

Article

Exploring the Interplay Among Student Identity Development, University Resources, and Social Inclusion in Higher Education: Analyzing Students as Partners Project in a Hong Kong University

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Abstract: Social inclusion is vital in teaching and learning, particularly within collaborative educational frameworks like the Students as Partners (SaP) initiative. This article delves into selected SaP projects regarding social inclusion in a Hong Kong university, focusing on understanding the complex interplay among student identity development, university resources, and social inclusion. To achieve this, the study employs a qualitative research methodology, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of students involved in the scheme. By analyzing student interview data, this article delineates the identity development process in SaP projects. Additionally, it explores aspects related to the university resources that support student partners throughout the social inclusion project implementation in the Hong Kong context. The results indicate that students are generally aware of social inclusion. Some of them developed a new identity to sustain a positive influence on social inclusion through SaP projects, along with the necessary university resources.

Keywords: students as partners; student identity development; social inclusion; Hong Kong; higher education



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1. Introduction

Advancing social inclusion as a significant social objective demonstrates a dedication to equity, diversity, and the comprehensive development of individuals. Efforts are being made to promote social inclusion across various sectors of society, including among college and university students. Students are actively promoting social inclusion via Students as Partners (SaP) projects. In these efforts, students transition from conventional learning roles to active collaborative roles, contributing their skills and knowledge to foster a more inclusive social environment. These partnerships enhance students' agency and responsibility, positioning students as active participants in their educational experience. Engagement in the SaP projects allows students to transition from passive recipients of knowledge to active co-creators, thereby taking on leadership roles in tackling significant societal challenges. This paradigm shift enhances students' academic experience and deepens their understanding of social justice and community engagement, which are crucial for promoting social inclusion. Leader Identity Development (LID) theory posits that leadership identity develops through experiential learning and social interaction, as opposed to conventional teaching methods. This theoretical perspective enables a systematic analysis of students' conceptualizations of their roles as leaders and active contributors in educational contexts. Additionally, it emphasizes the significance of mentoring, peer collaboration, and reflective

practice in identity formation, thereby deepening our comprehension of students' essential function in fostering social inclusion.

1.1. Promoting Students as Partners in Hong Kong Higher Education

Student–faculty partnership, sometimes called Students as Partners (SaP), is “a collaborative, reciprocal process” of teaching and learning whereby “all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al. 2014). Such partnership practices, involving students as major contributors to teaching, learning, and related research, sometimes described as “co-creation”, are emerging in the Asia-Pacific region. Asia presents unique opportunities and challenges for SaP due to cultural dynamics, institutional structures, and historical legacies. Though SaP is in its early stages of adoption in Hong Kong, with much of the work focusing on small-scale, localized implementations, some local researchers highlight the impacts of SaP and suggest ways to overcome barriers in the local context. For instance, the Student Consultant Program at Lingnan University in Hong Kong has been recognized as an example of SaP initiatives, fostering student–faculty collaboration through pedagogical partnerships tailored to the institution's liberal arts ethos and curriculum development (Ho 2017). Pounder et al. (2016) stated that the student consultant program connected student participants with faculty members to enhance classroom practices and encouraged student partners to provide systematic teaching observation and feedback. Based on three other local SaP projects in which students participated as co-researchers, Zou et al. (2023) found that cultural factors only affected the partnership development at the beginning of the SaP project. This implies that faculty just need different ways to engage Asian students in SaP projects. Other Hong Kong-based efforts included student-driven experiential learning initiatives that emphasize trust, autonomy, and student leadership (Lam and Tam 2022). Though some universities in Hong Kong and China have begun experimenting with SaP practices in recent years, including co-creating curricula and fostering learner–teacher partnerships, Dai et al. (2024) found that such practices are concentrated within isolated pilot programs, with limited systemic integration. It might be helpful to consider what Chng (2019) suggested for Singapore's higher education: incorporating SaP into co-curricular learning and institutional feedback loops.

Furthermore, reports from Hong Kong and Chinese universities demonstrated that SaP initiatives can enhance student motivation, build trust between students and faculty, and encourage professional growth through skills tied to collaboration and employability outcomes (Ho 2017). For example, a Hong Kong UG student researcher, Ms. Alya Prasad (2021), reflected in her article that the out-of-classroom experience as a student partner “empowered” her to see her interests and hobbies as “valuable skill sets”, which further inspired her goals and ambitions in the education industry and social contributions. While global influences intersect with local traditions, cross-cultural comparisons and adaptations of Western SaP frameworks can play a key role in shaping effective implementations across Asia (Liang and Matthews 2021).

1.2. Social Inclusion and Higher Education

Social inclusion is a complex concept that encompasses various dimensions of social groups. Demographic differences encompass socio-economic status, culture, primary language, religion, geography, gender, sexual orientation, age, health, unemployment, homelessness, and incarceration. The most limited interpretation of social inclusion emphasizes access, frequently linked to neoliberal ideologies (Mikelatou and Arvanitis 2018; van der Weele and Bredewold 2024). A fundamental perspective highlights participation,

aligning with social justice principles (Whiteford 2017). The most comprehensive interpretation views social inclusion as a form of supportive relationships, positing that individuals can actively engage and contribute to societal functions (O'Donnell et al. 2018). It seeks to enhance the participation conditions for marginalized groups by augmenting possibilities for individuals and collectives, enhancing resource accessibility, amplifying their voices, and upholding their rights (Mirzoev et al. 2022). This nested model offers a framework for analyzing the complexity of social inclusion across various contexts and populations (Gidley et al. 2010).

Broadening the criteria for participation in higher education is a method to tackle the challenge of social inclusion (Whiteford 2017). Higher education offers significant benefits, including personal development, improved social status, expanded career prospects, and increased lifetime earnings. Consequently, fostering the participation of marginalized groups in higher education is vital for marginalized groups' long-term social and economic integration (James 2014). This integration not only enhances individual opportunities but also contributes to a more equitable society. By addressing barriers to access and promoting inclusive practices, higher education institutions can play a crucial role in empowering underrepresented populations, ultimately leading to broader societal benefits such as reduced inequality and enhanced social cohesion. The instrumental aim of higher education states that including marginalized groups in the educational process not only changes their life paths but also enhances the learning environment by promoting a variety of viewpoints and creative ideas that are advantageous to all parties involved (Kromydas 2017). Thus, prioritizing inclusivity in higher education is essential for creating a more just and prosperous society.

