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Rise to the Challenges: Civic engagement and social integration of BN(O) Hong Kongers in the UK

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Summary Report

The aim of this study is to explore the civic and community life of Hong Kongers in the UK and to understand the challenges they face and the approaches they adopt to meet these challenges in a 'new' society. This study enables understanding about Hong Kongers and their paths towards social integration. It hopes to derive new insights in designing services beyond initial welcoming.

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Background

Since the UK government launched the BN(O) visa scheme in January 2021, more than 113,000 visa applications have been accepted so far¹. The Oxford University Migration Observatory estimated that 380,000 more would apply in 2022². With the influx of new Hong Kongers to the UK, welcoming programmes have been launched to help Hong Kongers tackle basic problems. However, beyond settling basic needs such as housing and children's schooling, positive engagement in civic and community life are essential for social integration. This study looks beyond initial welcoming and aims at exploring the civic and community engagement of Hong Kong people in the UK. It is the first of its kind and will hopefully shed light on developing new horizon of services for BN(O) Hong Kongers.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to explore the civic and community life of Hong Kongers in the UK and to understand the challenges they face and the approaches they adopt to meet these challenges in a 'new' society. This research, therefore, enables understanding about Hong Kongers and their paths towards social integration. It hopes to derive new insights in designing services beyond initial welcoming. Specific objectives of the research are as follow:

- a) To explore civic and political participation of Hong Kongers at the national level.
- b) To examine the availability of community support networks, affective ties and civic participation at the community level.
- c) To explore personal perceptions about the community and civic engagements.

Design and Method

As an exploratory study, this is the first of its kind. Respondents were Hong Kongers aged above 16 who came to the UK through BN(O) visa in the past two years or so (with a few who arrived before the scheme was formally launched). While probability sampling is not feasible at present, respondents were invited through Hong Kongers online networks and by snowballing. Data were collected through a structured online self-administered questionnaire. Informed consent was sought before data collection.

Key Findings

Profile of respondents (Chart 1)

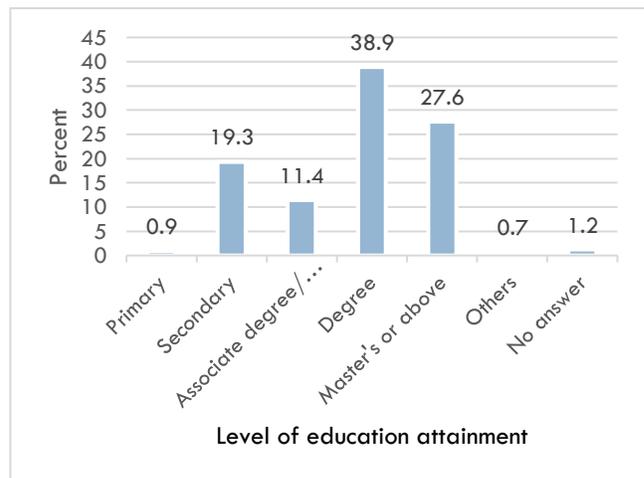
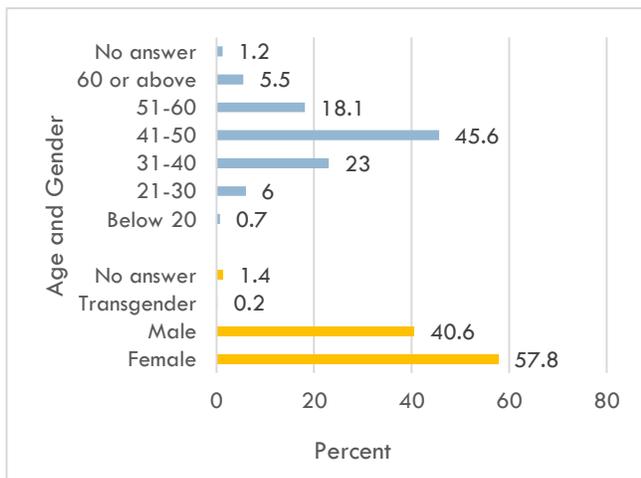
1. 586 valid questionnaires were received. Of these, more than half (57.8%) are women, 40.6% are men,

¹ All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration (n.d.) *A New Era for Welcoming: Making welcoming schemes work – for new arrivals and their communities*

² Kan, M.Y., Richards, L. & Walsh, P.W. (2021) *The migration intentions of British National (Overseas) status in Hong Kong*, Migration Observatory, The University of Oxford. Accessed from: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-migration-intentions-of-british-national-overseas-status-holders-in-hong-kong/>

- 1.2% did not answer while 0.2% are transgender. 45.6% are between the age of 41-50; another quarter (23%) 31-40, while about one fifth (18.1%) are in the age bracket of 51-60.
- 38.9% of the respondents have a university degree. More than a quarter (27.6%) have a master’s degree or a higher education attainment. About one fourth (22.5%) are in full-time employment, while around one sixth (16%) are in part-time or flexible employment. About a quarter (26.1%) have come to the UK for less than 6 months, while about another half (48.1%) have been staying here for 6 months to a year.
 - Respondents come from all parts of the UK. About a quarter (23.7%) live in Greater London. Another fifth is respectively from Birmingham and the West Midlands (21.7%) and Southeast England (21.5%). 11.9% of the respondents live in Greater Manchester.

