



November 22, 2019

AAUP Statement on the Situation at Hong Kong Universities

Increasingly violent [clashes between student protesters and police](#) at universities in Hong Kong raise grave concerns for the American Association of University Professors. On November 17, police [laid siege to the campus of Hong Kong Polytechnic University](#), where they employed tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons against students, journalists, and medical volunteers who had been assisting injured protesters. According to media accounts, police physically abused and harassed protesters being taken into custody.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong, and the Open University of Hong Kong have all canceled on-campus classes for the remainder of the semester. It [has been reported](#) that American universities are evacuating students studying in Hong Kong.

The clashes mark an escalation of a conflict that began in June in response to a proposed law, since withdrawn, that would have allowed extradition from Hong Kong, a special administrative region of China operating under its own legal system, to the mainland. The movement has expanded to encompass broader protests against the Chinese Communist Party, wealth inequality, and cultural homogenization.

The AAUP takes no position on the status of Hong Kong. However, these events raise serious concerns for us about university autonomy, academic freedom, and student free expression. Moreover, the clashes come in the context of [intensifying threats to academic freedom](#) throughout China, described at length in [a September report by Scholars at Risk](#). That report documented troubling efforts to intimidate, silence, and punish outspoken academics and students, including the imprisonment of prominent Uighur academics.

Of special concern to our Association is the potential for intensified threats to academic freedom and autonomy at foreign higher education institutions operating joint ventures with Chinese universities on the mainland. Here in the United States the Columbia University and New York University chapters of Amnesty International were [compelled to reschedule a program](#) on Chinese human rights violations amid concerns about threats and protests by mainland Chinese students.

The AAUP [joins Scholars at Risk in calling on](#) "all parties, especially government and university authorities, to take immediate steps to de-escalate violence and ensure the safety and well-being of all persons connected with the demonstrations" in Hong Kong. Authorities have a responsibility to maintain order and safety, to be sure, but they should refrain from actions that exacerbate tensions and threaten university autonomy.

We further join SAR's call for "a thorough, independent investigation of the police response to protest activities, to ensure the due process rights of all persons under investigation or in

proceedings arising out of the protests, and to ensure the well-being of those in custody, including by guaranteeing access to legal counsel, medical treatment, and family."

In addition, the AAUP urges administrations and faculties of US higher education institutions with programs in China and Hong Kong to take vigorous measures to ensure that academic freedom is protected in those programs and that American faculty members and students teaching and studying in China enjoy the same academic rights that they should have here. We also call on those institutions to use their good offices to urge the government of China to exercise restraint in Hong Kong and to commit to fundamental principles of free inquiry.