Furthermore, Barnett (2017) pointed out that the scholarship of higher education needs an adequate *philosophy of higher education* as a guide to broaden the conceptual horizon by identifying universal and innovative concepts. It is not only to understand the university but “to change it” (p. 78). In this sense, co-creation in higher education with students is an innovative collaboration that allows us to integrate a key social value—social inclusion—into our daily practices and expand it to a wider context beyond the university.

However, research studies discussing resources in the Hong Kong context that support SaP projects for social inclusion are scarce. Concerning the Agency of University Student (AUS) resources framework, which encompasses resources in Individual, Relational, and Contextual dimensions (Jääskelä et al. 2017), this article aims to identify any university resources (contextual dimension) that student partners would need to support them in working towards social inclusion through SaP projects.

1.3. Student Identity in SaP Projects and the Leader Identity Development (LID) Theory

Student identity refers to the evolving self-conception of individuals as learners, influenced by their experiences and interactions within the educational setting, and the extent to which they internalize the role of a student as a central aspect of their identity (Field and Morgan-Klein 2010). How a student develops his/her own identity is shaped by personal experiences and self-perceptions (Carter 2017) as well as by school and community (Kogan 2000). In SaP projects, student partners are unique and transformative identities. This is because student partners are generally empowered (Cook-Sather et al. 2018) and possess a change agency (Healey and Healey 2017), thereby altering the roles of compliance traditionally assigned to them in educational settings. This new position, which is characterized by power and agency, enables students to transition from passive participants to active learners. It also facilitates students to shift from being directed to taking on leadership roles in teaching and learning with educators. Students take the roles of both learners and

leaders in teaching and learning. Consequently, the development of student identity in SaP projects concurrently entails the building of leader identity.

Student identity and leadership identity are deeply intertwined in collaborative contexts, where shared experiences and relational dynamics create opportunities for identity formation and growth. In student collaboration, such as through frameworks like SaP, individuals engage as co-creators alongside peers, staff, or faculty, shifting traditional hierarchical boundaries and fostering a sense of collective agency (Dianati and Oberhollenzer 2020). Leadership identity in these settings often emerges through the alignment of individual contributions with the broader goals of the group, supported by reflective processes that allow students to integrate collaborative experiences into their evolving self-concept (Orsini et al. 2024). Social validation from peers and mentors further reinforces this trajectory, with collaborative environments providing continual feedback that strengthens leadership self-efficacy (Dianati and Oberhollenzer 2020). Moreover, collaboration challenges students to redefine leadership away from positional or hierarchical notions, promoting a relational understanding of leadership as the ability to facilitate shared influence and distributed responsibility (Komives et al. 2005). These experiences not only shape the internalization of leadership identity but also intersect with broader dimensions of student identity, as factors like gender, race, and socio-economic background influence how students navigate leadership roles within collaborative frameworks (Orsini and Sunderman 2024). By creating spaces where students feel empowered to collaborate and lead, these partnerships cultivate identities that are simultaneously individual and collective, contributing to holistic personal and leadership development.

The Leader Identity Development (LID) theory (Komives et al. 2005) is often referenced in the literature to clarify the transformative process students undergo during their educational experiences, particularly in higher education contexts (Arendale 2021). It emphasizes how students internally conceptualize their identity as leaders, whether in formal positions or informally within a group. Komives et al. (2005) asserted that leader identity cannot be imparted through direct instruction; instead, it develops through interactions with others. In the LID theory, four sources of factors accelerated the development of leader identity: (a) influences from esteemed mentors, (b) engagement with peers, (c) meaningful involvement in activities or school projects, and (d) reflection by the student over their interactions with others and the task itself. According to Komives et al. (2005), mentorship is an influential factor. Individuals initially identify role models who shape their perceptions. They follow mentors from whom they obtain guidance and practice (co-)leading roles with mentors. Sometimes, mentors assume the roles of meaning-makers, or even companions, who assist in affirming an individual's leadership identity. Similarly, in engagement with peers in activities, individuals could observe how a peer influences others when establishing a specific culture or working dynamics in groups. That nurtures self-awareness and the acquisition of new competencies. Finally, reflection enables individuals to have meaningful and purposeful conversations with others to identify their passions and commitment to self-evaluation and self-directed learning for better leadership skills.

With the above-mentioned factors identified, Komives et al. (2006) proposed an LID model, including six transformation stages (Awareness, Exploration/Engagement, Leader Identification, Leadership Differentiation, Generativity, and Integration/Synthesis). It signifies an ongoing evolution of leadership identity. Stages 1 and 2 transpire during childhood and adolescence. Stage 1 is an awareness phase, during which students identify role models, including family members, educators, and other community figures in childhood. Stage 2 is the exploration and engagement phase, typically occurring throughout middle or high school. Students engage in activities and interact with individuals, including schools, sporting events, and various community organizations. Individuals may be elected, appointed,

or acknowledged for formal or informal roles and duties, including team leaders, athletic team captains, elected presidents of school groups, active participants in class discussions or projects, or mentors to younger family members. Stages 3 to 6 often transpire during post-secondary education. In stage 3, the leader identification phase, students become team leaders although they might or might not undertake shared leadership responsibilities for the group. Stage 4 represents the leadership differentiation phase, wherein leaders endeavor to persuade others instead of issuing commands. They discuss and delegate authority to enable others to assist in tasks. Stage 5 is the generative leadership phase, in which leaders not only distribute power but also actively foster leadership and initiative among team members. They nurture the forthcoming generation of leaders in the team and empower individuals to recognize their own leadership identity. Stage 6 is the stage of integration, wherein team leaders collaborate with other teams to attain shared objectives, such as forming alliances with other units in the department, student organizations, or external advocacy groups while emphasizing the influence and promotion of individuals into formal or informal leadership positions (Komives et al. 2006). Komives et al. (2006) asserted that the entire process is ongoing and interconnected, while, simultaneously, development is intricate and influenced by numerous elements.

