

## Feature Article

### The hidden role of universities for tourism in Hong Kong

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#### 1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the four pillars of the Hong Kong economy. In 2018, the tourism industry, including both inbound tourism and outbound tourism, contributed to about 4.5 % of gross domestic product (GDP) and hired about 257 thousand people, which was equivalent to about 6.6 % of the total employment. Unfortunately, due to the social unrest, the total visitor arrivals in 2019 dropped by 14.2 % compared to 2018. In 2020, because of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), the total visitor arrivals further dropped by 88.2 % in the first five months of 2020.<sup>(1)</sup> With the advent of vaccines for COVID-19, it is anticipated that the tourism industry will start to grow again in late 2021 or early 2022. The rate of growth will depend on our strategies on how to attract global tourists.

In October 2017, the Hong Kong Government set out the Tourism Development Blueprint, which not only depicted the roadmap for sustainable development of the tourism industry in Hong Kong, but also suggested four strategies on how to achieve the sustainable development.<sup>(2)</sup>

- Strategy 1:  
To develop a diversified portfolio of visitor source markets for Hong Kong, with a focus on attracting high value-added overnight visitors.
- Strategy 2:  
To nurture and develop tourism products and initiatives with local and international characteristics, and to consolidate and enhance Hong Kong's status as a travel destination.
- Strategy 3:  
To develop smart tourism.
- Strategy 4:  
To upgrade the service quality of the tourism industry and encourage the trade in adopting good trade practices.

Similar to other industrial and service sectors, universities play a key role to nurture manpower for the tourism industry. With ever increasing demand from tourists, universities need to develop various courses and curricula relating to tourism. For

instance, a bachelor degree of tourism serves to train students with the fundamental knowledge and practical experience for working in the tourism industry, while a master degree of tourism aims to provide students with specific knowledge for the tourism industry such as management principles, marketing strategies, economic considerations and cultural aspects. Furthermore, a doctorate degree in the area of tourism is essential to explore new findings and create new knowledge for the tourism industry, and to nurture graduates for academic positions for tourism in universities. The education role of universities for tourism has been widely discussed, both locally and internationally. In particular, universities in Hong Kong have played a very active role in tourism education. For instance, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University consistently earns a high standing in international rankings such as No. 1 in the world in the Hospitality and Tourism Management subject by ShanghaiRanking 2020.<sup>(3)</sup>

The purpose of this article is to reveal the hidden role of universities for tourism in Hong Kong. Firstly, the term of university tourism will be coined, and the corresponding concept will be defined. Secondly, among the 12 universities in Hong Kong, some of their key features for university tourism will be described. Then, main factors for university tourism will be elaborated. The two oldest universities in Hong Kong, namely the University of Hong Kong (founded in 1911) and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (founded in 1937), will mostly be used for exemplification. Thirdly, both the benefits and drawbacks of university tourism will be discussed. Finally, a conclusion on the importance of university tourism and its research will be drawn.

#### 2. Definition of university tourism

Although the term 'university tourism' has not been formally coined, this hidden role has been brought forward for a few decades. For example, Cambridge University is one of the top-rated tourist attractions in the UK. Nevertheless, university tourism has not yet been well defined.

As reflected by the term, university tourism is a concept or

experience derived from the interaction of activity and people between universities and tourists. University tourists may be attracted by university histories (e.g., University of Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world), university rankings (e.g., Massachusetts Institute of Technology is ranked No. 1 by Quacquarelli Symonds), university heritages (e.g., the main building of Lomonosov Moscow State University is one of the most stunning university buildings in the world), and university events (e.g., the Boat Race between students from Oxford and Cambridge Universities is probably the most famous rowing event in the world).

Different universities have different histories, rankings, heritages and events. The development of university tourism should be well planned, not only strategically promoting specific attractions of individual universities but also synergically collecting relevant attractions of universities with complementary features.

The concept of university tourism well matches with Strategy 1 identified by the Hong Kong Tourism Development Blueprint that it can diversify the visitor source for Hong Kong, and Strategy 2 that it can incorporate both local and international characteristics. Meanwhile, both Strategy 3 and Strategy 4 can be incorporated into university tourism by promoting smart arrangement and high service quality, respectively.

