

Revisions to the HKU way of selecting students for admission: A guide for students

The University of Hong Kong (HKU) has been continuously refining its selection mechanisms for choosing overseas students from the thousands who apply each year, since it started to admit students (initially just from Mainland China) in 1999. In 2018 and 2019, however, it is making a qualitative change to the selection process, and this article is intended to explain to students (and any others interested) the rationale for this change, provide applicants to HKU with further information about what the University is looking for, and offer some advice to these applicants. The article is written by the Director of Undergraduate Admissions, Professor John Spinks.

Let me try to summarize what changes are taking place in the way in which we, in HKU, select students for admission, why we are doing this, and offer some advice that I hope will be helpful to you in being successful in your application to HKU. You may also find this information helps you understand more about academic life in universities more generally, and perhaps even helpful in getting offers of admission to other universities worldwide that are similar to HKU in their selection procedures.

The major change to the assessment of applicants to HKU like you revolves around using a Critical Analysis of an article as the basis for a Group Discussion. You probably know that the Group Discussions, which have been part of the HKU selection process for a number of years, involve you and usually 5-7 other students, sitting facing each other to discuss a topic, while HKU professors listen to what you have to say to each other. The Critical Analysis, that involves reading an academic or intellectual article, and thinking critically (and, as you will see, writing) about the issues it raises, is the new part. The Critical Analysis and the Group Discussion are related, but also distinct, parts of the selection process, and will be discussed separately. However, both mirror the type of educational environment that, if you are successful in your application, you will find when you join HKU. That alignment of the selection process and the HKU intellectual environment is critical, since the University wishes to admit those who are the most likely to benefit from the education that HKU provides. For the sake of clarity, we call the Critical Analysis and the Group Discussion, together with any other questions that the interviewers may ask after the Group Discussion, “Centrally Coordinated Admissions Interviews” (CCAIs).

You will likely find that a University education can be very different from a school education, where, as you will know very well, there is often a cultural expectation (and very often pressure from your parents!) to study curriculum content extremely well, and achieve well in standardized or national examinations. The competition for places at top universities is so intense that the education itself can become examination driven and curriculum bound.

This is markedly different from University education. I like to think of universities as communities of learners, where students and professors like me share in constructing and developing knowledge. That is the very basis for the Group Discussions that have successfully formed part of the HKU selection process for a number of years.

In the past, the Group Discussion was around a topic given to them by the HKU professors at the time. The topic was usually one that was of general interest, did not require any specialist knowledge, and often represented an ethical or moral dilemma. One example was whether huge sums of money should be spent on the Olympic Games or instead put to use developing community projects. Another was to discuss how the participants would change the country's educational system if they were made Minister of Education. The topics were not important. What was critical was how students in the Group Discussions approached the topic. We found that it was possible to assess students in these Group Discussions for their ability to listen to and follow on from other participants ideas, as we would hope they would do in a University, interacting with the professors (and not just following them) as well as other students. English language skills, rational or logical thinking, and even some social competencies or creative thinking can form part of a good Group Discussion, just as they might in a good university tutorial session. Group Discussions certainly give a better understanding of an applicant's communicative, debating, understanding, reasoning and social skills than an individual interview.

It is important for you as an applicant to HKU (or a potential applicant to HKU) to note that Group Discussions are not ways of assessing your own achievements, as might be the case in a more typical individual interview for entrance to a University. In HKU, we feel that we have all the necessary information about broad achievements on your written application form. Information about examination scores is made available to us, sometimes before, sometimes after the selection process, and is a separate part of the assessment.

A recent survey by Kira Talent, a Canadian company that queried around 200 universities about their admission practices, showed that 13% were now using group interviews. This does not make it a common practice, of course, not being used as much as grades, letters of recommendation, essays, resumes, personal statements, individual interviews, timed video assessments, work samples, demonstrated interest and references (in that order of common use).