According to Cook-Sather et al. (2021), owing to their liminal status, student partners are perpetually translating themselves. In Hong Kong, student partners frequently serve as language and cultural interpreters for their peers. They serve, in numerous respects, as ‘native informers’; nonetheless, their endeavors equip them for transitional phases (to employment, between positions, to postgraduate education) since they may use a diverse array of transferable talents. Moreover, the profound influence of Confucian culture mandates the veneration of educators and the teaching profession, emphasizes humility and kindness, and promotes the early instillation of respect, focus, and obedience in students. This establishes a power disparity between educators and learners, wherein educators wield decision-making authority while learners stay passive and compliant within a rigid academic setting in Asia (Kaur et al. 2019; Liang and Matthews 2021). This cultural context presents an obstacle to the adoption of student-centered SaP in most Asian institutions. However, Zou et al. (2023), a cohort of scholars from Hong Kong, found no substantial impact of Confucian background on three SaP programs at the University of Hong Kong. Instead, they posited that cultural influences, including respect for and obedience to authority, may affect student–staff interaction in the initial state. They argue that students just cannot “immediately assume the role of a partner” at the project’s inception. It is suggested that the development of student identity and the acknowledgment of their obligations necessitate a specific procedure and ongoing exploration for fulfillment.

Though the development of their identity is complicated, there are some similarities between leader and partner identity development when students participate in SaP projects on social inclusion. This work aimed to explore to what extent the LID could explain how students’ partner identities evolve or develop in social inclusion SaP projects.

1.4. Research Objectives and Questions

The work aimed to investigate how students’ identities evolve as they transition from traditional learners to active partners in the context of SaP projects for social inclusion. It sought to analyze this development through the lens of the Leader Identity Development (LID) theory, which provides a framework for understanding the stages of identity evolution. Another objective was to identify the university resources that are vital to supporting student partners in their efforts to promote social inclusion. The research questions were:

1. To what extent could the LID theory explain how student identity development occurs in SaP projects?

2. What university resources are essential in supporting student partners to contribute to social inclusion through SaP projects effectively?

In summary, this study contributes to the existing literature gap by shedding light on the interplay among student identity development, university resources, and social inclusion in SaP projects in Hong Kong higher education. It acknowledges the limitation of generalizability to other educational settings. However, the insights gained from this study can still offer valuable implications for wider Asian contexts, highlighting potential strategies to address power dynamics, biases, and structural barriers that impact social inclusion.

2. Methods

2.1. Context

Since Professor Mick Healey visited Hong Kong universities to promote SaP in December 2018, relevant concepts such as students as change agents, co-constructors, and co-designers have gained significant attention among faculty members in Hong Kong. The positive impacts of SaP on learning and teaching are generally well recognized by local universities. Although there may be some concerns about power relationships in the East-ern cultural context (Kaur et al. 2019), most Hong Kong universities have shown support for SaP practices. In many local institutions, the instructions for teaching development grant applications have been amended to create opportunities for faculty members to integrate SaP into their proposals. Undergraduates are welcome to join as co-investigators (Co-Is) or other collaborating roles in university-funded teaching and learning projects. This positive change is supported by the senior management.

A year prior to Professor Healey's visit, the Hong Kong Branch of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA HK) launched the Redesigning Student Learning Experience in Higher Education (RSLEIHE) scheme. This notable inter-institutional initiative, which has been in operation since 2017, focuses on enhancing co-creation and fostering student partnerships in the realms of teaching and learning, marking a significant step towards developing student-centered educational practices in higher education.

The scheme is supported by 10 local universities, including the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the City University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Baptist University, the Education University of Hong Kong, the Lingnan University, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, the University of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Metropolitan University, and the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education. This scheme requires the participation of a minimum of two university students and one academic or professional staff member on each team. The scheme calls the students and educators to co-design evidence-based projects reflecting their needs, ideas, and perspectives on optimal arrangements of university education processes while offering them guidance and training. Aside from the SaP project implementation, the scheme includes an award, a symposium, and a publication highlighting the results of the projects. The award comprises three distinguished awards and 3–6 merit awards in each round, emphasizing a dedication to acknowledging excellence. The scheme was organized every two years; it has facilitated over 50 SaP projects, engaged about 700 participants in symposia, and resulted in the production of four online publications since 2017.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning, the RSLEIHE scheme in 2021 became an experiment platform that fosters active student participation and empowerment in teaching and learning opportunities to ease the rapid transition to online and hybrid learning as well as the exploration of the innovative application of technologies in education. In recent years, the RSLEIHE scheme began to encourage co-creation projects to address

emerging challenges to universal values (such as social inclusion). Many SaP projects were then encouraged to address relevant topics, such as healthcare inequity, intercultural understanding, sustainability education/action, community engagement, financial literacy for the public, etc.

2.2. Sample and Data Analysis

This study adopted the qualitative method research design to answer the research questions, focusing on students' identity development in SaP projects. It employed an interpretive perspective, positing that the significance of a phenomenon is contingent upon the respondents' viewpoints (Creswell 2006). In-depth discussions with participants yielded valuable insights into students' opinions of their identity formation in SaP projects. Interviewees were recruited through mass emails at a Hong Kong university. A purposive sampling method (Campbell et al. 2020) was adopted with selection criteria, including student partnership, social inclusion-related projects, and full-time UG/PG students. Using the university's wide network, the recruitment approach sought to guarantee a varied representation of students with diverse discipline backgrounds engaged in social inclusion projects. A total of 17 student participants at a Hong Kong University accepted the invitation. A total of 14 interviews were arranged. Eleven of them were individual interviews. The other three were arranged as focus groups (two students) to allow participants in the same project teams to discuss their experiences. Table 1 provides a summary of the interviewees' backgrounds. Forty-seven percent of the samples were male ($N = 8$). Eight were Hong Kong locals, while the others were overseas students. The majority were undergraduates, with only one individual being a doctoral student. Participants represented a range of disciplines, covering most of the faculties

Table 1. Summary of interviewees.

