

UNDERGRAD, HKUSU

Interview with Candidate for Undergraduate Student to the Senate: Marzukh Akib Asjad

23 April, 2023

Editors: Please introduce yourself and talk about why you are running for Senate.

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: Hi, I am Marzukh Akib Asjad, and I'm currently a third-year engineering student. A primary reason I am running for the Senate election is that there isn't a lot of non-local representation, especially in the organization levels at this height or above at HKU. I feel like for a community to come together, there should be representation of every culture, including very minor ones and very major ones. I am a strong believer of the fact that, with greater representation of all cultures in every level of the organizational structure of HKU, we can thrive even more. There aren't a lot of internationals running for this post. I feel this should change in the future, and hopefully, this change will start with me.

Editors: Please briefly explain the function and the importance of the Senate.

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: The Senate is the principal academic body of the University. Its membership and powers are governed by Statutes XXII and XXIII. Statute XXII basically outlines the composition of the Senate as well as briefly outlines its functions: it is the primary academic governing body of the University (Editors' note: the Senate's power to regulate all education-related matters is derived from Section 7(4) of the University of Hong Kong Ordinance¹). Statute XXIII outlines the powers of the Senate, that it has the power to provide courses, and regulate instructions as well as examinations. There are other things as well, but one of its fundamental powers is that it may delegate its powers and regulate matters such as admissions, registrations, and examinations. Furthermore, any of the regulations made by the Senate has to be relayed to the Council. The earliest time the changes can take place is no earlier than one semester after the changes are made.

Editors: Please briefly introduce your election platform and the goal you wish to achieve the most if elected.

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: As a candidate for the undergraduate student to the Senate, I am committed to promoting transparency and diversity on campus. My platform includes two key priorities, as well as one other point. The first priority is improving the database by making past exam papers more transparent; I will advocate making the past exam papers much more transparent and accessible to all students of HKU. My other key platform point is increasing diversity and inclusion on campus. I really prioritize diversity and inclusion initiatives on campus, including cultural awareness events, increased resources for underrepresented groups, as well as advocating for efforts to recruit a more diverse student body and faculty, and for more diversity in the organizational structures. My third point is that I plan to communicate our needs and wants regarding the incorporation of the recent explosion of AI tools into our curriculum, to make our education more robust. Basically, I do not want these AI tools to be limited to just helping us in our assignments, but also serve as part of a structured education system, so that we may develop ourselves much further.

¹ <https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/cap1053!en-zh-Hant-HK>

Editors: Let's talk about your first point. You mentioned that you wanted to improve the transparency and accessibility of past papers. Could you please comment on the accessibility of the current past papers system and how you wish to improve it?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: The current exam database, ExamBase - it's pretty good. It's alright even. The problem is that most of the past papers are not accessible. This is actually a problem that I often face. The problem is that intensive exams, especially in my faculty (Engineering) - but the same issue may be faced in other faculties as well - have patterns quite similar to those of previous years, but because I am not able to access the past papers, I am unable to familiarize myself with the patterns. After all, I am studying this course for just 3-4 months, I may as well absorb as much information as I can. I will advocate for making the exam database more transparent and accessible to all students. This will help promote fairness and transparency in the assessment process, and ensure that all students have access to the same resources. This would mean more practice materials, so that we get to find out our weaknesses and work on them before sitting for the final examinations.

Editors: Moving onto your second point, could you please comment on the current state of diversity and inclusion at HKU?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: The current state of diversity and inclusion at HKU is actually quite deplorable, where individuals from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds may feel alienated. Most international students are from different places of origin, with very different cultures. They come here and live for 3-5 years to complete their degree, and they will feel the cultural difference. It's inevitable, and actually not unusual at all, because after all, they're from very different countries. However, there may be certain things that can be done to help improve the experience for international students, so that they may feel more connected to this university and enjoy the University life experience.

Editors: You mentioned earlier about some cultural activities. What specific cultural activities do you plan on hosting?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: I plan to organize events with other associations, because I believe there are associations currently available here, but they're not able to reach the student body. Let me give you an example. I come from Bangladesh, where there's a national cultural event called the Pohela Baishakh. This is a very rich and colorful event, and it's not just a cultural tradition of my country. Bangladesh has a very diverse population with different ethnicities, and this event binds all of them. Other countries very near Bangladesh, like India and Pakistan, also have similar events. What I want to do is, for example, create an event that emphasizes the diversity and robustness of the culture of South Asian countries. There can be a day when the people from these countries can wear different traditional cultural clothes, and when the locals get to see this, it'll be something quite wonderful. A few days ago I saw something similar, where people were wearing different anime costumes. People's general reaction was that "This is so cool, let me dig more into this culture". It's not a local culture, but people are drawn to this. In the same way, there could be a cultural event like this.