We are making some revisions to the Group Discussion, as you will see if you read on. However, before that, let me turn to the Critical Analysis, as this is the new part of the selection procedures, and may, like Group Discussions, require a rather different type of expertise than you will have developed in your previous education. It is my intention to give you as much information about this Critical Analysis as you may need to help you. Even if you move to another university and not HKU, I believe that the skills required for a Critical Analysis will be of considerable value to you as you develop into a more independent and intellectually curious adult. HKU has a Dual Degree arrangement with a leading political science university in France, called Sciences Po, that involves students spending two years in France at Sciences Po, then two years in Hong Kong at HKU, with the award of two degrees if successful after those four years, one from Europe and one from Asia. I was at Sciences Po a few weeks ago, when they had two Prime Ministers, one from Canada, and one from New Zealand, visiting on the same day. The French Prime Minister is an alumnus of this University. You will understand from this that it is a world-renowned university. Anyway, Sciences Po uses a Critical Analysis method to select students from its many applicants each year, and our new selection system in HKU combines the best of their system with the best of our earlier system.

In HKU and other top universities, we do not want you to blindly accept what you read in books, or even what you hear from Professors. We want you to take in this information and construct your own understanding based on this as well as the context, your own reading or understanding from elsewhere and discussions that you may have with other top students in class, around the dinner table, or in your residence before going to sleep! This requires you to consider all that information critically. Is the information you receive accurate? Is it up to date? Does it apply to the present situation? Are there alternative ways of looking at it, alternative perspectives? Do you agree with it? If not, why not? Would other people have different views of it? All life issues are complex, particularly those that we discuss and debate in University. This approach to understanding the world around us is at the heart of the Critical Analysis and the Group Discussion that follows. And, it is at the heart of a University education, where we want to help you develop into intellectually curious and thinking adults.

You will be given 20 minutes to read a short Article on a topic, usually a current problem, dilemma or issue under discussion in the world around us. Your task is NOT just to read and understand it. Your task is to think critically about the issues the Article raises. You are asked to write a Critical Analysis of the Article within this 20 minutes. It is a tough assignment, but one that good students like you are able to accomplish.

I have provided below some notes that we give to all students to help them understand what a Critical Analysis is all about. These notes are in the form of questions (that you can add to those posed above):

- *What are the points in the article with which you agree? What are the points with which you disagree? Justify any answers.*
- *Are the arguments or statements in the article rational and logical?*
- *Does the article present an unbiased account of its topic?*
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of the article?*
- *What are the implications of the article's main points for society today? Are they positive or negative?*
- *Is the topic one of importance in today's world? In what ways?*

In a good Critical Analysis, I would not expect students to necessarily answer those questions, and certainly not be able to answer all of them! I have supervised many research postgraduates who have investigated complex problems, and I have always tried to explain to them that knowledge development and understanding a problem better is not always about answering questions – it is often about asking better questions! But, in the list of questions above, we would expect you to be able to at least comment intelligently on them. And, please remember that the questions I have provided for you are only a guide to what to write in your Critical Analysis. I will also provide for you the details of the actual procedures that we give to all students who are shortlisted for this selection process. It is best to read them thoroughly in advance to understand exactly what will happen. This makes your day much less stressful!

Following this 20 minutes, you hand in your written Critical Analysis and then go into a Group Discussion. (The written Critical Analysis will be looked at by the interviewers as you

are discussing the Article, and may form part of your assessment even though it is not formally scored as an independent piece of work). You will be teamed up with 5-7 other students, and asked to discuss the article. Two HKU Professors will sit nearby and listen into your conversation, but, like the Group Discussions in previous years, they will not intervene. You should not talk to them but to each other, just as though you were sitting as a group of friends having a drink in a coffee shop one evening! Of course, we expect that discussion to be, on the whole, an intellectual one, and that is what we look for. If there is time, you may also be asked individual questions by the professors after this Group Discussion.

I will give you some advice about this later, but you will want to know that we look for the following parameters in our assessment of an individual in this Group Discussion:

- English language competency (both speaking and listening)
(We have your English language writing from the Critical Analysis that you have written, and you will have based this on your reading of the Article)
- Communication competency
- Logical, rational thinking

And, to a lesser extent:

- Creative thinking
- Social interaction and teamwork.