Background			Background		
		N			N
Gender	Female	9	Discipline	Arts	1
	Male	8		Economics and Finance	3
Place of origin	Local (Hong Kong)	8		Education	1
	Non-local	9		Engineering	4
Degree	Undergraduate	16		Global Management	4
	Postgraduate	1		Medicine	1
				Science	1
				Social Sciences and Laws	1
				Technology	1

The research data were mostly derived from student interview data, supplemented by project reports or official website information provided by the interviewees. This served to validate student experience in the projects. Prior to data collection, 17 students accepted our invitation and provided written consent to take part in interviews conducted via Zoom or in person, with the interviews being audio recorded.

Interview questions concerned the participants' identity development in the SaP projects, the social inclusion dimensions of their initiative, and the resources they perceived as necessary from the university for the projects' success. Each interview lasted for roughly 30 to 40 min. Any personally identifiable information was eradicated during the transcription and analysis of the data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate students in articulating their thoughts and emotions about the events candidly. The interview questions were open-ended to enable interviewees to articulate and elucidate their responses. Example inquiries encompassed the following: What roles are you assuming in this project? In what manner does this identity enhance your overall experience and

involvement in the project? How does your project facilitate social inclusion, enabling people from a variety of backgrounds and capacities to engage actively? Have you faced any obstacles or difficulties concerning social inclusion in your project? How may these impediments be addressed or minimized with the assistance of university resources? Interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were transcribed exactly as presented in the original text. Interviews were examined according to the participants' individual contributions, positions, and perceptions of partnership and social inclusion initiatives.

Narrative analysis was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' experiences and identity development process as it often effectively illustrates human existence as situated action, with activities characterized as purposeful participation in the world (Polkinghorne 1995). It also offers information about the storyteller and their inner world while also providing important insights into their identity, motivations, and emotions (Pope and Mays 2005). For investigator triangulation, two investigators were involved in data analysis and perused the transcripts from interviewees multiple times to familiarize themselves with the data, enhancing the depth and breadth of the findings, as well as minimizing any bias in the data interpretation (Carter et al. 2014).

In summary, investigator triangulation (two investigators involved in the coding and theme identification) and data triangulation (multiple sources of data including interviews, project websites, and reports) were employed to reduce biases and to ensure the validity of the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

3. Results

3.1. Student Identity Development in SaP Projects

Overall, the student interview data revealed a systematic progression of identity that participants underwent during their involvement in SaP projects. As the project progressed, they explored and defined their identities. Drawing on all six stages of the LID model (i.e., Awareness, Exploration/Engagement, Leader Identification, Leadership Differentiation, Generativity, and Integration), our analysis illustrated how student partner identity development unfolded in six stages: Awareness, Exploration/Engagement, Identification, Differentiation, Generativity, and Integration.

Students progressively transitioned from "helpers" to "peer leaders" or "partners" in their teams. "Peer leaders" and "partners" were characterized with (self-)defined power, responsibilities (such as making decisions, defining missions, seeking sponsorship), and roles (such as promoting, recruiting, and training new members). Some of them eventually found ways to sustain project impacts by extending the practice to a new project setting (a wider context). This process of identity transformation was shaped and influenced by various factors. First, mentorship or guiding support provided by university staff or faculty was instrumental in fostering student confidence, skills/knowledge development, and leadership potential. Second, engagement and collaboration with peers facilitated the development of students' role recognition and sense of responsibility within the team. Finally, the supporting resources and environment in the university, such as funding/financial support, facilities (laboratory), administration support, academic support, etc., significantly contributed to students' growth and development. The students' sense of growth and responsibility was exercised and strengthened in this process, enhancing their ability to adapt to challenges and assume higher-level responsibilities.

3.1.1. Awareness Stage

Before joining the SaP projects, students possessed a degree of Awareness before their commitment to participation. In this stage of students' identity development outside Student as Partner (SaP) projects, individuals began to recognize SaP as a distinct concept,

albeit without a personal connection or identification with it. They viewed SaP projects as something that others engage in, often observing peers or people who are in formal roles, such as teachers or authority figures, without relating these dynamics to their potential. Apart from intrinsic motivation (e.g., personal interest and prior experience), some students were drawn to the SaP by senior peers, for example, in orientation meetings. Interviewee 7 stated that an influential person “was my senior called Lawrence, he was the previous department head (team lead)”. He continued to elaborate on what he observed from his senior peer: “I saw a framework to build upon and live up to in terms of what I’m expected to do as a partner . . . which I think was a big part of why I picked up on this role”. Interviewee 17 also stated that a professor in her department who is a leader in the SaP project introduced her to SaP and influenced her to participate in the project.

3.1.2. Exploration/Engagement Stage

In the Exploration/Engagement stage, individuals actively immersed themselves in collaborative activities and began to explore their potential roles as partners in the educational process. During this phase, students engaged in tasks related to their interests, often motivated by curiosity or a desire to contribute meaningfully to their projects and sometimes collaborating with peers. For instance, Interviewee 1 stated, “I’m interested in communication (industry) and my friends were also interested”. She participated with a friend in a global consultant project in which she joined as a student consultant for social policy and offered Asian students’ perspectives.

While students were beginning to engage more actively, they still viewed their roles as tied to specific tasks or positions within the project. Many participants perceived themselves as “juniors”, anticipating guidance and supervision from more experienced peers, which reflects a limited sense of autonomy. As Interviewee 8 articulated, “. . . when I entered the program initially in the publicity department (a sub-team for promoting a UG program), I was expecting like a subordinate to a superior. . . maybe someone would assign (me) a specific task to do”. A few students admitted a lack of confidence in pursuing project goals and opted to seek external assistance, as Interviewee 16 stated, “During the initial stages of the project, we sought guidance from a few professors to explore...”.

Through this stage, students accumulated positive personal experiences and decided to move forward. Interviewee 16 noted that he was responsible for knowledge exchange in a project in his first year of study before joining the SaP project. “After finishing the project, I realized the influence I had on people and how I contributed to a larger project that would be seen worldwide. This improved my sense of responsibility and how I presented myself”, he further explained.

