bachelor's degree offers. Second, it is important to highlight that applicants who did not receive offers from such degree programs may qualify for post-secondary self-financed institutions (including bachelor's, associate's degree, or higher diploma programs). EM students are likely represented in these self-financed institutions, but individual institutions keep the admission figures of these and are not necessarily published in public domains. Third, in Table 2, the Legislative Council used the term "non-Chinese speaking" (NCS) students to refer to those "whose ethnicity is not Chinese and/or spoken language at home is not Chinese," which may include people who are ethnically Chinese but do not speak Chinese as their home language. NCS and EM are not synonymous, and the reasons for the differences in usage could be the subject of further research. Thus, Hong Kong has yet to develop a more robust tracking system to enable the analysis of EM students' academic progression to higher education.

Table 2
Number of Local Non-Chinese Speaking Students Admitted to Publicly Funded Bachelor Degree Programs (Legislative Council, 2022, pp. 527-528)

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Local NCS students admitted to UGC-funded undergraduate programs	210	296	313	290	371
Local (Chinese) students admitted to UGC-funded undergraduate programs	20,026	19,991	19,987	20,083	19,760

The presence of EM students in higher education has nevertheless important implications for understanding the orientation of universities towards DEI commitments. A point of departure in this task involves assessing the attitude towards the diversity (of EM populations) and actions that minimize barriers to learning opportunities (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Within its policy and education landscapes, Hong Kong lacks a framework that allows for greater appreciation of EM communities' contributions, such as multicultural policies (Kennedy, 2012). Multiculturalism, if at all exists, merely describes the co-existence of different cultural groups in Hong Kong (Law & Lee, 2012). Gao's (2024) recent study provided an indication of such co-existence in a university, where EM students formed ethnic cliques as a result of a perceived lack of empathy from their local Chinese peers. Thus, much is left to be desired about the extent to which EM students feel included in higher education learning environments (Manning & Yuen, 2023). To understand the gap between DEI commitments and practices, discussing the lack of reception towards diversity through risk-based and deficit views is necessary.

Risk-Based and Deficit Views

Supporting students to meet various learning outcomes in higher education may invariably amount to apprehensions in response to the attributes and resources they lack. As Smit (2012) observed,

> *The dominant thinking in higher education thus attempts to understand student difficulty by framing students and their families of origin as* lacking *the academic, cultural and moral resources necessary to succeed in what is presumed to be a fair and open society.* (p. 370, italics in original)

Smit's comment reflects a risk-based approach that underscores the shortcomings of young people's development. This approach gives priority to pathology and deficiency rhetoric, which views youth as a sum of their individual characteristics and personal failures rather than outcomes of entrenched institutional barriers, such as a culturally unresponsive school system (e.g., Rutter, 1995). If learners were successful in school settings, they would be recognized as intelligent; if they failed, they would be perceived as incompetent. Thus, if left unaddressed, risk-based views in the higher education setting of Hong Kong can perpetuate harmful labels that stereotype EM as lazy (Bhowmik & Kennedy, 2016).

Broadly, mainstream societies may unwittingly privilege risk-based views that cast EM as inadequate because they may not find opportunities or resources to integrate into higher education due to systematic inequalities (e.g., incompatible language requirements or environments). As observed elsewhere, EM students may socially exclude themselves or self-segregate on campuses (Goth et al., 2017; Park, 2012). In Hong Kong, the official medium of instruction in Hong Kong's tertiary education is predominantly English, except for two universities that adopt a mixed-medium policy (Cantonese and English) and programs and courses related to, for example, Chinese language and history (Shepard & Rose, 2023). Most campus activities and informal interactions are in Cantonese, especially among domestic students admitted from Chinese medium public schools. Furthermore, courses and student clubs that admit larger groups of Mainland Chinese students are in Putonghua. Given this broader language environment, most campus activities rarely attract participation among EM students who are less fluent in Cantonese (Arat & Kerelian, 2019; Equal Opportunities Commission & The Centre for Youth Research and Practice, 2020). EM students' lack of participation in university life with their Chinese peers could be a source of *deficit* views against and non-belonging experienced by EM (i.e., that they are not trying hard enough to immerse themselves; Gao & Liu, 2021).

