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Academics pledge to help students who boycott classes over suffrage row

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Chinese University students attend a forum to discuss the class boycott. Photo: Edward Wong

The announcement by mainland officials of new rules ensuring that only hand-picked candidates will be allowed to run for Hong Kong's top leadership position in 2017 was, not surprisingly, condemned by democracy activists.

But this latest setback in the struggle for genuine universal suffrage has brought to the surface a growing undercurrent of support among academics for the Occupy Central movement.

It would be overstating the case to say there is massive backing for the campaign. But an increasing number of Hong Kong academics are getting behind the fight.

Dr Benson Wong Wai-kwok, assistant professor at Baptist University's department of government and international studies, says more than 250 academics have signed the joint statement pledging to fight for democracy.



Dr Benson Wong

Wong, the organiser of a signature campaign among academics to oppose the National People's Congress decision and fight for democracy, says: "Because of the increasing awareness of the seriousness of the issue, and students' promotion on campus in the past few days, more academic, teaching and administrative colleagues support the movement in different ways.

"It is possible that some choose not to stand too close to the front, but they appreciate the movement by providing logistical and moral support," Wong says.

David McCarthy, a philosophy professor from the University of Hong Kong, has incorporated Occupy Central into his course on "value theory". He also supports students skipping classes by uploading courses online and allowing them to turn in their work in a flexible manner.

Another academic actively lending his support to the campaign is **Gordon Mathews**, head of anthropology at the Chinese University. An American who has lived in Hong Kong for 20 years, Mathews views it as his civic duty as a Hongkonger to speak up at this critical juncture.

He says: "Some of us who are not Chinese are very willing to engage in Occupy Central, but we are worried that, as foreigners, and particularly as Americans, we will be playing into the hands of the mainland's propaganda. We don't want to be involved if we would hurt the Occupy Central movement."

Mathews certainly doesn't want to assist Beijing, which often claims that foreign influence has infiltrated and influenced the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Having lived in the city for more than two decades, he doesn't see himself as an outsider.

"The least I could do is to be there when Occupy Central happens to make sure the police do not misbehave," he says.



Professor Gordon Mathews

"But if being there just to observe would get me arrested, then so be it. To be honest, I don't believe I would get arrested. But if that happened, then for sure Hong Kong is not a place for me to stay."

Mathews feels that as a professor, a foreigner and a long-standing Hong Kong resident, it's important for everyone to fulfil their civic duties, even if doing what is morally right may lead to breaking the law.

He warns against politicising or glorifying his support to help students who plan to skip classes during the week of September 22. In a curtain-raiser to Occupy

Central, students from at least 14 universities and colleges plan to stage a week-long boycott of classes.

Mathews confirms he will help by recording lectures and posting them online for students to access classes they miss.

The least I could do is to be there ... to make sure the police do not misbehave
Gordon Mathews

He insists as an educator that it's his responsibility to help students if they miss classes as long as there are legitimate reasons. Taking part in Occupy Central is a "civic responsibility which students should be encouraged to do", he says.

Wong also plans to help students who take part in the boycott. Wong says: "Classes will be offered as usual [during the week of September 22] and, if students join the boycott, make-up classes can be offered based on mutual arrangements between students and me."

Asked about local university students' support for social movements, Wong says: "Based on my observation, students understand what they are doing and the meaningfulness arising from class boycotting.

"In this light, political participation of university students can serve as the first step towards a civic engagement, with the aim to continue and sustain the entire democratic movement in a gradual, but consistent way."

Wong feels students can learn from the entire movement to fight against the decision. He adds: "As the first step towards the understanding of civil disobedience, it is important to let them know more about how university students can take an initiative against the political discrimination imposed by the Beijing authorities.

"During the process of the campaign, forums, talks and performances will be organised in light of the current political and institutional controversies; that will arouse their attention.

"Most importantly, apart from university students, high school students and citizens can also be learning from the entire movement by observing and participating in such events, and then cultivating a network and linkage in preparation for future campaigns," Wong says.

The final word goes to Mathews, who has a faithful following on Facebook which mainly consists of his students, with this posting: "If Chinese University classes are shut down at the end of September, I will support the student protesters.

"I will film all my classes and put them online, and make sure that no one who is arrested and jailed will academically suffer for it. I will also do all I can to offer my class for those who want to attend, and who aren't participating in the boycott: this is strictly a matter of free, individual choice," he writes.

While he fears the Occupy Central movement will not change the central government's mind on democratic reform, Mathews says: "My biggest worry is that the introduction of Article 23 would strip us of our freedom of expression."

For the preservation of such freedom, he argues, Hong Kong people must speak up and be counted in the Occupy Central campaign.