3.1.3. Identification Stage

In the Identification stage, individuals began to recognize and embrace their roles as active partners in the SaP projects. At this stage, students started to see their engagement as integral to the collaborative efforts of the group, focusing on the responsibilities associated with the partnership. They perceived their contributions as essential to the success of the projects, reinforcing their identity as engaged participants. As engagement increases, they progressively participate in co-creation, co-design, and decision-making. Such involvement led to the recognition of their capabilities and the development of self-confidence. For instance, Interviewee 1 felt “a sense of achievement” after completing a global consultation project, in which much research on social equality policies in different cities was done. On the other hand, Interviewee 2 also stated that she received many chances to make small decisions (e.g., choosing social media platforms, inviting NGOs or people for collaboration) in the weekly meetings with the teachers and faculty representatives. She elaborated that

“... so I feel like I have equal status with the school (faculty)...” at the moment when teachers invited her for ideas and direction.

Students noted a growing sense of responsibility through collaboration with peers in the SaP projects in this stage. Interviewee 11 stated that enhancements result from peer guidance and collaboration, the availability of educational materials and resources offered by the faculty to students. Apart from the resources or materials, such support should also include the trust and appreciation demonstrated by staff and teachers and the autonomy granted. Interviewee 13 stated, “I think the sole reason why a staff member would approach you is that they trust you enough that you have the potential ... you are responsible, and they know you can bring something valuable”. Interviewee 12 supported this and further elaborated on autonomy, “I think it’s the freedom that the professor gave me to work independently. He didn’t interfere much in team issues or the decisions I made”. Interviewee 14, who worked on the ArtPEACE project for marginalized communities and art production, also felt that she was supported by university staff: “they encourage us to lead, ... they will check our updates, whether we feel okay and whether we need any help, we can ask them any questions. They will give us immediate feedback, and also, they will remind us about certain schedules and deadlines”.

3.1.4. Differentiation Stage

The Differentiation stage followed when students threw themselves into SaP projects. In this noticeable stage, students would assume various responsibilities and duties gradually. They began to recognize that student partnership is a collective process shaped through collaboration, inclusivity, and shared goals, rather than a fixed position held by a single person. Their understanding of identities in the activities was clearer, and they possessed a more precise definition of responsibilities, including (co-)creators, researchers, advocates, or leaders. Interviewee 4 reflected that she felt like “a teacher, a pacifier, an investigator, a speaker... I felt like I had to take on a lot of different roles, like an organizer. I had to make sure that, because our team leader was not very active... I had to convince and pacify the disagreements between the members of the group”. Interviewee 4 felt tired of such a dynamic situation but another student, Interviewee 6, felt “included” when another team reached him for consulting. He enjoyed working together to find solutions and noted that “any situation where I can collaborate with others and have a say in the project’s direction would give me a sense of partnership and involvement”. At this stage, the nature of partnership matured, expanding beyond formal and fixed roles to encompass various leadership behaviors exhibited within teams. They came to understand that anyone can participate in SaP at any given time, reinforcing the idea that effective partnership relies on shared responsibility and mutual support.

Moreover, students experienced different responsibilities, either proactively or by being invited or requested. They explored roles and eventually chose or settled on some identities that were essential to the project. Some identities might be enjoyable, but others are not necessary, for example, “co-creator” for Interviewee 6 as he enjoyed solving problems with others, while Interviewee 4 might view herself as a “conflict resolver” because the team relied on her mediator leadership when conflicts happened in the team.

3.1.5. Generativity Stage

As SaP projects advanced, students’ identity development progressed into the Generativity stage. At this stage, students recognized the constraints and limitations of their abilities and transcended to a greater cause. They began to focus on nurturing and mentoring others, emphasizing the importance of developing leadership potential within their peers. At this stage, partnership was perceived as a shared responsibility that fosters

community contributions and collective success, rather than a singular achievement. The emphasis shifted from individual accomplishments to the broader dynamics of partnership, where the focus is on “us” as a contributing group rather than “me” as a student partner. Efforts were made to “produce” more partnership, going beyond the current partnership, for example, to share values or visions to invite more participants or encourage junior associates to get more involved in the partnership. Interviewee 9 stated, “So I get more familiar with that, and as I move on and new freshmen come in, I helped them become partners as well”. Interviewee 7 stated, “I focused on more of the student recruitment side of things as well as program development to promote social inclusion in Hong Kong (beyond the university)”.

3.1.6. Integration Stage

When student partners eventually considered how to sustain the SaP projects in a wider context, students’ identities would further develop in the Integration stage. In this stage, they began to fully integrate student partners into their identities, viewing it as an intrinsic part of who they are rather than merely a role they assume in specific contexts. At this stage, leadership behaviors and values aligned seamlessly with their belief systems, allowing them to enact leadership authentically and consistently across all aspects of their lives—personal, professional, and social. External networks were pursued, as illustrated by Interviewee 12, who acknowledged the advantages of funding and external relations for the SaP project, stating, “I focused on finding sponsorships and doing public relations work for the team. . . while developing training for new team members”. Students developed a strong sense of ownership of the project and somehow demonstrated a worry about the project’s sustainability. They would seek external resources such as financial support beyond the faculty or university. This helped create opportunities to expand networks and look for collaboration with and potential impacts on wider communities. In the ArtPEACE project, for example, though the original teaching content was arts subjects, Interviewee 14 and other student partners sustained the SaP project by “co-designing a STEM curriculum for refugee students in Thailand”. Though they changed the teaching topics from arts to STEM (programming, website design, 3D models building), they insisted on the project principles and missions to support the marginalized groups. The Integration stage referred to the process of embedding sustainable practices and principles into the core strategies, operations, and culture of an organization. It involved aligning the project’s goals and activities with sustainability objectives to create positive environmental, social, and economic impacts. The integration process necessitated teachers and student partners to stay informed about global trends, external threats, resources, and opportunities, and to be reflective, innovative, and agile in their responses. Additionally, in the realm of identity, student partners must also adapt to a self-paced environment.