### 3. Features of universities in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a metropolitan with only 1,110 km<sup>2</sup>. Because of the population of over 7.5 million, there are 11 universities in Hong Kong, excluding those higher education institutions without the university status. Three key features of these universities that are identified to be most influential for university tourism are summarized in Table 1, and their locations are marked in Figure 1.

In Table 1, the foundation year refers to the year of establishment of the university in Hong Kong, and subsequently be granted the university status by Hong Kong Government.<sup>(4)</sup> It can be found that there are 6 universities in Hong Kong over 50 years old. Among them, the University of Hong Kong is

over 100 years old and its 110-th anniversary is coming soon. In general, the older the university, the more the interesting history can be considered as tourist attractions. For instance, the origin of the University of Hong Kong could be traced back to the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese founded in 1887, which was then incorporated as the Faculty of Medicine in 1911; and the history of Hong Kong Polytechnic University started in 1937 as the Government Trade School which was the first publicly funded post-secondary technical institution in Hong Kong.

The world ranking quoted in Table 1 refers to the world university ranking 2021 by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS).<sup>(5)</sup> Although there are different rankings in the world and there are some variations across each ranking, the QS ranking is relatively most well-regarded by employers, academics and the general public. In particular, it can well reflect the reputation of the university. From Table 1, it indicates that there are 4 universities in Hong Kong that are ranked among the world's top 50. Among them, the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology are most highly ranked, and can be considered to be most reputable. Many tourists, especially those with children or relatives studying in secondary schools, are very eager to visit reputable universities.

The most international quoted in Table 1 refers to the most international universities in the world 2021 ranked by Times Higher Education (THE).<sup>(6)</sup> It is based on the international student score, international staff score, international co-authorship score and international reputation metrics to calculate the level of internationalization of universities. Among the ranking of 172 universities around the world, the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong are ranked No. 1 and No. 3 in the world, respectively. It illustrates that both universities are highly international, which can readily attract international tourists, especially family members, relatives and friends of their students and staff.

### 4. Factors for university tourism in Hong Kong

Apart from the aforementioned key features that are most

Table 1: Features of universities in Hong Kong

Name	Foundation year <sup>(4)</sup>	World ranking <sup>(5)</sup>	Most international <sup>(6)</sup>
The University of Hong Kong (HKU)	1911	22	1
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU)	1937	75	–
Hong Kong Baptist University (BU)	1956	264	–
The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CU)	1963	43	3
Lingnan University (LU)	1967	571-580	–
Hong Kong Shue Yan University (SYU)	1971	–	–
City University of Hong Kong (CityU)	1984	48	–
The Open University of Hong Kong (OU)	1989	–	–
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (UST)	1991	27	–
The Education University of Hong Kong (EdU)	1994	–	–
Hang Seng University of Hong Kong (HSU)	2010	–	–