However, I do not want to just make something that's temporary, something that will only happen during my term of office. I want something a bit more permanent, something that people from other cultures and ethnic backgrounds may use even after my term ends. I would advocate for some permanent policy changes that promote diversity and inclusion. I could advocate for a policy that makes organizing cultural-representation events much faster, feasible, and grand. Currently, if someone wants to host a cultural event at Happy Park, it's just not possible because that place is not reserved for cultural associations. The application usually has to go through multiple steps. International students may feel that it's difficult to go through these obstacles. I could make it easier for them so they can enjoy their culture without having to face these difficulties. That's one possibility.

Editors: You mentioned that you wanted to propose recruiting a more diverse student body and faculty. Do you have a plan on how you would propose that in the Senate if elected?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: I believe that diversity in the student and faculty body requires the engagement of most stakeholders, including the University administration, the faculty, the staff, as well as the students. The University administration itself could do outreach to international schools and make targeted advertisements and marketing campaigns. While, understandably, the HKDSE is the major way to get admitted to HKU, more diverse programmes could be incorporated. Though the IGCSE and IB curriculum are accepted, exams from curriculum boards of other countries could also be recognized. For example, India has a national curriculum board giving the national curriculum exam. The University could recognize it as an independent examination, and also incorporate it under an official scholarship and financial aid system (Editors' note: results from the Indian Board Exams are currently part of the accepted qualifications at HKU²). This could be a major way to reach out to students. For faculties, I believe there simply has to be more trained faculty staff from different diverse backgrounds available in Hong Kong. This might not just be a university-level administration thing; a Hong Kong-wide effort has to be made. Also, there could be incentive systems in admissions so that people from abroad would be more tempted to apply because of the greater compensation and rewards for them.

Editors: You talked a little bit about AI tools just now. You mentioned that you would like AI to not just be a part of helping our assignments, but also a part of the structure of our education itself. I was wondering if you could elaborate a bit more on that and how you would like to implement such structural change.

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: While I did mention that, I specifically said that I cannot treat it as one of my key platform points. The reason is that HKU currently has a temporary ban on AI tools. This is speculation at this point, but I have reason to believe that the faculty and the University administration are working on reforming the curriculum to integrate AI into it. I really do not know until I see it happening in the next semester, but AI can perhaps be implemented not just as a helpful assistant for school work, but integrated into the work. Perhaps, instead of testing the knowledge itself, assignments may be designed to test our abilities to use the AI tools. This has to be put into further research, but all I can say for now is that some facilities in the University may be integrated with AI. Perhaps the library could integrate AI into its system to speed up the process of searching for resources, making finding resources easier for students.

² <https://admissions.hku.hk/apply/international-qualifications>

Editors: If you are elected, how will you communicate with the undergraduate students to make sure their voices are heard, other than by keeping in contact with faculty board representatives and other student bodies?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: One way that I will do so is through social media. I understand that social media is a very important medium of student communication. I have made an Instagram account where I would relay information to and draw voices from the students to relay to the upper administration. I understand that that's very hard, because the information usually flows one way only, downwards from the upper administration. If I were a member of the Senate, I may talk to the University to perhaps incorporate a forum where students may anonymously voice out their opinions. This has to be anonymous, and it will be regulated slightly so that there are no slurs and negative comments like that. We do not want that negative space. This policy would be stated initially at the front of the forum before someone can comment on stuff. Nevertheless, I would definitely prefer if people's opinions are kept raw so that there is greater freedom of speech in that sense. I understand that information is rarely bidirectional, especially in current times, and I would definitely want students to relay their voices and opinions to the upper administration, so this forum may be a good idea if it could be implemented.

