**SCMP Article**

**Disrespectful youth a sign of the times**

Most people in Hong Kong have probably seen the Baptist University video which went viral last week. For anyone who did not, it showed a group of students, including the union leader, confronting staff members at the campus language centre. One used foul language and the students’ behaviour towards the shorter, female staff member seemed physically intimidating.

A lot of commentators have focused on the students’ complaint about a compulsory Mandarin language requirement for undergraduates. This raises the issue of localism and anti-mainland sentiment among some young Hong Kong people.

But I think that is a distraction. The real point is that the behaviour shown in the video was rude, disrespectful and frankly obnoxious. Even if a student has a valid complaint about a university policy, there is no excuse for this nasty way of expressing it.

I was on the receiving end of similar treatment from students several years ago. I was the chairman of the Lingnan University council at the time, and we were in the process of selecting a new university president. For several hours, I was subjected to quite serious abusive language from student leaders who felt the appointment should be carried out through a “one man, one vote” election process.

As council chairman, it was part of my role to listen to students’ criticism – even if that meant being insulted. But it was shocking and frankly unpleasant. I can’t help but feel sympathy towards the Baptist staff members who were simply performing their duties.

It is tempting for people to link this behaviour with Hong Kong’s broader social and political conflicts. To some, this is the fault of radical Occupy protesters who set a bad example for the young. To others, it is the fault of the government for failing to create economic opportunities, thus making our youth angry.

But again, I think this is missing the bigger picture. There does seem to be a trend towards disrespect and intolerance among students in recent years, and not just in Hong Kong. As a trustee of a liberal arts college in the United States, I also keep in touch with developments on American campuses. Universities in the US have noticed a trend in recent years for students to become less tolerant of others’ opinions.

One typical example was when students demanded that a respected serious writer with conservative views be banned from speaking on their campus. They insisted that her freedom of speech came second to the feelings of people who might disagree with her. They rejected the concept of a respectful exchange of ideas – which is central to academic life.

Colleges are also noticing students’ changing expectations of campus life. For example, some students demand “trigger warnings” in case the content of courses upsets sensitive individuals.

This perhaps reflects a feeling that universities are service providers that should give the students – consumers – exactly what they want. Although the trouble at Baptist University concerned Mandarin, the students really seemed most angry about an inconvenient course requirement.

I do realise that many young people have very good manners and treat others with respect at all times. (And to be fair, some older people do not.) I also strongly believe that young people and students have a right to express their opinions, and to speak out when they think something is wrong. But they need to do it within particular boundaries, with basic manners.

Of course, every older generation criticises the youth of their time for lack of discipline, laziness or some other faults. And I am reaching that age when my own kids are growing and I am no longer part of the younger generation.

Maybe parents should ask themselves if they are the problem. Have the children been spoilt, maybe by having helpers do things for them? Are the kids online all the time on social media? One disturbing thing I have heard of is parents with children at high school who take their kids’ side if a teacher takes disciplinary action.

I have no answers. But I expect that not only the young but also the older generations are partly to blame.