Chart 1 Profile of respondents



Civic engagement at the national level

A. Civic awareness and civic participation (Table A1 and Chart 2)

- Almost all respondents (96.7%) are aware of their right to vote in elections.
- A great majority (81.1%) have registered as a voter. Slightly more than half (56.2%) have turned out in the local election in May this year, which is higher than that of UK 2018 local election. Election turnout is significantly higher among people with higher education attainment (71.8%) and people who had come to the UK for at least 6 months (73.7%).
- Half of the total respondents (49.7%) agreed that they “concern about British politics”, while another 15.7% strongly agreed.
- Respondents aged between 30-50 showed significantly more interest in political affairs than the other age groups.
- Only one fifth (19.3%) had actually joined or attended activities related to UK political and social agendas. Rather, majority of them (80%) seemed to keep a distance from participating in local UK politics.

6. More than half of the respondents (58.5%) revealed that they had participated in activities/events related to Hong Kong agendas.

Table A1: Voter's Registration and Election Turnout

	Yes (%)	No (%)	No answer (%)	Total
Registered as a voter	473 (80.7)	110 (18.8)	3 (0.5)	586
Voted in recent election	326 (55.6)	254 (43.3)	6 (1.0)	586
Will vote in future elections	565 (96.4)	7 (1.2)	14 (2.4)	586

Chart 2 Awareness of the right to vote

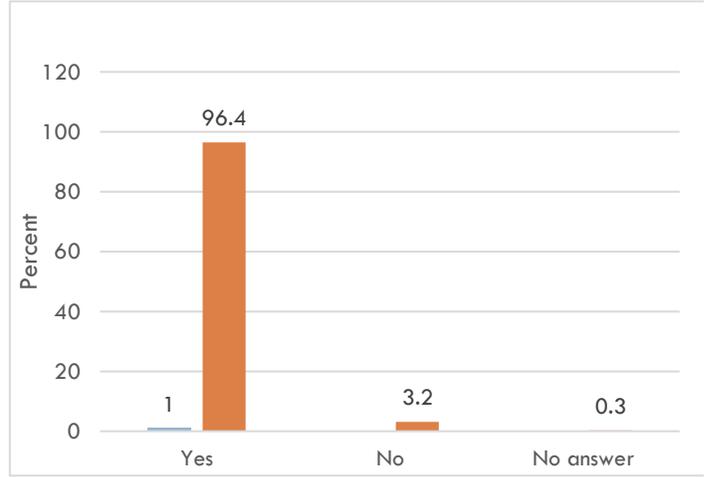
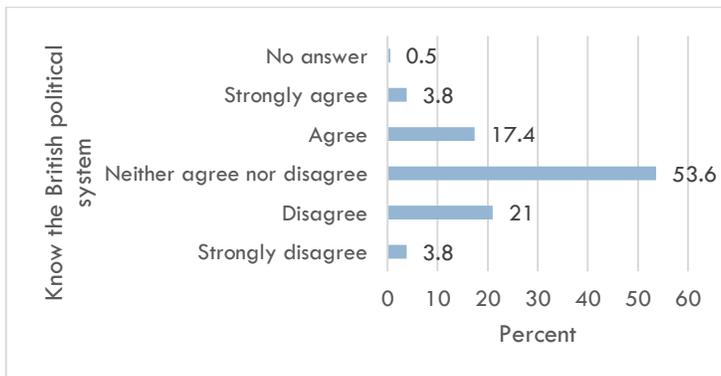


Table A2 Participation in social and political activities

	Concerning UK politics		Concerning international politics		Concerning Hong Kong politics	
	Frequencies	%	Frequencies	%	Frequencies	%
Yes	113	19.3	178	30.4	343	58.5
No	469	80	405	69.1	236	40.3
No answer	4	0.7	3	0.5	7	1.2
Total	586	100	586	100	586	100