The findings from the student interviews suggested that students had a comprehensive understanding of social inclusion and were willing to promote relevant values (equality, justice, policy) through student activities. Some considered themselves advocates for good practices for social inclusion, such as reinforcing anti-discrimination laws for working women or minorities (The Access to Justice Fellowship), enhancing education opportunities for refugees (ArtPEACE), promoting awareness of medical inequality (Promoting Awareness of Healthcare Inequality and Cultivating Empathy), reviewing/revising social policies (Global Consultants), etc. For example, Interviewee 2 had a deep awakening to women-related issues and intended to fight for women’s rights via her efforts. She reflected,

“... as a female, I do understand that a working female could be facing discrimination. I’m foreseeing that I’m trying to fight for the rights of women. . . What we can do to do the best for them? For example, launching social media posts

might not be that impactful. I would explore if any other alternatives could make a great impact in Hong Kong”.

Based on the findings in student interviews, Table 2 below summarizes a list of identities that students would develop at different stages.

Table 2. Student identity identified at different stages.

Awareness	Exploration/ Engagement	Identification	Differentiation	Generativity	Integration
Helpers Assistants	Followers Volunteers	Communicators Consultants Promoters	Designers Researchers Investigators Facilitators Tutors Mediators	Trainers Managers Mentors Leaders	Advocates Partners Social Entrepreneurs

3.2. University Resources That Students Required for Social Inclusion Projects

The projects analyzed in this study (such as ArtPEACE, The Access to Justice Fellowship, Promoting Awareness of Healthcare Inequality and Cultivating Empathy, Peer Support & Empowerment, Global Consultants, STEM education, etc.) exhibited substantial awareness of diverse global issues related to social inclusion. For instance, ArtPEACE’s “Works in Progress” online theatre production exemplified a commitment to social inclusion by leveraging the transformative power of art to address sensitive issues and promote advocacy for marginalized communities. The Access to Justice Fellowship aimed to enhance social inclusion by addressing systemic barriers to justice that disproportionately affect underserved and grassroots communities in Hong Kong. By promoting partnerships in public interest law and increasing the legal capacity of NGOs, this project played a pivotal role in fostering equitable access to legal resources and services. The Peer Support & Empowerment project embodied a robust framework for promoting social inclusion through the cultivation of supportive networks among students. By empowering Peer Supporters to connect with and assist their fellow students, the program addressed critical aspects of social inclusion, particularly in a university setting where students may face various challenges related to mental health, academic pressure, and social integration. Through these projects, students formed collaborative partnerships with schools, communities, NGOs, enterprises, or international organizations to access valuable resources and to promote social inclusion around themselves. Some projects were implemented directly by utilizing the university’s resources (such as teaching development grants, experiential learning funds, and administration supports), while other projects sought external sponsorships and training outside the university (such as community partners and NGOs). All interviewees either indicated the intention to further develop or mentioned the action to sustain the projects. They all exhibited reasonable scalability and sustainability, fostering empathy and social responsibility for societal advancement. This SaP approach promoted student engagement in both personal development and broadened the well-being of the community and society.

The critical resources that empowered student partners to engage meaningfully in initiatives mainly focused on four key areas: (1) programmatic investments in topics related to social inclusion, (2) investments in recruiting diverse student partners, (3) leveraging the expertise of faculty or community partners, and (4) addressing structural constraints in the SaP project or university. These were typical SaP approaches that enhance project diversity, facilitate resource access and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, promote equal opportunities, and acknowledge diverse perspectives.

Effective programmatic investments were critical for supporting student partners in their efforts to promote social inclusion. Funding and resources for projects that specifically address social inclusion themes were needed by students. Interviewee 3 expressed frustration regarding the funding for the SaP project provided by the university, describing it as “really not that much funding”. Such investments can include grants for developing educational materials, workshops focused on inclusivity training, and resources for outreach activities targeting marginalized communities. The establishment of projects was notably inclusive, with themes centered on social inclusion. Some projects targeted to include a variety of participants during the implementation and intentionally sought to recruit students from various socio-economic backgrounds. Participants enhanced mutual understanding and cultivated respect and tolerance through interaction and cooperation. Some SaP projects incorporated considerations of social inclusion, aiming to address students’ biases and stereotypes through the development of communication activities tailored to diverse cultural and social contexts. Certain projects prioritized the requirements of marginalized groups. This focus enhanced these students’ sensitivity to inclusion issues, while also contributing positively to the promotion of social inclusion. Simultaneously, certain projects integrated educational materials on cultural diversity to assist students in appreciating the significance of various cultures.

In executing the SaP projects, the students recognized the importance of recruiting diverse partners from various disciplines and backgrounds. This recruitment strategy not only enriched the learning experience but also fostered collaboration among students with different perspectives. For example, in a STEM education SaP project, some students majoring in education, business, and arts were also recruited to rehearse the content and pedagogical approaches. Some students even served as teachers to facilitate the summer course while others reviewed and designed the “business model” to explore the potential to grow into a social enterprise. They recently targeted to serve low-income-family students who cannot afford high-cost STEM courses in the market. By prioritizing programmatic resources for social inclusion, universities can create a supportive framework for student partners. This would further enhance sensitivity among students and promote acceptance and understanding within a diverse society. By prioritizing the recruitment of students from varied backgrounds, the project effectively promoted a culture of inclusivity and collaboration. For instance, reflecting on the experiences shared in the Access to Justice Fellowship project, Interviewee 2 articulated a personal perspective as a female in a low-income family.

