**SCMP Article**

**When universities are full of anger, what hope for tolerance?**

I attended a liberal arts college in the United States. Among its core values were inclusiveness and understanding among different cultural and other groups. I like to think I absorbed these values and still keep them today.

In the past few months, hundreds of universities in the US – including my alma mater – have been caught up in a controversy. To one side, the debate is about language and behaviour that can be perceived as offensive or even threatening. To another side, it is about “political correctness” and censorship.

The dispute was initially about Halloween costumes. A campus community group at Yale issued a request that students avoid wearing costumes that, among other things, mocked or disrespected cultures or faiths. One faculty member responded with an email essentially asking people not to get too worked up if someone was a bit provocative.

The result was a backlash by students. Many commentators said students were being oversensitive. Some said “political correctness” was becoming no different from censorship. The argument spread to other campuses, where more students started to demand more consideration for women, ethnic minorities and other groups.

Of course, this is not happening in isolation. Some critics say the younger generation is too protected from the hard realities of life. Others are more sympathetic and say young people are right to take a stand against today’s realities – like police shootings of unarmed young black men in the US.

Meanwhile, we are having our own “political correctness” problems. Last month, Hong Kong was about to play China in the World Cup Asian football qualifier. Students at several local universities put up banners supporting Hong Kong and – in at least one case – carrying the slogan “Hong Kong is not part of China”.

Other students – apparently from the mainland – defaced the banners. In one case, a female student was filmed changing the poster to read “Hong Kong just a part of China”, which led to an argument which went viral. Some netizens accused her of censoring others, while others pointed out that she was also, in some ways, being censored.

This might seem like a minor dispute among students, but the media made sure others got dragged into it. While I was visiting to know, essentially, which side I was on. (It was the first I had heard of the incident). Even the match itself became the subject of a test, with the media asking officials to state which team they supported.

In some ways, this all sounds amusing. But it is taking place against a background of anger and friction about Hong Kong’s relations with the mainland.

One feature of “political correctness” is that it is about how language is used. An example is the Cantonese word gwailo – or “ghost man” – to mean Westerner. Some Western friends use it as a joke. But, in another context, it can be intended or perceived as a racist slur. Calling mainland visitors “locusts” is the same. It is especially worrying if insulting comments are becoming part of life on our university campuses.

There is a need for rational discussion here. It is not a question of whether Hong Kong is part of China – that is a constitutional fact. But it is perfectly valid and necessary for local and mainland students (and all of us) to explore the differences between Hong Kong and the mainland.

To get answers, we need basic honesty – for example, recognition that there are real differences. But we also need an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect. If we do not have that in our universities, where can we have free debate?