Editors: Could you comment on the current relationship between the University and student organizations?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: I believe the University is trying to foster a better relationship with the students, but I also believe the students feel like their voices are not being heard right now. This is because the student organizations had a medium of connection before, by speaking through the HKUSU. With the disbanding of the HKUSU (Editors' note: the Union has not announced whether it has disbanded), I believe the students feel like they are more alone, and once again, it feels like information flow is happening unidirectionally. I believe that for the rapport between students and the University to be better, they definitely need to improve on their communication. The forum I talked about could be a way of communication, but that is a more unofficial method since we're talking about the student organizations themselves. There perhaps has to be a better way to improve communication for it to happen both ways.

Editors: Please comment on the current electoral system of the University committees.

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: I believe this is one of the ways the University is trying to effectively communicate with students, by allowing the students to participate in matters that verily affect how the University administration performs. So it's a decent way to ensure that students have some kind of voice, by incorporating student representatives into the committees. Some of them are filled by elections, some by appointments. I personally believe that having an election for student representatives in the University committees is much better, because - that way - the students get to decide who represents them. After all, if we want our voices to be heard, we would want the very best to represent us.

Editors: According to a news article published by Ming Pao³, the HKU Court is planning to amend the University Statutes governing the appointment of the student panel of the Disciplinary Committee; the Senate, instead of the HKUSU Council, is to appoint the members of the student panel under the proposed changes. What is your view on this arrangement?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: The HKUSU was the voice for the students. It was a platform of democratic power for students to express themselves through. A number of actions have taken place to curb the power of the HKUSU. At the end of the day, we are the ones receiving the education. Considering the sheer size of the student body, I believe we should be able to delegate electoral power to vote for the members in these panels. I understand that the HKUSU is no longer there, so my current opinion is that if the members are being appointed by the Senate, there should still be a student-wide election, so as to encourage student democracy.

Editors: In 2019, the HKU Council went against the Senate's ruling that there were insufficient grounds to fire then-professor Benny Tai, and proceeded to dismiss him⁴. Could you comment on this event? What would you do as an undergraduate student to the Senate if a similar event were to happen during your term of office?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: Professor Benny Tai was a Hong Kong pro-democracy activist. I understand the decision was widely criticized by the students. It was said that there was a violation of academic freedom. I personally believe that the move did highlight a lot of the growing concerns about repressed academic freedom and institutional autonomy in Hong Kong, in the sense that what he did could be treated as separate from the institution. However, I cannot provide any further comment about the situation. That is all I can say. And if something similar does happen while I'm a Senate undergraduate representative, because I am an international student, it would not be right for me to comment on local politics, but I can still fight to ensure that the students are not affected by these decisions.

Editors: Please comment on the current state of academic freedom at HKU.

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: I'm going to be brief about this, but if I'm talking about academic freedom in the strictly academic sense, then perhaps there is plenty of freedom for just conversing with peers. However, in a politics course, for example, if students have to choose a topic to work on, perhaps students are more likely to choose a safer topic which might not attract too much attention. Basically, I think it's specifically within certain departments. If I'm talking about an engineering research paper, I think there is little impact, but if I'm talking specifically about political courses, then I think students are very likely to stick to a safer topic because of previous situations. In that sense, I guess there's slightly less academic freedom, but once again, I believe it depends on which department we are talking about.

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<https://news.mingpao.com/pns/%E6%B8%AF%E8%81%9E/article/20220809/s00002/1659982437996/%E6%B8%AF%E5%A4%A7%E7%B4%80%E5%A7%94%E5%AD%B8%E7%94%9F%E4%BB%A3%E8%A1%A8-%E6%93%AC%E6%94%B9%E6%95%99%E5%A7%94%E6%9C%83%E4%BB%BB%E5%91%BD-%E6%9C%80%E5%BF%AB%E6%97%A5%E5%85%A7%E8%A1%A8%E6%B1%BA-%E6%A0%A1%E5%8F%8B%E5%98%86%E3%80%8C%E6%90%B2%E7%88%9B%E9%9D%A2%E3%80%8D%E7%84%A1%E8%AB%AE%E8%A9%A2>

⁴ <https://www.undergrad.hk/18600/>

Editors: Final question, do you have any other words you wish to say to the voters?

Marzuhk Akib Asjad: Yes. I have said this before, but I would like to reiterate this. Representation of international students in all of the organizational structures at HKU is very important. It's not just for the international students, it's for the locals as well, for everybody. For a much better school experience, everyone has to be accounted for at different levels of the University, so that we can bring our ideas together and form better ideas of teaching, to prosper and move forward together in both the academic life and the non-academic life. To do this, representation of diverse backgrounds is required.