Access to the expertise of faculty members and community partners was another crucial resource for student partners. Within the context of SaP projects fostering social inclusion, the interviewees were generally satisfied with the technical/academic supports and basic resources that their teachers and departments provided, such as training workshops, logistics supports (venue or online platforms), project funds, and promotion. For example, the project for STEM education was initiated by a few engineering undergraduates who originally formed a Special Interest Group (SIG) to build an electrical racing car for global competitions. With an engineering teacher being the consultant to the group, the students gained some tips to self-learn the necessary knowledge and later developed student-initiated training courses to help their peers learn the knowledge beyond the mechanical engineering curriculum. That was the moment they included social responsibility value in the SIG. They carefully selected fundamental knowledge to develop summer course materials for general secondary students without relevant backgrounds. To ensure that the course fit this purpose, they sought consultation from faculty members and secondary teachers. On the other hand, a few interviewees mentioned some “inefficient” administration procedures. For instance, Interviewee 3 waited several months for the

department to purchase materials. Interviewee 4 contended that his feedback as a student partner was not regarded seriously by the university, resulting in a small improvement after implementation.

While students articulated elevated expectations regarding structural constraints in the SaP project or university, all interviewees mentioned *authentic opportunities* to make positive changes, to bring impacts to society, or to create a better world. However, some interviewees articulated other supports that might go beyond what a faculty member or administration staff can do. Evidently, students elevated expectations regarding the opportunities offered by the department or university, regarding opportunities to change policies and to receive formal recognition from the seniors. As Interviewee 17 stated, "... just like a seal of approval, or something legitimate to give students and teachers more trust in what we do. We're not an official group like [student organizations under academic departments or under student unions]". She continued, "... so it would be nice to just get some legitimacy which is why I know it's quite hard... [however], I'm still thinking of what that looks like as well". Interviewee 17 suggested that "recognition is also like marketing..." because it helps others to see the project. "Having a top-down approach really does help", she commented.

Moreover, students also anticipated more equitable representations in the SaP project. Interviewee 9 stated, "In Asian education and culture, there is an expectation of respect towards seniors", and pointed out that this cultural norm necessitates greater confidence to articulate the perspective to the supervisors or seniors. He believed that this cultural barrier hinders his ability to fully engage in meaningful discussions and contribute effectively to decision-making processes. Interviewee 9 emphasized the importance of creating a more inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives and fosters open communication among all stakeholders. Moreover, Interviewee 4 suggested that establishing feedback channels and mechanisms to encourage participant input enhances the effectiveness of project outcomes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Student Identity Development and Social Inclusion in Asia Context

The development of student identity within the SaP project is a complex process including six stages that shape an individual's self-perception, wherein students actively participate in collaborative projects that foster shared leadership and inclusivity. Initially, students engage in the Awareness stage to participate in SaP projects and comprehend student partners' definitions and responsibilities by observing and being influenced by others. Then, they move to the Exploration/Engagement stage, which is marked by inquisitiveness and an inclination to engage in the SaP project. Through their engagement in SaP projects, students enter the Identification stage, during which they begin to express their values, beliefs, and aspirations and align them with the partnership expectations. In this stage, students also acquire a sense of agency, as they negotiate their academic and social contexts while enhancing their confidence. Then, they progressively transition to the Differentiation stage, where they begin to take on responsibilities and duties incrementally. As students advance, they enter the Generativity stage, wherein the emphasis transitions from self-exploration to the nurturing and mentoring of others. They acknowledge the significance of cultivating partnership potential among their peers, highlighting teamwork and community development. This phase enables students to assimilate partnership and leadership as a fundamental aspect of their identity, transcending personal achievements to emphasize communal success. In the Integration stage, students completely assimilate partnership into their identity, harmonizing their actions and ideals across all facets of their lives. They serve as exemplars of inclusive and relational leaders, showcasing a dedication

to social justice and community involvement. This phase entails an increased consciousness of the wider societal repercussions of their actions, as students proactively endeavor to maintain and enhance the efforts in which they participate. During these stages, multiple elements affect student identity development, such as peer interactions, mentorship, and involvement with varied cultures. Ultimately, the development of student identity is a continuous, dynamic process that influences individual experiences.

Gale and Tranter (2011) advocated for broader recognition of the diverse knowledge, beliefs, and perspectives that all students contribute to higher education, emphasizing the necessity of establishing inclusive environments rather than merely increasing enrolment capacities. The SaP projects represent initiatives established by students and university staff to foster a diverse educational atmosphere, enabling students to investigate multiculturalism's essence and its constituents' fundamental principles. Results from the interviews indicated that students possess a great awareness of social inclusion and diversity. Students focus on minority or marginalized groups in society based on their experiences or observations, enhancing the understanding of these groups among students and individuals from diverse backgrounds through student activities. They endeavor to bridge the divide between communities by fostering understanding and acknowledging the issue of social inclusion. Certain programs enlarge their scope by collaborating with the community, thereby extending their impact beyond the university into the broader community. In addition, certain students participating in the project originate from disadvantaged backgrounds; these individuals consistently adopt a negotiated position as they endeavor (with differing levels of success) to maneuver through institutional expectations while remaining aware of the transformative potential of their involvement (Hughes 2015). The engagement of these students also enhances the concepts and content of social inclusion in SaP projects, rendering them more substantial and meaningful. These indicated that SaP projects positively influence social inclusion.

In addition, the recognition of hierarchy in Asian societies profoundly influences students' confidence in articulating their viewpoints. This cultural context frequently prioritizes deference to authority and compliance with superiors, leading students to be more reluctant to articulate their thoughts, particularly in the presence of supervisors or individuals in positions of greater power. During interviews, students indicated that their self-confidence increased only when afforded greater autonomy and trust, such as the ability to accomplish activities or make decisions autonomously, implying that a supportive atmosphere and trust influence their capacity to overcome challenges. Conscious pressure is crucial. Furthermore, students must also navigate this cultural influence during their identity development as they progressively shift from the role of "helper" to "partner" in collaborative efforts. This process frequently presents obstacles as individuals must take initiative within the team, make critical decisions, and assume responsibility for the team's objectives and direction. These experiences indicated that offering helpful resources and chances to engage students in decision-making might enhance their self-confidence and mitigate the limitations imposed by a hierarchical society. In conclusion, the hierarchical nature of Asian cultures presents a challenge to students' confidence in articulating their opinions; however, by offering autonomy, supportive resources, and opportunities to foster participation, students can be assisted in gradually surmounting this obstacle and enhancing their self-expression.