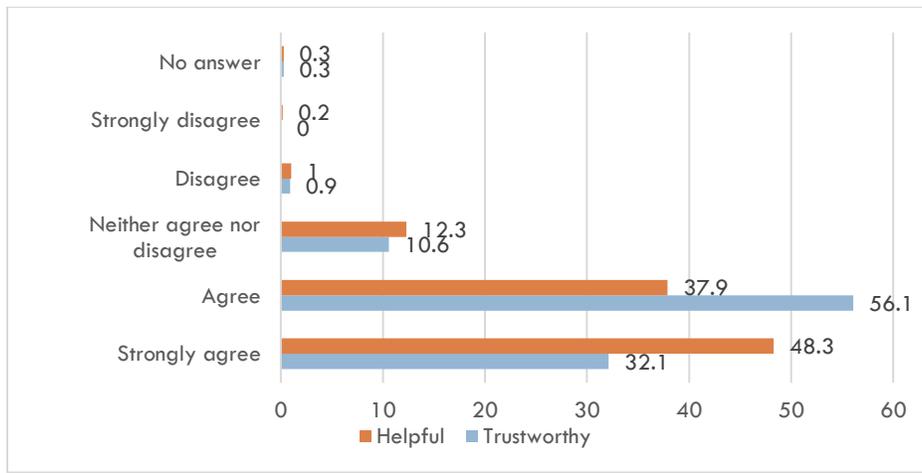
Chart 3 Know about the British political system



B. Trust in the Government (Chart 4)

- 7. 86.2% either strongly agreed (48.3%) or agreed (37.9%) that government policies are helpful for Hong Kong people. Only 1% holds an opposite view.
- 8. A vast majority (88.2%) expressed that the British government was trustworthy. trust in the British government appears to be consistently high across different age, gender, education background, whether or not they are employed, and how long they have stayed in the UK.

Chart 4 Trust in the government



Civic engagement at the community level

A. Civic engagements in the community

- 1. Very few respondents (1.2%) believed that people in the community would join hands to solve community problems. 43.2% opined that it would be rather unlikely for residents to jointly solve community problems, while 6.1% thought that it would not be unlikely at all. (Chart 5)
- 2. 59.2% thought that their opinions were valued by the local authorities, while 38.4% disagreed that their views were recognized. Perception towards the LA appears to be age-related. 66% of the 41-50 years old agreed that their views were valued by the local authorities, but in the age group of 21-30, 60% disagreed.
- 3. More than half (57.3%) thought that they were not able to influence local authorities' decisions, while about three quarters (64.8%) believed that they were not able to effect change in the community. (Chart 6)

Chart 5 Community problem solving

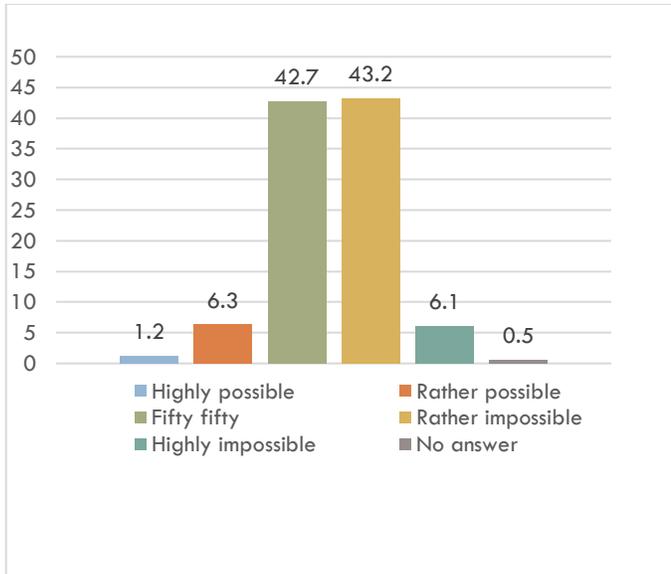
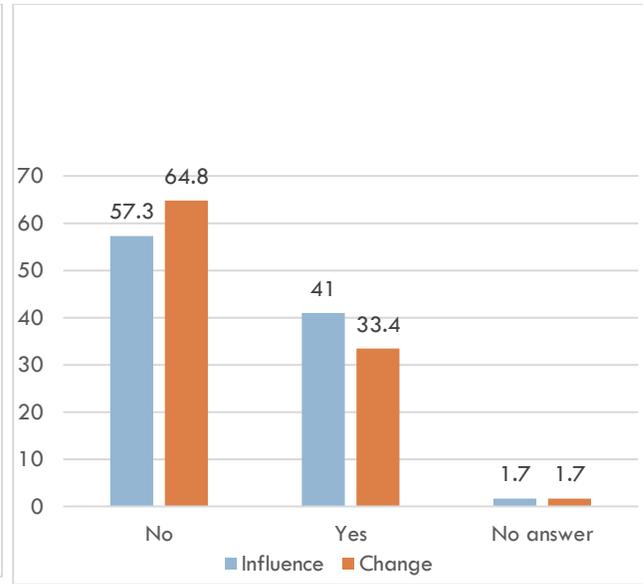


Chart 6 Influencing and changing local authority decisions



B Trust, security and sense of belonging

4. Three quarters (75.3%) felt safe to walk alone in the community at night. This reflects a general sense of security towards the community that they live. That said, however, more women than men felt unsafe, and more older people (aged 61 or above) felt unsafe than their younger counterparts.
5. More than 60% have trust in the community in which they live, in which 53.9% rather agreed while 6.3% strongly agreed. This reflects a general trust of the community. (Chart 6)
6. 41.8% had a rather strong home feeling towards their community, while another 4.9% felt it very strongly. In other words, slightly less than half of our respondents did see their community as their home, while only 14% did not have such feeling. Crosstabulation analysis shows a significant difference between people who have different length of stay. For example, only 37.3% of those who have stayed in the UK for less than 6 months had a strong home feeling, but among those who have lived in the UK for 2 years or above 50% felt strongly about it.