Risk-based views tend to pay lesser regard to the multiple developmental contexts of EM students. These contexts include the need to navigate cultural norms, expectations, and values across family and education systems, which result from multiple influences of the social environment (e.g., Motti-Stefanidi, 2018). In effect, risk-based views bypass the complexity of culture and identities of individuals with ethnically diverse or immigrant backgrounds who take up different cultural practices and ways of life in different societies. For example, Filipino students in Hong Kong may identify as Filipinos yet do not always feel accepted as members of Hong Kong society because of their lack of proficiency in Cantonese (Gube & Phillipson, 2021). Risk-based views also make it convenient to justify initiatives that address the needs of these young people based solely on their needs by providing language training. If there is a mismatch between the native and mainstream cultures, EM young people are regarded as less successful, resulting in academic failure or school dropouts (Motti-Stefanidi, 2015). They can thus be on the receiving end of societal blame owing to the cultural differences that cast them as the *other* and may not be as successful as their mainstream peers. Any discussion about successful DEI in higher education can quickly become unproductive if the neglect and impasse on these inequities persist.

The preceding critique suggests that the overwhelming focus on language proficiency may risk creating an illusion to educators and administrators that language support is all EM students need to succeed academically. As prior research (Gao, 2019; Shum et al., 2016) has

consistently shown, the lack of proficiency in Cantonese is not necessarily a result of individual shortcomings or lack of willingness to learn. It is a systemic issue that prevents integration between Chinese and EM students. Dismantling structural barriers is a necessary step to promote a shift from a risk-based to a strength-based approach. This reorientation can help reframe efforts to support EM young people's success in higher education (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013).

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory provides a promising way to address the needs of minoritized students in higher education. This theory refers to bouncing back, demonstrating optimum positive outcomes, such as maintaining positive health in challenging circumstances (e.g., civil war, institutional discrimination), and empowering individuals by focusing on their strengths (Ungar, 2012). Within a sociocultural context, different systems (such as school and family) may shape youths' experiences, resulting in resilience (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). In line with this focus on different systems is the socio-ecological model of resilience (Ungar, 2012), where a person is expected to recover from severe levels of stress/adversity based on protective factors embedded in one's socio-cultural context. The socio-ecological model posits that the proximal systems (e.g., self, family, school, neighborhood, and other distal systems (e.g., sociocultural contexts, school policy) outside of the young individual may promote or inhibit resilience. Resilience theory advocates for fostering learning environments that facilitate EM youth to actively participate both in their own ethnic community and mainstream society.

To our knowledge, resilience theory has been frequently studied in different aspects of young EM people in middle or secondary (high) schools. However, in university settings, the focus tends to be on the academic aspect of resilience (Miremadi, 2013). A broader focus on resilience theory is suited for questioning institutional motivations in higher education because it frames heterogeneity as a source for organizational improvement through enhanced "knowledge base by including different people, perspectives, and backgrounds" (Duchek et al., 2020, p. 413). However, resilience theory has been criticized mostly for focusing on individual traits which cannot eliminate systemic barriers (Hart et al., 2016). We, therefore, propose to incorporate social justice into the resilience theoretical framework to promote racial equality in higher education as a system to help meet the learning needs of EM students.

Social justice-oriented resilience theory involves a shift in the understanding of promoting resilience using individual-based factors (e.g., stronger family networks). This orientation aims to promote social change to tackle barriers and social inequalities through multilevel systems (Diaz et al., 2021; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). It is a necessary step as Hong Kong moves more deeply into the DEI agenda and overcomes its neoliberal undertones in education (Manning & Yuen, 2023), providing a rationale to confront deep-seated racial inequalities that EM students might face (Chang & McLaren, 2018).

Applying Social Justice-oriented Resilience Theory in Hong Kong's Higher Education

Social justice-oriented resilience theory posits a holistic view of how young people participate in their social environment from micro (e.g., peer network), macro (e.g., education system) to chronic (e.g., the impact of the colonization period on the existing education system, influences of education reforms over time) levels. It has highlighted the ways young people participate in different dimensions of higher education, including (1) teaching, (2) administration (e.g., Turner et al., 2017), (3) on-campus activities, and (4) non-education networks. A key focus on young people's participation consistent with a social justice

perspective is the removal of systemic barriers in ways that "challenge the structures that create disadvantages in the first place" (Hart et al., 2016, p. 5). Thus, this perspective provides a foundation for on-campus activities that engage EM students to interact with their peers and staff to improve campus inclusion. This paper focuses on the latter two components of the theory, namely on-campus activities and non-education networks.

Creating Welcoming On-Campus Activities

Studies (e.g., Caruana et al., 2011) have suggested that the positive and welcoming attitudes of the majority ethnic populations are more likely to open up space for harnessing resilience among students from different cultural groups through diversity teaching and cross-cultural interaction (Denson, 2009). University clubs in higher education are essential for students to develop a sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2020), leadership skills (Lewis, 2017) , and resilience (Holdsworth et al., 2018). Yet, EM students who are less proficient in Cantonese will likely be deprived of this opportunity, as most university club activities in Hong Kong are held in Cantonese. Thus, minimizing language barriers is key to signaling a welcoming campus environment to different student groups in higher education. If university clubs (e.g., sports) can offer language support platforms or are open to admitting students with different language backgrounds (e.g., creating bilingual posters and events). In that case, EM students who are less proficient in Cantonese may have a chance to communicate with students from different cultural backgrounds, including Hong Kong Chinese and Cantonese-speaking students. They may also feel socially accepted and included by other ethnic groups, which makes them more likely to develop resilience in higher education regarding their academic output and benefit from positive mental health outcomes (e.g., Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020).