4.2. University Resources for Student Identity Development

An authentic learning environment and educational resources can enhance student engagement (Herrington et al. 2014). This research identifies the significance of university resources for SaP projects and students' engagement, as well as their influence on student

identity development. Students equipped with authentic educational resources will be more adept at entering the labor market and will achieve greater success as future professionals in a reduced timeframe (Laundon et al. 2024). It is evident from the studies' findings that student partners require a diverse array of resources for their social inclusion projects. The initial aspect is the opportunities and platform for coordinating projects; this is consistent with the findings in this study. Student partners can be instructed, either actively or passively, to engage in the process of identity construction. This operation is intricate, involves extensive institutional backing, and demands student partners get ready to capitalize on opportunities and demonstrate resilience. Furthermore, according to Nuis et al. (2023), mentoring has become an integral part of student success in higher education. Therefore, collaboration with accountable mentors or teachers is essential for student engagement in projects and student identity development. Student partners require guiding and emotional support (e.g., recognition) from appropriate individuals in practice. In this study, many interviewees indicated that their mentors or senior peers have influenced them in this way. Engaged mentors instill a sense of purpose and confidence and even serve as role models for students in SaP projects. Mentors serve as essential role models for students, offering knowledge, resources, and feedback, fostering reflection, and aiding in goal-setting (Nuis et al. 2023). Frequent absences of mentors result in student confusion and dissatisfaction due to the lack of adequate direction, adversely impacting their engagement in SaP projects. For social inclusion projects, student partners also require other resources provided by departments/universities, including logistics (recruitment, promotion, etc.), funding, training, formal recognition, and networks (collaboration with other universities, communities, or corporate partners). These resources are essential for the progression of projects, facilitating progressive identity formation.

Students asserted that the education and support offered by the university are essential for the enhancement of their abilities and skills (Saeed et al. 2015). Diversity and accessibility of resources can broaden the scope of student projects, especially enabling student partners to cultivate greater ambition and vision, thereby advancing them further into the final two stages of identity development: Generativity and Integration. Additionally, students may foster their professional identities by participating in social inclusion projects. Professional identity can provide a framework for learning, comprehending practice, and evaluating (Trede et al. 2012). As such, these projects could be perceived as a process of developing their professional identities. This study reveals that students exhibited a strong interest in investigating social inclusion issues. While they were developing new (professional) identities, they were experiencing genuine autonomy and a student-centered learning paradigm.

Based on the findings, student partners would require the following key university resources to support them in working toward social inclusion in SaP projects:

1. **Autonomy and trust**
Students need to feel trusted and be given the autonomy to make decisions and take ownership of their projects. This empowerment builds their confidence and fosters a sense of responsibility.
2. **Mentorship and guidance**
Having mentors or senior peers who provide guidance and serve as role models helps students navigate their roles and responsibilities within SaP projects. This support helps them understand best practices and frameworks.
3. **Role clarity and identity development**
While students work on their projects, they need clarity about their roles and responsibilities. This includes understanding different identities they might take on, such as creators, researchers, advocates, leaders, etc.

4. Feedback and support from staff
Continuous feedback and support from university staff are essential for students. This includes checking on students' progress, providing immediate feedback, and reminding them of schedules and deadlines.
5. Opportunities for co-creation and collaboration
Engaging students in co-creation and collaborative decision-making processes helps them recognize their capabilities and develop a sense of responsibility and partnership.
6. External resources and networking
Connecting students with external resources (such as funding, networks, and partnerships) supports the sustainability of SaP projects. Students benefit from developing networks and seeking collaborations beyond the university to make a broader impact.
7. Support for sustainability initiatives
Resources that help integrate sustainability practices into SaP projects are important. This includes aligning project goals with sustainability objectives and being aware of global trends, external threats, and opportunities

5. Conclusions

This study delineates the process of identity development among students who engaged in Students as Partners (SaP) projects in the Hong Kong context. It demonstrates the students' identity development as designers, co-creators, partners, leaders, and advocates in the social inclusion projects. In general, student partner identity development could be identified in six stages: Awareness, Exploration/Engagement, Identification, Differentiation, Generativity, and Integration. The findings of the study indicate that students have significant concerns regarding social inclusion. They express a desire to tackle these challenges through the SaP projects, viewing these initiatives as promising avenues to foster best practices that enhance social inclusion. Key university resources are vital for successful SaP projects, which include programmatic investments in social inclusion, investments in recruiting diverse student partners, leveraging the expertise of faculty or community partners, and addressing structural constraints in the SaP project or university. Additionally, factors such as autonomy and trust, mentorship and guidance, clear role definitions, continuous feedback, opportunities for co-creation, external resources, and support for sustainability are crucial for the success of these initiatives. These resources empower students to develop their personal and professional identities, fostering a sense of responsibility and partnership. Co-creation in higher education with students is an innovative collaboration that integrates social inclusion into daily practices and extends it beyond the university.

This study contributed to understanding the relationship between identity development and structure support for SaP projects in Hong Kong higher education. It possesses a few limitations requiring acknowledgement. Initially, by concentrating on the experiences and viewpoints articulated by participants, we sought to obtain genuine insights and reflections pertinent to students' identity formation and experiences, without considering potential participant biases, such as social desirability. Another limitation is the representativeness of the sample as the sample size was relatively small though it covered most faculties. Furthermore, the feasibility of conducting a longitudinal study was compromised by the time constraints of this research. Last, it lacks generalizability to other educational settings. However, the insights gained from this study can still offer valuable implications for wider Asian contexts, highlighting potential strategies to address power dynamics, biases, and structural barriers that impact social inclusion.

Future research should aim to increase both the quantity and breadth of studies, focusing on forming and developing student identity within student activities across various

Asia-Pacific regions while incorporating quantitative research elements. Comparative studies are advised to investigate the differences in identity development of students in SaP projects and the requisite university resources for students from diverse cultural backgrounds or geographical areas. Encouragement of collaboration among a diverse array of higher education institutions in Hong Kong is also recommended to facilitate comparative studies. Moreover, further exploration of the elements of social inclusion in student partnerships is recommended, as well as an understanding of how these partnerships influence social inclusion.

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