Chart 6 The community is trustworthy

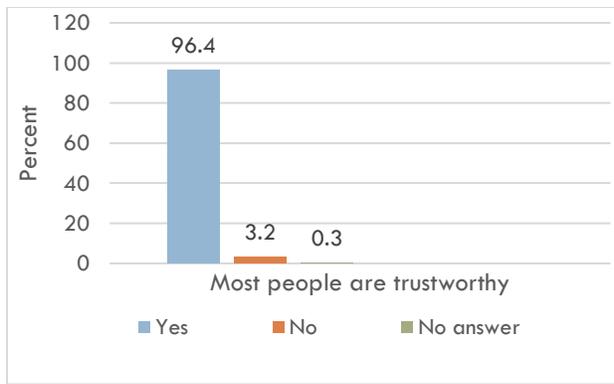
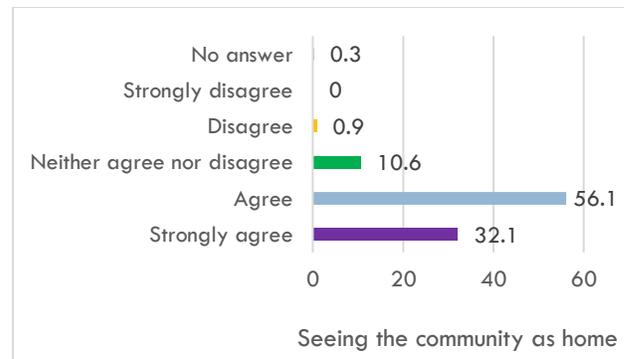


Chart 7 Seeing the community as home



C. Community support network

- 59.2% believed quite a lot that help from their neighbours would be available if such needs arose, while another 14.2% very much believed so. This is a good sign of a mutual help network and neighbourhood relationships. (Chart 8)
- 68.8% had received help from their neighbour since they arrived, while only less than a quarter (30.5%) indicated they had not. The finding here suggests that the perceived support matches quite neatly with the actual experience of people in the community, with 73.4% of perceived support against 68.8% of actual support received. (Chart 9)

Chart 8 Do you believe your neighbours will help

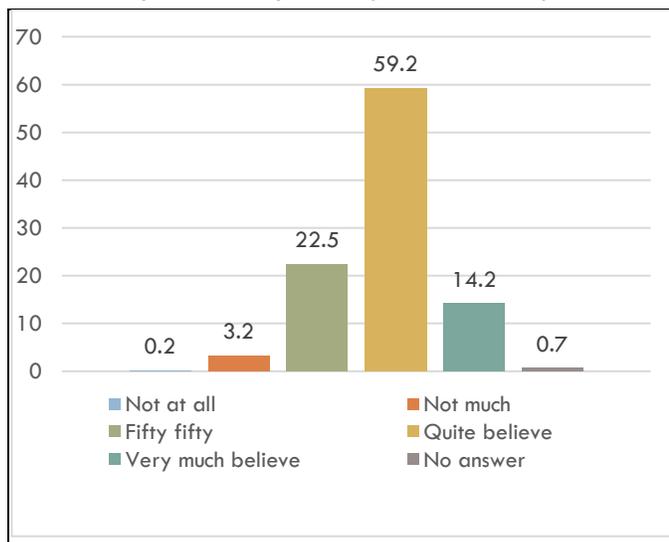
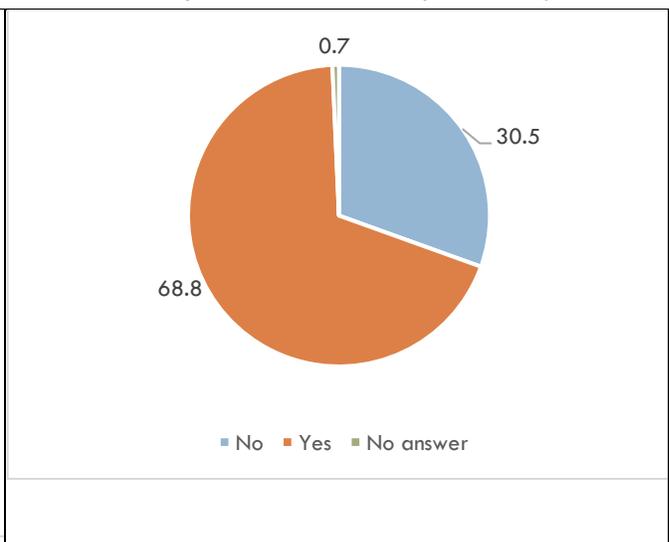


Chart 9 Have you ever received help from neighbours



- More than half (54.3%) have offered help to their neighbours, but 44.4% did not have that experience. Apparently, there are more people who received help from than those who offered help to their neighbours, and the difference is about 14%. More are on the receiving end.

