

To What Extent Have Examination Reforms Since 1997 Negatively Affected the Social and Academic Development of Students of Secondary Age in Hong Kong?

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ABSTRACT

Education is the focus for people aged 16 to 18. Working hard is important in order to have a brighter pathway. However, students in Hong Kong are often suffering from pressure all around them. From self-expectations to the entire society, pressure have brought huge impacts on students' mental and physical health. This essay will argue that the examination reforms since 1997 is bringing negative effects to the social and academic development to secondary aged students in Hong Kong. This essay will also cover the background of the examination reformation, the factors of pressure to students, charts will be included to strengthen the stance in the research.

Introduction

As the lifestyle of the younger generation has changed, the education system has been reformed in Hong Kong since 1997. (HKSAR Government, no date). Until 2011, secondary education required 7 years while a university degree required 3 years. There were HKCEE and HKALE exams taking place in secondary 5 and 7 respectively (HKEAA, no date). Starting from 2012, the secondary education shortened to 6 years while university degrees increased to 4 years (HKEAA, no date). The previous exams were replaced by the HKDSE, in secondary 6. The changes affected the shaping of personalities, time management, whole person development and health of students.

This essay will argue the examination reforms since 1997 brought negative effects to the social and academic development of secondary aged students in Hong Kong. The age of the students will be focused on students aged 16-18. It will cover the background and pressures on students.

Background

Examination Reform

Examination reform leads to extra pressure for students. In previous system, students have more choices in pathways. For instance, students can choose to join vocational training schools in secondary 3. While some choose to join universities after attending all examinations. However, in today's system, students need to complete the entire secondary education to participate in public examination. Then, they can either join tertiary education or the labour market. The reduction in examinations means the pathways choices are reduced, which the pressure level remains at high level.

Examination Reform Under Covid-19

Changes under Covid are shown in figure 1 and 2.

Subject	Paper (Original % → DSE 2022)	Structure	Duration
Core Subjects			
Chinese Language	Paper 1: Reading (24% → 32%)	Section A: Classics Passage in Compulsory Module (30%)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
		Section B: Extended Reading (70%) Consist of: Chinese Classical x 1 Chinese Vernacular x 1-2	
	Paper 2: Writing (24% → 32%)	Choose 1 from 3 questions (At least 600 words)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
	Paper 3: Integrated Skills and Listening (18% → 26%)	Section A: Listening (20%)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
		Section B: Integrated Skills (80%) (At least 500 words in 1 hour 15 mins)	
Paper 4: Oral (10% → 0%)	Cancelled due to Covid		
English Language	Paper 1: Reading (20% → 23%)	Section A: Compulsory Part (50%)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
		Section B: Elective Part (50%) Section B1: Easier Level (Highest level: 4) Section B2: Difficult Level (Highest level: 5**)	
	Paper 2: Writing (25% → 28%)	Section A: Guided Writing (40%) (Around 200 words)	120 minutes (2 hours)
		Section B: Extended Writing (60%) (At least 400 words) Choose 1 from 8 questions	
	Paper 3: Integrated Skills and Listening (30% → 34%)	Section A: Listening (50%)	120 minutes (2 hours)
		Section B: Integrated Skills (50%) (Task 8 – 10 → within 1 hr 30 mins)	
Paper 4: Oral (10% → 0%)	Cancelled due to Covid		
Mathematics (Compulsory)	Paper 1: Structural Questions (Total Score: 105 marks - 65%)	(Foundational) Section A1: 8-11 Level 1-3 Questions Section A2: 4-7 Level 3-4 Questions	135 minutes (2 hrs 15 mins)
		(Non-foundational) Section B: 4-7 Level 4-5** Questions	
Mathematics (Compulsory)	Paper 2: Multiple-Choice Questions (Total score: 45 marks – 35%)	Section A: 30 Questions (Consists of $\frac{2}{3}$ of total score)	75 minutes (1hr 15 mins)
		Section B: 15 Questions (Consists of $\frac{1}{3}$ of total score)	
Mathematics (Extended Module)	Paper M1: Structural Questions & Multiple-Choice Questions (Total Score: 100 marks)	Section A: Short Questions (8-12 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score)	150 minutes (2 hrs 30 mins)
		Section B: Long Question (3-5 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score)	