Another consideration for promoting intercultural contact through on-campus activities is the potential to raise cultural awareness. Taking the example of South and Southeast Asian families in Hong Kong, the Race Relations Unit of Hong Kong (a government unit dedicated to the promotion of racial harmony), and several university clubs regularly organize cultural festivals to promote diversity. Based on NGO reports (as cited by Arat & Kerelian, 2019), many Chinese families state that they enjoy the traditional food or clothes of their non-Chinese counterparts. These cultural events (e.g., dance, food) often aim at introducing a specific culture but rarely provide relevant insights into the cultural values of EM groups. That is, there may be limited explicit efforts to provide opportunities to learn in-depth about different cultures and for different ethnic groups to intermingle, apart from those organized for international exchange students. We propose that higher education institutions could build on these activities further to deepen relations across cultural groups. If there is an ongoing series of events, students will become familiar with different ethnic/cultural values/traditions on (e.g., in cafeterias) and out of campus (e.g., student hiking or study groups).

Based on social justice-oriented resilience theory, all individuals—regardless of their ethnic background/values—are considered unique persons who can collectively build the capacity to overcome adversities (Hart et al., 2016). This approach provides an impetus for guiding learners to work towards their own strengths and build their future careers and well-being, while reducing the barriers in their learning environment. For example, members of university clubs may be encouraged to contribute something that could benefit most of the university population (e.g., social inclusion projects). This form of contribution provides a way to appreciate cultural diversity via EM students' own cultural identity/resources where they may feel valued or respected. In this regard, higher education staff may play an instrumental role in turning the campus into a place of acceptance, which draws on the rich experiences of students from various cultural backgrounds to enhancement of learning. For instance, drawing

on intercultural contact perspectives (e.g., Campbell, 2012), collaboration between academic and administrative staff may focus not only on the provision of mainstream language training and support (e.g., Cantonese) but also on raising mutual interest in getting to know different cultures through a number of courses (e.g., courses in social sciences and education).

Leveraging Non-Education Networks

The aspect of the non-education network in resilience theory draws attention to the use of space where non-academic activities or events are carried out. We suggest rethinking how to use the canteen/cafeteria or rooftop/green areas to build safe spaces. University campuses are generally comprised of spaces such as a canteen/cafeteria, sports facilities, and green areas. This suggestion is more about creating inclusive environments for all students that extend beyond refurbishing the interiors of these spaces (Tate, 2017). These spaces highlight the importance of accepting varying opinions, being accountable for one's dialogues, freedom to opt in and out of challenging conversations, respect, and an agreement to not harm others (Ali, 2017). Putting these into action is key to harnessing academic success and a sense of belonging for all. For instance, Celeste et al. (2019) showed that a sense of belonging and resilience are interdependent and positively impacted by campus policies that actively integrate culturally diverse students. These policies and campus arrangements work at all levels. That means resilience cannot be practiced solely by one or more proximal systems (e.g., teachers, administrative staff) or other or distal systems (e.g., canteen staff, cafeteria, or social activities organized in small parks). The attention paid to the interconnection of these systems is significant because they raise questions about institutional motivations for DEI, where EM students are better positioned to feel safe, thrive academically, and develop a sense of belonging to the university.

Moreover, university policies in Hong Kong should gradually promote DEI higher education. Unlike the Western sphere, which has a largely heterogeneous population, Hong Kong has a unique cultural and historical makeup that barely draws attention to racial equity issues in education (Gube & Burkholder, 2019). Yet, for Hong Kong's longer-term development and competitiveness internationally, there is a case for DEI principles to be embedded in the existing regularity framework (Li et al., 2023). As of now, higher education in Hong Kong lacks overarching DEI policies that comprehensively address the needs of EM student populations, except The Chinese University of Hong Kong has a Diversity and Inclusion Office, scholarship schemes targeting ethnic minority groups, individual projects and initiatives run at departmental or faculty levels (e.g., DEI at veterinary medicine school of the City University of Hong Kong). While mutual integration between local and non-local students is important (University Grants Committee, 2010), going beyond celebratory aspects of diversity, e.g., international food fest and stalls, to promote cultural inclusion requires efforts that actively eliminate barriers to learning. This is to help ensure equity in student learning experience across different cultural groups of students. More empirical evidence is needed to show how higher education may potentially eliminate racism and social inequalities in policy, research, and teaching.