The ability to follow another person's arguments and to build on these is part of the value of the constructive learning process that I have written about above.

You will see from this list that not all of these parameters are assessed in formal examinations. In HKU, we value all-rounded development – we always say that excellent academic performance in examinations is necessary but not always sufficient for entry to HKU. That is one reason for having this selection process.

Another is that knowledge construction, as I have described above, is often a social process. Even today's successful entrepreneurs work in teams.

A third reason is that the general knowledge and breadth of the issues presented in the Articles which are then debated in the Group Discussions aligns very well with the learning environment of HKU – one in which there is a wealth of optional general education programmes for you as a student, to help you develop your own individual talents, and where such co-curricular activities are valued almost as highly as the formal curriculum.

I have found that nearly all students joining HKU are enthralled by the prospect of a more student-centred, problem-based type of learning, with an emphasis on co-curricular activities and the development of individual interests and strengths. The transition of learning styles from high school to university is not a problem that students talk about to me. More specifically, the Mainland and Overseas students that I see are very successful in moving from what is often a more instructivist, teacher centred, teaching pedagogy to one that is focused on a constructivist, student-centred, learning pedagogy, in which you are given more responsibility for what and how you study. Sometimes, however, it is necessary to explain the purpose and value of this approach to education to parents!

The move away from using examination scores as the only determinant of selection has caused some concern in the past. People have asked whether the scoring for the Group Discussion, Group Interview or Individual Interview, as we have had in the past, is objective and reliable. There are a number of ways to address that issue. We may question, as I have done above, whether examination scores on their own measure the sort of student attributes that are important for university success. The research on examination scores or grades as predictors of university GPAs is not clear. In other words, while people would not normally question the reliability of examination scores, we can question their validity, particularly their predictive validity¹. We try to make our CCAIs more reliable by adopting a set of instructions that govern all of the process and are known by all HKU people concerned. There are instructions to Professors and administrators about when you as applicants will get the Article to read, how long you have to read it, what information you are given about the process, what the scoring system is for the Group Discussions, what we are trying to measure and so on. In the end, we combine the examination scores with the CCAI scores, to provide a composite measure of potential for studying at HKU. The formula for this is complex, and I am not going to tell you how we do it! Examination scores are still important to us, for many reasons. Some of those reasons that I have not discussed are that they are a way of rewarding you for all the hard work you have put into studying over the years, and that examination score cut-offs are used by many as a way of ranking universities. HKU's reputation is based, to a large extent, on the quality of its students. We will not give up that reputation lightly!

In summary, in the discussion of selection procedures above, it was noted that the interview procedures were aligned with the pedagogical approach of the University, in that they focused on all-rounded development and interests, and competencies such as communication, reasoning and argument.

As some of your predecessors who gained admission to HKU will tell you, we also try to make the CCAI sessions friendly and personal. The interviewers are all HKU professors, so remember that we choose to become professors in a university because we love talking to students and listening to them. So, you will find that we are (nearly!) always happy, if time permits, to chat to you, or answer questions that you might have. That personal approach is also aligned with putting students at the centre of activities in HKU itself (the centre of learning, of making decisions about courses or even your future). The tests and selection interviews are aligned with the quality and education of the institution, while the respect paid to all applicants and to the motivations and needs that they bring to the application process is itself aligned with the respect accorded to all those that enter HKU.

I will finish by referring (with some modifications) to a few sentences from an article I wrote a few years ago about enrolling students from outside Hong Kong. The general point made there is just as valid today.

¹ Reliability is the extent to which when we measure something, it results in the same scores each time you measure it. Validity is asking whether we are measuring the right thing in the first place. So, for example, measuring a person's height is very reliable. But it has zero validity using it to select people for a computer job, and perhaps high validity when selecting players for a basketball team.