10. Two thirds (65.9%) have visited or have been visited by at least one neighbour.
11. With the median number of close friends at 3, majority of the respondents do have a wide friendship network. However, we need also to pay attention to the small proportion (18.1%) who have none or have only one close friend to talk to or to seek help.
12. Despite a wide friendship network, most rely on friends in Hong Kong for support. About one third (31.4%) have their close confidants in Hong Kong. Another third (35.9%) have a combination of confidants consisting of friends in Hong Kong. Furthermore, we need also to pay attention to the small proportion (18.1%) who have none or have only one close friend to talk to or to seek help from. (Chart 10)
13. As for financial support in case of need, most also rely on friends in Hong Kong. It reflects that although BN(O) Hong Kongers appear to have quite active interactions with their neighbours, they are still relying on friends and relatives in Hong Kong for confidence and financial help. In-depth local helping networks are yet to be built. (Chart 11)

Chart 10 Who are your close friend who you can confide with

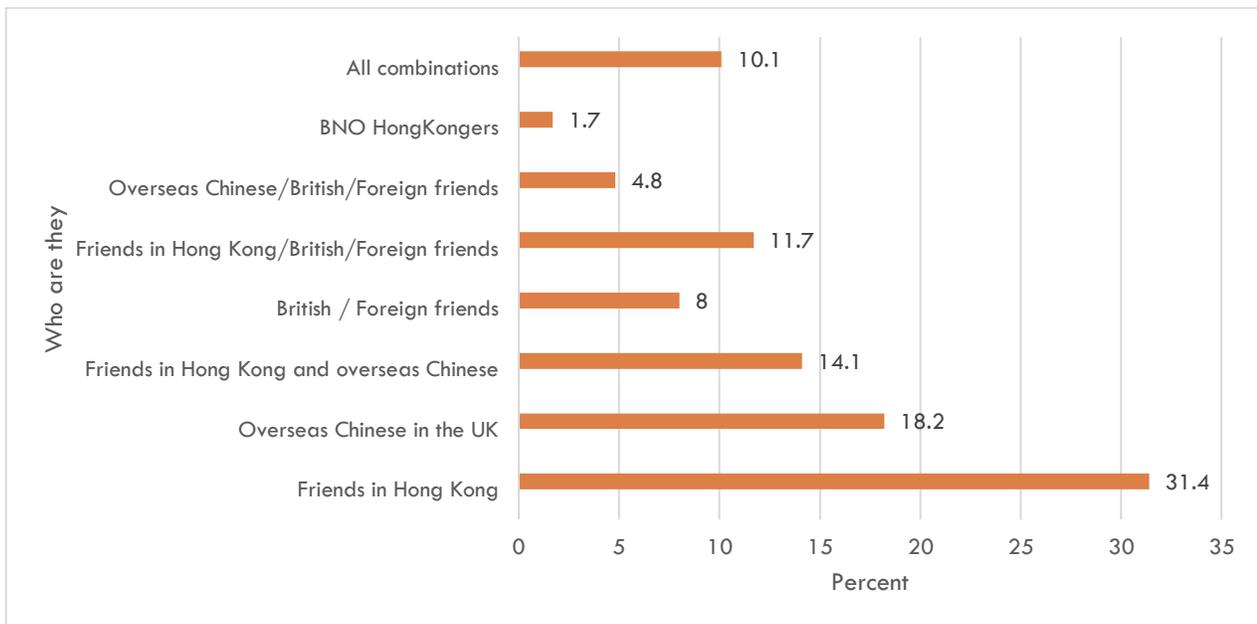
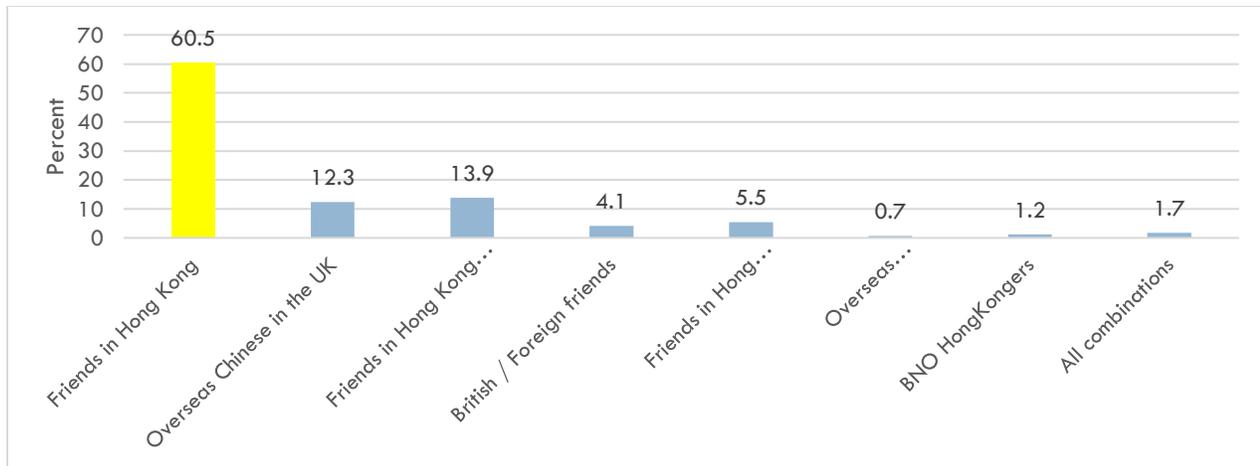