Conclusion

This paper has probed the complexities of embracing DEI initiatives in a higher education setting. These complexities underline the nuances of attending to *what* and *who* these initiatives attempt to address, particularly in settings where higher education administrators may have varied levels of acceptance towards DEI. A case in point is that while DEI has a more

extended history in the US, it has also faced backlash from conservative politics, which has led to funding cut threats on DEI programs (Valbrun, 2024). However, this situation is yet to be seen in Hong Kong. DEI is primarily a Western concept that deserves further translational work to receive broader support within the local community. Aside from more programmatic initiatives that bring about greater acceptance of meaningful contact among learners, more work is also needed to examine the underpinnings and impediments of DEI in Hong Kong higher education, particularly the values of stakeholders underpinning these.

Nevertheless, DEI holds importance for higher education in responding to the changing student population, which results in a widening spectrum of learning needs and engagement. The complexity of DEI, however, demands that scholars and practitioners identify a focus and priority for implementation. Determining the priority for DEI initiatives in higher education is deeply embedded in context, which primarily involves identifying the learning needs of different student populations from a variety of lenses. It also calls for understanding how the distinct values of staff and students interact with the various support systems of campuses that shape the learning and engagement of students. Our paper has focused on its implications for EM in higher education, given the increasing public attention given to this student population and Hong Kong's increasing uptake of DEI initiatives. This focus is by no means sidelining the other aspects of DEI, such as gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and so forth. Yet, regardless of the focus taken in any DEI program, it rarely departs from the goal of ensuring all students are welcomed and that they feel so.

This paper has therefore proposed a strength-based approach drawing on resilience and social justice lenses. The approach advocates for a positive focus on utilizing resources to conceptualize the long-term promotion of DEI in higher education. It is designed to support initiatives that bring about more significant appreciation for DEI and, ultimately, student well-being (Baik et al., 2019). In particular, we have examined the conceptual underpinnings of creating welcoming campus environments and the need to sustain non-education networks to promote cross-cultural interaction of different student groups as a starting point. The combined conceptual underpinnings offer a basis for addressing the intense focus of resilience theory on the individual to adapt and cope with their marginalization and exclusion (Hart et al., 2016). Adding a social justice perspective helps draw further attention to removing structural barriers for EM learners in higher education, enabled by strategic academic leadership in higher education (Gleason, 2020).

Social justice-oriented resilience theory is, however, not without limitations. First, for some individuals, personality traits (e.g., being optimistic) (Pidgeon et al., 2014) could promote resilience, not just positive environmental resources such as a supportive peer network. Further, existing studies on promoting resilience have suggested that resilience should be tracked across years (e.g., Twum-Antwi et al., 2019). A possible reason is that individuals can withdraw or improve themselves according to external conditions (e.g., perceived discrimination) or internal conditions (e.g., being pessimistic). Therefore, providing a solution based on empirical investigation may take time to measure the same sample population over time.

In many cases, it may not be very easy to tackle and measure the possible protective resources for a longer period due to feasibility issues (e.g., scarce funding resources and loss of contact among study participants). Empirical research has yet to provide evidence of how the (lack of) interaction between local Chinese and EM students contributes to or impedes the development of their resilience. For instance, a few studies have explored the meaning of canteen/cafeteria for undergraduate students and concluded that this non-educational setting provides a safe space for them to construct narratives that closely relate to their positive experiences and memories (Spiteri, 2015). Strayhorn (2019) questioned how most disadvantaged or minority groups spend time together mainly as co-ethnic peers—segregated

from the majority population in the cafeteria—which may challenge us as to whether these non-educational settings could serve as a sense of belonging or social exclusion. Rather, a question remains as to the extent to which higher education can be a site of change that cultivates "different ways of understanding, imagining, and navigating our encounters with one another in the heterogenous spaces and societies we inhabit" (Saltmarsh, 2022, p. 342).

We nevertheless hope to have begun identifying some intricacies inherent in promoting DEI in higher education in Hong Kong. Three potential lines of research arise from this paper. Further research may: (1) generate more empirical evidence of how institutions could make the best use of non-education networks where students from different cultural backgrounds are in contact regularly; (2) explore how non-educational settings (e.g., canteen, cafeteria, small parks or green areas where many students gather to spend some time or have picnics could promote resilience); and (3) investigate the possible impact of distal systems on EM students' resilience and factors contributing to its achievement. When one recognizes the niceties of the shifting cultural context of higher education, particularly the learners it seeks to support, administrators and practitioners may readily begin to consider the value of DEI work in provisioning an equitable and nurturing learning environment.

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