The fundamental approach (of HKU) is to find ways in which institutions can add value to non-local students and their families through their provision of education. This has to be approached not from what the institution can offer, but from the perspective of what the student is looking for, or, sometimes, what the student's home country itself requires for its ongoing development. In this sense, international recruitment is seen more within a social or political context, with educational provision being a valuable resource that should be used for mutual benefit, not just for the host institution. There are many issues to be considered within this wider context – for example, the impact of students leaving their homeland and being enticed to stay away, the alignment of the disciplines that non-local students typically apply for and their country's plans and ongoing development, the value of deeper collaboration in raising the profile and educational provision of the partner universities, the development of an educational provision in the host university where non-local students are contributing to that environment as much as they may be taking from it, where a true exchange of knowledge is taking place.

And, finally here is my advice to you, in bullet form:

1. Read all that you can about the CCAI, so that there are no last-minute surprises. You do not want extra uncertainty!
2. Consider carefully what is meant by a Critical Analysis.
3. Practice if you have time – both a Critical Analysis and a Group Discussion.
4. Use the down time on the CCAI day to talk to current HKU students, HKU administrators and, if they are free when they are not interviewing, HKU Professors. They are your best way to gain information about HKU. You will also find that it helps you to relax. You will find that they are all quite nice people!!
5. Read broadly – consider current issues in the news, ethical dilemmas, etc. -- not just local issues but worldwide issues.
6. Enjoy the exercise! It is not easy to do, I know, but it may help you to know that we as Professors enjoy listening to you. Consider it as an interesting experience.
7. Some specifics for the group discussion...
 - a. Don't monopolize the discussion
 - b. Don't try to push others into talking, but offer quieter members the opportunity to talk
 - c. Don't set the structure for the discussion at the start, unless you are sure that this will lead to a good interchange of ideas
 - d. It's not about presenting your ideas...these can be assessed in an individual interview. It's about feeding off each other to make the discussion deeper and richer.
 - e. Don't get aggressive.
 - f. But, don't be shy...you will be asked at the end if you haven't spoken much but that is not a good position to be in.
 - g. Consider the different levels of a Critical Analysis.
 - h. And finally, Good Luck!!!

The following are the Instructions and Guidelines given to all students who attend the CCAI sessions.

INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS FOR THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- You will have 20 mins to read through and critically evaluate an Article that will be given to you.
- You are to prepare individually without discussion or collaboration.
- You should not have access to a mobile device / computer / other means of electronic communications during the preparation.
- You will be given one A4 sheet, double sided. You should write, in English, your Critical Analysis of the Article on one side. It should not be more than one page long, and may be much shorter than that. Concentrate on answering concisely. On the other side of the sheet, you may make rough notes to help you organise thoughts during the 20 minutes. At the end of the 20 minute period, you will be asked to hand in this sheet of paper. The Critical Analysis will be made available to the interviewers (they will not be concerned with your rough notes, if any, on the other side).
- Use the Guide for Critical Analysis to help structure your ideas.
- You should not use or write on any other paper.
- Do not make any notes or marks of any kind on the Article.
- After 20 minutes, you will join other students who have read the same Article, and you are asked to discuss the Article amongst yourselves, with HKU professors listening to your discussion. That Group Discussion may revolve around the questions listed in the Guide to Critical Analysis, or around others that the group sees as important. The best discussions will often be around some of the more difficult questions at the bottom of that list. Remember to listen carefully to others' views and ideas, and develop these further if possible. Do not merely give your own views that were formed before entering the Group Discussion. That is not a Discussion!
- If time remains, the HKU professors may ask you some further questions about this article.
- You must return the Article at the end of the Group Discussion.

GUIDE TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Level 1. Read and understand the article. Be able to describe the major points or ideas and the main arguments in the article, and be clear its conclusions.

Level 2. Critically evaluate the article. This means attempting to answer some of the following questions (in increasing order of difficulty):

- *What are the points in the article with which you agree? What are the points with which you disagree? Justify any answers.*
- *Are the arguments or statements in the article rational and logical?*
- *Does the article present an unbiased account of its topic?*
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of the article?*
- *What are the implications of the article's main points for society today? Are they positive or negative?*
- *Is the topic one of importance in today's world? In what ways?*

A good critique will be able to complete Level 1 quickly, and be able to offer some analysis of at least some of the bullet points of Level 2.

The Group Discussion should concentrate on Level 2 issues.