Chart 11 Who can help in times of financial needs



Civic engagement at the personal level

A. Personal participation

1. Only about one fourth (26.6%) have involved themselves as a member of a local organization since they arrived, while the majority 72.7% have not done so.
2. Two thirds (65.4%) have never served as a volunteer since they arrived.
3. A vast majority (79%) have not served any people in the community who are in illness, having a disability, or in old age.

B. Personal support networks

4. Almost 90% of our respondents have at least one person around who would offer help or support in case of need, while 77.6% have at least one close friend around who maintains frequent contact.
5. More than two thirds (71.5%) saw either a friend, a relative or a colleague at least once a week. More than a quarter (27.6%) said that they did not do so.
6. A vast majority of the respondents (93.9%) answered that they had online chats with friends after they came to live in the UK, but almost all of their online confidants (96.9%) were Hong Kongers.

C. Loneliness, discrimination and trust

7. 13.5% of the respondents never felt lonely, while 41.5% rarely had that feeling. However, still there are more than one third (36.7%) who felt lonely some of the time, while 7.3% felt often/always felt lonely. (Chart 12)

8. A great majority (85.3%) had never experienced discrimination or exclusion. However, around one eighth (13.5%) had that experience. (Chart 13)
9. 59.4% perceived that people in the society were trustworthy. 6% expressed the otherwise, while one third (33.8%) said they were not sure. (Chart 14)

Chart 12 How often do you feel lonely (Hong Kongers and England samples)

