

Assessing Risk: Decision-Making Amidst Student Protests in Hong Kong

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Tags

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Setting

Hong Kong is a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China. It is under the "one country, two systems" arrangement with some autonomy from mainland China. In April 2019, the Extradition Bill was introduced, which triggered an ongoing series of protests and demonstrations in Hong Kong that continued through December 2019 (as of this writing). The extradition bill would subject Hong Kong residents and visitors to the jurisdiction and legal system of mainland China. Opponents of the bill were concerned the bill would undermine the region's autonomy and their civil liberties and endanger dissidents. The bill has been formally withdrawn, but protests continue with increasing violence. Due to student deaths related to the protests, violence increased dramatically in November. Protesters occupied university campuses and blocked nearby traffic. The police besieged two of the largest universities in Hong Kong. One siege lasted 12 days, with extensive damage to the university, many arrests, some hospitalizations, and a resultant school closing.

International students have been involved within and outside Hong Kong. For example, two exchange students studying at a university in Hong Kong were arrested for unlawful assembly. At the same time, international student groups have had verbal and physical conflicts at universities outside of Asia when Hong Kong pro-democracy students have held rallies and Chinese students reacted with counter-protesting.

Case

International education programs in Hong Kong want to protect their students, while also ensuring that students do not lose valuable educational opportunities. Their options include cancelling programs, relocating programs, forbidding student involvement in protests, encouraging students to study the protests and political events, and more.

Classes at the various Hong Kong universities have either been suspended, cancelled, or replaced with online lectures for the foreseeable future. Each international education office needs to decide what action to take, if any. Some Hong Kong universities have mandated that exchange students return to their home institutions. A few of the students' home institutions have mandated that the students return home due to the protests. Many of the students' parents are concerned and want them to return home. Some students have reported that their insurance provider has threatened to cancel their coverage if they do not leave Hong Kong. As a matter of safety, many universities and international education offices have warned students to stay away from protest sites and to not get involved.

The fact that the students' education has been halted is a factor in their decision-making. Many students decided to study in Hong Kong due to an interest in the politics, government, history, and sociology of the area. Engaging with the local society during these pivotal events has the potential to offer a powerful educational experience. If students leave Hong Kong and return home, in most cases, they will not complete their courses or earn credits for the semester. This will likely delay students' graduation by one semester and will require students to pay for an additional semester of tuition.

Students that have not been required to leave Hong Kong and return to their home institutions have to make a tough personal decision about whether to leave or to wait out the unrest. Whether it is because of personal safety concerns, concerns from home institutions and families, or from not receiving the quality education they sought by going to Hong Kong, students are in a dilemma.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What preparations can international education offices offer to students before and during their study abroad experience to help students during turmoil like the Hong Kong protests?
- What factors might international students studying in Hong Kong consider as they make their individual plans about staying or leaving?
- After 6 months of increasing violence, protests, and deaths, how will this affect Hong Kong institutions' international student recruitment for the following academic year? What measures can be taken to boost future enrollment numbers?
- What best practices can be implemented to assess for risk in education abroad?
- International education offices warned students to not get involved. Would there be repercussions if students decided to get involved anyway?

- International students may be concerned about their safety amid student-led protests around the world (e.g. climate change, immigration reform, or gun control protests, etc.). Does this have any correlation to the case described here? How should international educators address risk assessment and student support in these cases?