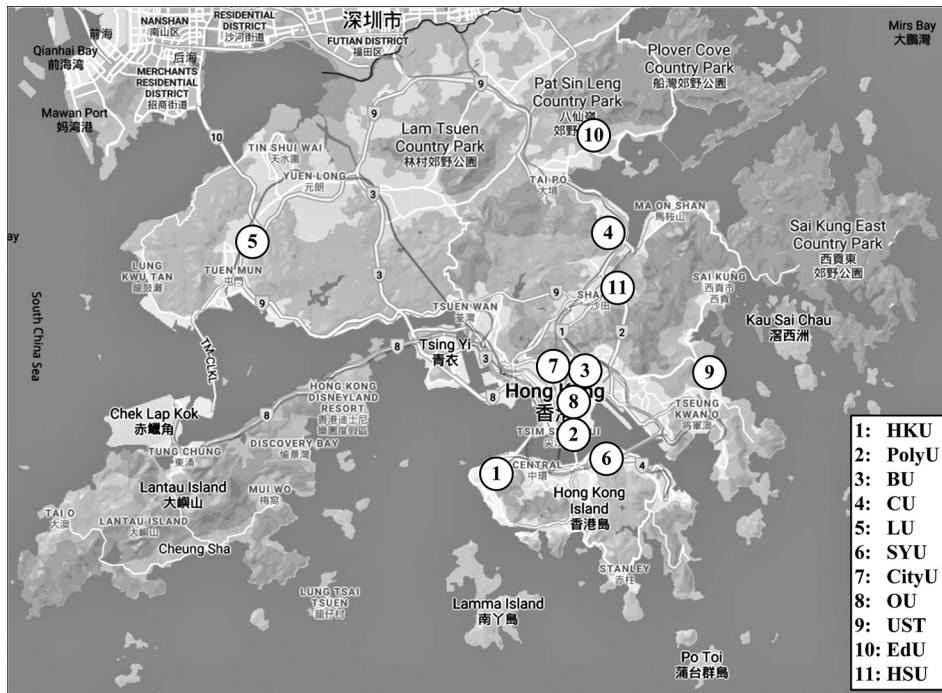


Figure 1: Location of universities in Hong Kong

influential for university tourism, there are many other factors affecting the realization of university tourism. The university heritages, events, landmarks, facilities and locations are identified to be main factors for university tourism.

Firstly, the university heritages such as historic buildings, halls, chapels, statues and ponds are prominent tourist attractions. For instance, in the University of Hong Kong, the Main Building as shown in Figure 2 is an Edwardian Baroque-style building, which was built in 1912. It has been declared a monument by the Hong Kong Government, and visitors can see a beautiful clock tower and four memorial courtyards with a brick structure design. The Loke Yew Hall inside the Main Building, named after Mr. Loke Yew for his generous support in the early development, was where Dr. Sun Yat-sen delivered his public address “I feel as though I have returned home,



Figure 2: Historic Main Building in the University of Hong Kong

because Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong are the birth place of my knowledge” on February 20, 1923. With similar importance, the University Hall originally named Douglas Castle which was built in 1861 is a historic residential hall in the University of Hong Kong. Located at the main entrance staircase, there are statues of Père David’s Deers (an amalgam of the mythical auspicious kirin, elephant, lion and horse) which no students dare touch before their graduation; otherwise, there is a curse that they would never graduate. Actually, there are many heritages associated with different universities.

Secondly, the university events such as open days, competitions, shows, ceremonies and exhibitions can attract various visitors. For instance, the Fashion Gallery in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University is the only of its kind in Hong Kong devoted to the exhibition of fashion and textiles.<sup>(7)</sup> Regular exhibitions are open to the public. In particular, graduation fashion shows are annually organized to showcase the flair and talent of graduating students of the Institute of Textiles and Clothing to media and the general public. The shows receive overwhelming response and strong support from both local and overseas industries. On the other hand, the Cultural Management Office of the University of Hong Kong organizes a series of programmes called My University Spotlight Encounters (MUSE)<sup>(8)</sup>, aiming to inspire lifelong learning and passion through innovative and educational programmes such as the “François Rabbath’s Double Bass” and “The Beatles & Takemitsu’s Guitar”, which are definitely attractive for quality visitors.

Thirdly, the university landmarks such as iconic buildings and unique statues which may not be historic are very attractive for university tourism. For instance, as shown in Figure 3, the Jockey Club Innovation Tower in the Hong Kong Poly-



Figure 3: Iconic Innovation Tower in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University

technic University is very artistic and futuristic with a ‘fluid character’, which was designed by Zaha Hadid, the first woman architect to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize (considered the Nobel Prize of architecture), and was completed in 2014. Another iconic building located in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University is the Hotel Icon, which is not only a 5-star hotel for business and travel needs, but also a teaching and research hotel for the School of Hotel and Tourism Management, and is fully owned by the university. The hotel was opened in 2011, and its architectural design was awarded the 2011 Hong Kong Institute of Architects Medal of the Year of Hong Kong.