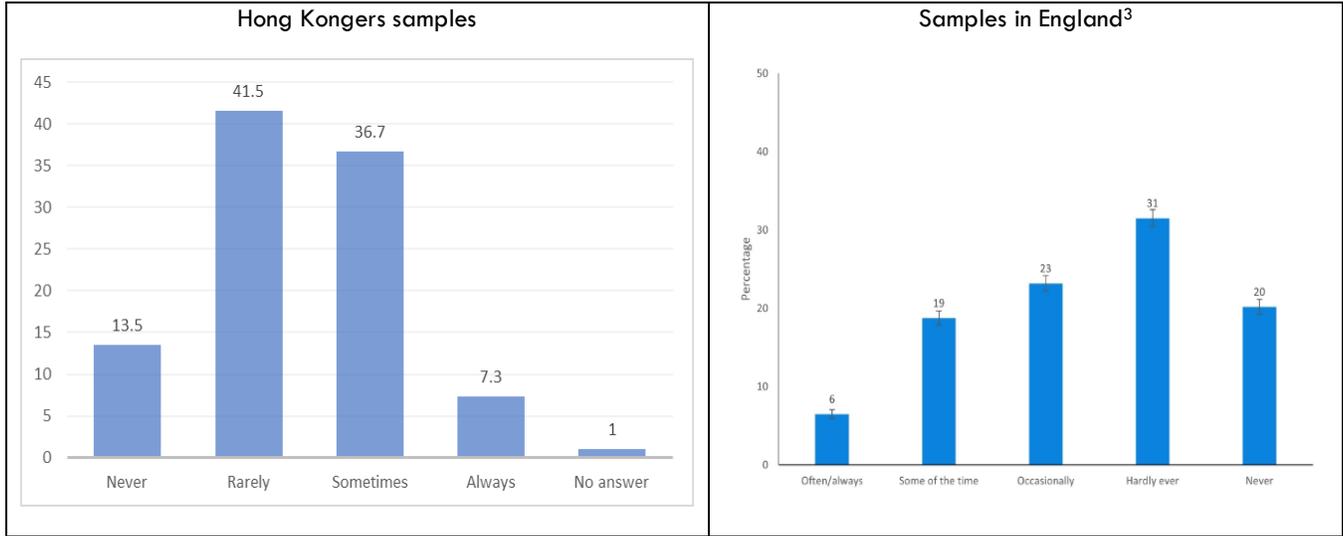


Chart 13 Experience of being discriminated or excluded

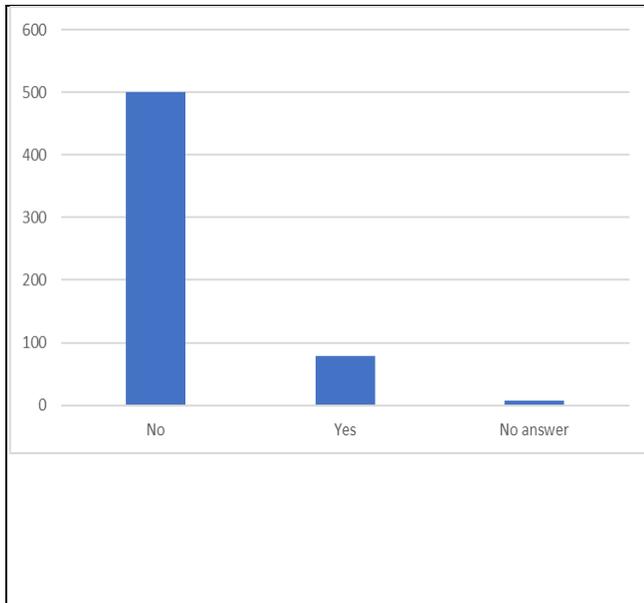
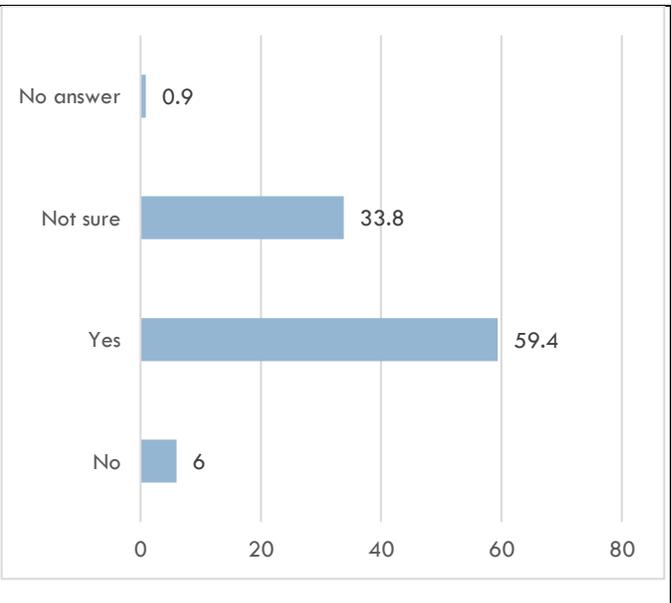


Chart 14 Are people generally trustworthy



³Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport (2021) *Official Statistics: Wellbeing and Loneliness: Community Life Survey 2020/2021*, published on 29 July 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021-wellbeing-and-loneliness/wellbeing-and-loneliness-community-life-survey-202021>

Observations and Suggestions for the Future

1. BN(O) Hong Kongers are motivated newcomers. Most of them are highly educated and are knowledgeable in their respective life worlds. Our findings suggest that most of these Hong Kongers hold positive attitudes towards the UK and have active intention to integrate in the British society. This can be reflected by the high voters' registration rate, high turnout rate in local election, and high intention to vote in future elections. In other words, motivation for active engagement and social integration is found to strong among BN(O) Hong Kongers in the UK.

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2. In addition to the positive intention for integration, our findings also suggest that most BN(O) Hong Kongers hold active trust towards the government. Most thought that UK government policies are helpful. These findings imply a successful starting point where newcomers from Hong Kong felt the friendliness of the host society and they felt being welcome. However, reading from the context of recent political changes in Hong Kong, it is not surprised that some BN(O) Hong Kongers may experience a sharp contrast between what they witnessed in Hong Kong and what they experience now in the UK. In this light, the high level of trust towards the British government may have to be read with more caution. On the one hand, it may be taken as a 'protest vote' against their previous Hong Kong experience. On the other hand, it could also imply an expectation towards the UK government. So, once the expectation failed as time goes by, there might be a possibility of diminishing enthusiasm and growing disappointment. **We consider it essential to take early actions to build upon the goodwill and positive motivation of Hong Kongers so as to consolidate trust based on deeper knowledge and actual experience of the democratic institution and democratic lives in the UK. To achieve this end, more efforts must be put in the community to broaden and deepen civic participation to enhance social integration.**

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3. Findings of our research also reveal a paradox: high voting turnout and voting intention on the one hand, and low actual participation in community affairs on the other. For example, very few people (1.2%) believed that joint action for community improvement was possible; while 64.8% believed that they were not able to effect change in the community. This is quite a difficult combination. There are several possible explanations: First, it is a cultural product manufactured by Hong Kong social policy ideology – that all community problems are personal and should be dealt with, first, by personal efforts. Therefore, it is not to suggest that BN(O) Hong Kongers are fundamentally apathetic, but it more reflects a cultural practice that is socially produced. Secondly, this paradox may reflect a narrow conception of civic responsibility where voting in democratic elections is taken as overriding importance. Thirdly, on a more practical side, Hong Kongers are newcomers. There are practical difficulties such as the unawareness of channels and know-how, and sometimes doors for participation are also not opened. **We consider enabling and empowering for actual civic participation in the community essential for successful integration. It is through actual involvement, emotionally and practically, in mutual help relationships, in community associations, community events, as well as collective actions that mutual learning takes place. Doors must be opened on both sides, but this has to be encouraged, helped, and developed. One possible starting point is to organize more mixed-ethnic group activities and mutual exchange events, for example for Hong Kong congregations to have regular joint services with local churches but without one replacing the other. All these require new efforts and mindset changes on both sides.**

Findings of our research also reveal a paradox: high voting turnout and voting intention on the one hand, and low actual participation in community affairs on the other. We consider enabling and empowering for actual civic participation in the community essential for successful integration. Doors must be opened on both sides, but this has to be encouraged, helped, and developed.

4. We also concern that more young people disbelieve in the possibility of community working together to solve community problems. Furthermore, more young people felt lonely compared to other adult groups. As argued above, social production of personal reliance can be a factor, but there may be other hidden factors unexplored. In view of the fact that we have a relatively small sample of young Hong Kongers in this study, and it is not the purpose of this study to focus on a single age group, **we consider it necessary to look deeper into the challenges of social integration faced by young Hong Kongers in a separate study.** In the meantime, we attempt to suggest a possible explanation: There is a deep sense of frustrations among young Hong Kongers towards the establishment, government authorities and the political institutions of Hong Kong. In other words, mistrust and helplessness are learnt through previous experience and are manifest in young people's attitudes in the UK. **Young people should be helped to unlearn mistrust and helplessness in the UK, and this could be achieved with youth-focused services.**

We also concern that more young people disbelieve in the possibility of community working together to solve community problems. We consider it necessary to look deeper into the challenges of social integration faced by young Hong Kongers in a separate study. Furthermore, more young people felt lonely compared to other adult groups. Young people should be helped to unlearn mistrust and helplessness in the UK, and this could be achieved with youth-focused services.

5. As far as support networks are concerned, basic social networks between neighbours do exist, but genuine and reliable support from the local community seems lacking. Majority (67.3%) relied on previous Hong Kong networks for confiding and financial aid. 18.1% had no confidant at all. **This challenge must be tackled for successful integration. We suggest that more fundings should be devoted for community organizing work with a specific aim to help Hong Kongers establish mutual support networks in the local communities. Cultural skills and knowledge beyond the provision of English language classes should be provided at the community level. Multicultural groups are to be encouraged in schools, churches and other community settings.**

Hong Kongers lack genuine and reliable support from the local communities. This challenge must be tackled for successful integration. Cultural skills and knowledge beyond the provision of English language classes should be provided at the community level. Multicultural groups are to be encouraged in schools, churches and other community settings.

6. Majority of our respondents had not experienced discrimination or exclusion in the community, schools, and the workplace. We welcome this finding, and hope this is a symbol of success of the welcoming programmes. That said, however, we remain concerned about the 13.5% of Hong Kongers who had such experience, and we also concern about the hidden aspects of discriminations and exclusion. Sometimes, feeling powerless in a new environment where one self-defines as an alien may discourage being identified as a victim. We also concern about the finding that more women had experienced being discriminated than men. **While the British people generally extend their warm welcome and friendliness to Hong Kongers, the public should also be helped to appreciate that Hong Kongers also bring with them unique personal, economic and cultural strengths. Integration education should be provided not only to the newcomers, but also to the general public so as to foster a genuine multi-cultural community.**

We concern about discrimination and exclusion, and we also concern about the hidden aspects of discrimination. While Hong Kongers felt warmth and friendliness,

the public should also be helped to appreciate that Hong Kongers also bring unique personal, economic and cultural strengths. Integration education should be provided not only to the newcomers, but also to the general public so as to foster a genuine multi-cultural community.

7. Overall, **we propose to adopt a new perspective to look at Hong Kongers as active agency** and to mobilize meaningful engagements in the community. **More in-depth and proactive organization work at the community level is imperative** for developing genuine supportive networks. **Due attention must be given to those who 'actively' mistrust the community, especially the younger groups.** **The society as a whole also have to learn to receive Hong Kongers beyond the initial welcoming stage, while mutual learning between Hong Kongers and their British counterparts must be actively fostered.**

We propose to adopt a new perspective to look at Hong Kongers as active agency and to mobilize meaningful engagements in the community. The society as a whole also have to learn to receive Hong Kongers beyond the initial welcoming stage, while mutual learning between Hong Kongers and their British counterparts must be actively fostered.

Research team members:

Sammy Chiu was former professor and adjunct professor respectively of the Hong Kong Baptist University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Kate Kwok was a town planner and has been actively engaging in supporting Hong Kongers in Britain.

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Tai Shing Lee is currently working for the Good Neighbours Church England, and was the former director of the Hong Kong CSSA Alliance.