Fourthly, the university facilities such as restaurants, canteens, visitor centres and transportation means are important to provide an exhilarating experience for visitors. In particular, low-cost and convenient transportation is very important for university tourism. Thanks to our town planners, most universities in Hong Kong can be easily accessed by mass transportation. For instance, the University of Hong Kong is beside the HKU Station on the Island line of Mass Transit Railway (MTR) while the Hong Kong Polytechnic University is beside the Hung Hom Station which is the junction of the East Rail line and West Rail line of the MTR network as well as the terminus of cross-border through trains to mainland China. On the other hand, the visitor centre of universities is equally important because it serves to give visitors the first impression and the lasting memory of the visit. For instance, the Visitor Centre of the University of Hong Kong was transformed from a historic Workmen’s Quarters Building, which provides publication and information about the university, and offers a wide range of HKU branded gifts, souvenirs and memorabilia.

Fifthly, the university locations are essential to determine the time and duration of the visit, especially for tourists organized by travel agencies. Hong Kong is composed of three main regions: Hong Kong Island, Kowloon Peninsula and New Territories (including the biggest Lantau Island). As shown in Figure 1, some universities are so close that they can be visited together in the same trip. For instance, the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Shue Yan University are located on Hong Kong Island so that they can be grouped together for

each visit, similarly for the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong Baptist University and City University of Hong Kong all located on Kowloon Peninsula. For those universities located in New Territories such as the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology should be visited separately unless the trip is well organized by the travel agencies.

### 5. Benefits of university tourism in Hong Kong

Since Hong Kong is experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry is almost frozen. With the advent of a ‘Green Pass’ available to anyone who has been fully vaccinated or has recovered from COVID-19, it is high time to prepare for tourism rebound. Having discussed the key features and main factors for university tourism, the corresponding benefits are summarized below:

- It can diversify the portfolio of visitor source markets, both local and international as well as individuals, families and tours.
- It can attract high value-added overnight visitors since university visits usually take time to realize and appreciate their histories, heritages and landmarks.
- It can attract quality tourists who come for attending university events such as fashion shows and cultural exhibitions.
- It can promote the universities in Hong Kong, and improve their reputation.

Most importantly, university tourism can create a sustainable mechanism to grow in a healthy way. As depicted in Figure 4, when tourists visit the universities, they not only appreciate their heritages, events and attractions, but also realize the goodness of these universities and why they are highly ranked in the world. They will prefer or introduce their relatives and friends to send their children to study in these world-class universities. This will significantly increase the number of applications to these universities and improve their internationalization. Thus, parents, relatives and friends of overseas students will regularly visit the universities, hence further increasing the number of overseas visitors for university tourism. Meanwhile, when more students prefer to join these universities, because of increasing competition, the student quality will be further improved. This will further improve the reputation and ranking of the universities, thus further inducing visitors contributing to university tourism.

### 6. Drawbacks of university tourism in Hong Kong

There is no doubt that universities are a place to create knowledge and nurture students. A tranquil environment in universities should be provided and maintained. Some travel agencies have organized tours to visit those universities with famous attractions. Not surprisingly, students in these universities were annoyed by the enterprising or aggressive spirit of these travel agencies, especially breaking the tranquility of the

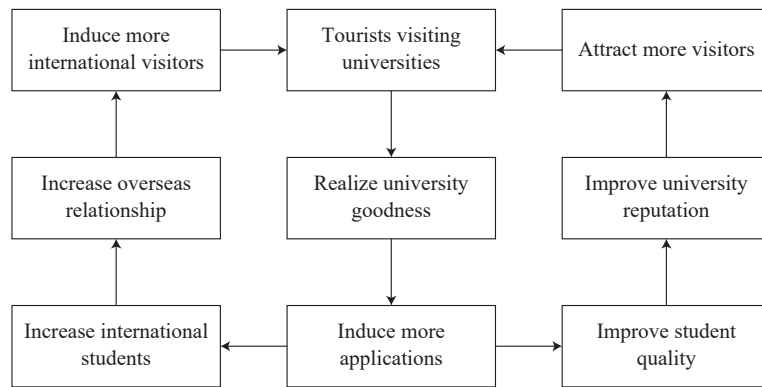


Figure 4: Sustainable mechanism of university tourism

environment.<sup>(9)</sup> Since some university facilities such as restaurants, canteens, shuttle buses and leisure areas are initially designed for the use of students and teachers, they will be overcrowded with tour groups, thus disturbing the normal life and operation of the universities.

As identified by the Hong Kong Tourism Development Blueprint, Strategy 3—smart tourism—is the way to go. Namely, smart technology can be utilized to solve the aforementioned drawbacks of university tourism. University tourists need to book timed-tickets in advance to visit the universities. Thus, the universities can fully control the numbers and types of visitors in such a way that the tranquil environment and normal operation will not be adversely affected. For instance, the universities can strictly limit the number of visitors, and give higher preference to individuals and families or lower preference to tour groups.

The quick response (QR) code technology can be adopted as a smart arrangement for university tourism. A QR code consists of black squares arranged in a square pattern on a white background that can store data information and be read at very high speed by smartphones. In recent years, the growth of QR codes is exponentially fast because smartphone users can simply use the smartphones to transmit, receive and display the codes as well as their built-in cameras and apps to scan and recognize the codes. The merits of this technology are summarized below:<sup>(10)</sup>

- Speed reading:  
QR code can be read or scanned very fast from any angle in any direction without requiring any alignment.
- Large storage capability:  
QR code has much larger data storage capacity (200 times) than the traditional barcode. A regular QR code can store up to 7,089 numerals, while an advanced QR code, termed iQR code, can store up to 40,000 numerals.
- Flexible data:  
QR code can handle numerals, alphanumeric characters, Chinese, Japanese and Korean characters and binary data.
- Dirt resistant:

QR code can provide error correction to restore data information if the code is dirty or even damaged. There are various error correction levels available for users to choose, depending on the operating environment.

- Small printout size:  
QR code needs much less space (only one-tenth) to display the same amount of data than the traditional barcode.
- Product marking:  
QR code can be directly printed onto the product because of high degree of readability under low-contrast condition.
- Widespread use:  
QR codes can be used for various domestic and business purposes, making a wide variety of activities both at home and at work convenient.

For university tourism, visitors and tour agencies need to book the timed-tickets in advance via relevant university online booking systems. Issuance and delivery of timed-tickets are costly and time-consuming, and checking timed-tickets at the time of admission is also inconvenient and time-consuming. So, when bookings are approved, the timed-tickets will only be in electronic form, and sent to the smartphones of visitors and tour agencies. Each visitor, no matter registered individually or via tour agencies, has a unique QR code, which should be stored in each smartphone and displayed at university entrances. Children who do not have smartphones can accompany with adults, provided that they have been included during online booking. These QR codes can also be used to control the usage of university facilities such as canteens and shuttle buses.

While it is an utmost importance to protect the privacy of university visitors, the use of QR codes and smartphones for admission and usage control can provide much useful though anonymous information, such as the identification of peak hours and peak seasons, the popularity of individual attractions and events and the usage of individual facilities as well as the statistical difference between individuals, families and tour groups, which can further improve university tourism.

## 7. Conclusion

Instead of elaborating on the primary role of universities to nurture manpower for the tourism industry, this article has focused on revealing the hidden role of universities for tourism in Hong Kong. This hidden role, dubbed university tourism, has been thoroughly discussed, including the key features, main factors, expected benefits and possible drawbacks. While university tourism can definitely provide many benefits for the tourism industry in Hong Kong, the drawbacks will hinder the involvement of universities for industry. By incorporating smart arrangement based on the latest QR code technology, these drawbacks can be solved or at least minimized to an acceptable level. Most importantly, universities should not consider that university tourism is a burden on university administration or operation, they should make use of this university tourism to improve the student intake quality as well as the university reputation and internationalization. It has been identified that there is a sustainable mechanism of university tourism in Hong Kong.

The development of university tourism in Hong Kong is still in the crawling stage. More research on this topic should be conducted, such as investigating the business model of university tourism, the relationship between the summer institutes of universities and university tourism, the effect of international student exchange programmes on university tourism, and so on. Research will definitely provide the Hong Kong Government, especially the Hong Kong Tourism Commission, with vital information to support the development of various university tourism initiatives in Hong Kong.

## Notes

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