	Paper M2: Structural Questions & Multiple-Choice Questions (Total Score: 100 marks)	Section A: Short Questions (8-12 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score)	150 minutes (2 hrs 30 mins)
		Section B: Long Question (3-5 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score)	
Liberal Studies	Paper 1: Data-based Questions (50%)	3 questions with 2-3 sub-questions each	120 minutes (2 hours)
	Paper 2: Extended Questions (30%)	Choose 1 from 3 questions (2 sub-questions)	75 minutes (1 hr 15mins)
Elective Subjects (Category A)			
Chemistry	Paper 1: Compulsory Module (75%)	Section A: Multiple Choice Questions (22.5%) (Consist of 36 questions)	120 minutes (2 hrs)
		Section B: Structural Questions (52.5%) Part I: 8 Level 1-4 questions Part II: 5 Key chapters & Level 4-5** questions	
	Paper 2: Elective Module (25%)	3 questions with 10 sub-questions each	60 minutes (1 hour)
ICT	Paper 1: Compulsory Module (55%)	Section A: Multiple Choice Questions (40%) (Consist of 40 questions)	120 minutes (2 hours)
		Section B: Structural Questions (60%) Consist of 5 questions (At least 4 sub-questions per questions)	
	Paper 2: Elective Module (25%)	4 questions with at least 8 sub-questions each	90 minutes (1 hour 30 minutes)
		2A Database 2B Data Communication and Networking 2C Multimedia Production and Web Site Development 2D Software Development	
History	Paper 1: Data-based Questions (60%)	4 compulsory questions	120 minutes (2 hours)
	Paper 2: Descriptive Questions (40%)	Choose 2 from 7 questions	90 minutes (1 hour 30 minutes)

From figure 1, it is clear the percentage changes in examination paper are large. Paper 1 and 2 in Chinese Language increased by 8%. Paper 4 in Chinese and English Language reduced to 0%. Also, there were more flexibilities towards the structure of the papers.

Category A: Senior secondary subjects	Weighting of SBA in the final result			
	2020	2021	2022 – 2023	2024
Core Subjects				
Chinese Language	24%	10%		15%
English Language	25%	15%		
Liberal Studies	20%	10%	0%	x*
Elective Subjects (Science)				
Biology	20%	0%		20%
Chemistry	20%	0%		20%
Physics	20%	0%		20%
Combined Science	20%	0%		x
Integrated Science	20%	0%		x
Information and Communication Technology	20%	0%		20%
Elective Subjects (Humanities)				
Chinese Literature	15%	0%		15%
Literature in English	20%	0%		20%
Elective Subjects (Non-science or <u>Non-humanities</u>)				
Design & Applied Technology	40%	20%		40%
Technology & Living	30%	0%		30%
Health Management & Social Care	20%	0%		20%
Visual Arts	50%			

* Starting from academic year 2024, Liberal Studies has changed to Citizenship and Social Development.

From figure 2, it is clear the reduction in School-based Assessment (SBA) is significant. Language subjects reduced by 10% -14%. Meanwhile, SBA of Liberal Studies, elective subjects (Except Design & Applied Technology) reduced to 0% in 2022-2023.

Sources of Stress

According to Ma (2019) there are major pressures on students including from themselves, peers, parents, and the system.

Students have high individual expectations, which lead to poor mental and academic development. Hong Kong students slept for less than 6 hours a day, which is at least 2 hours shorter than the United Nations' recommended sleeping hours. Lack of sleep leads to absence of physical and mental development, which affects daily learning effectiveness. According to Wong (2021), the shortened sleeping hours increases the risk of losing memory capacity. Also, memory impairment affects students' understandable abilities. Students find it difficult to recall memories and remember new contents (Yan, 2021). This affects students' learning confidence. Meanwhile, the schedule of Hong Kong students is fully packed with extra-curricular activities, it is difficult to amend the timetable for revision and preparation (Ho, 2021). Limited time to prepare is affecting the revising effectiveness. Self-pressure brings negative effects to physical and mental development.

In the age of 16-18, people are sensitive to peers' opinions. They believed their friends focus on them and hope to continue the friendship forever (Hok You Club, 2019). Teenagers think peers' opinions are better than their parents', as there are no generation gaps. Teenagers talk to their peers when they face problems. Also, the faces of Chinese make teenagers become sensitive to others' opinions. Chinese think he/she should be proud of him/herself when being appreciated (Lo, 2020). This creates resentment towards peers and reluctance in returning to school, which harms peer relationship. Breaking down happens when coming up with different values. Therefore, pressure remains in high level, which causes student stress to burst.

The traditional parenting style in Hong Kong made students difficult to express their opinions and show abilities to the others, as their parents have full control on their schedules. Over 90% is controlled, which reflects the insufficient flexibilities for students' development. 60% of the timetable is filled with extra academic classes. They believe the more expensive the classes are, the higher students' achievements. However, they do not consider about student's pressure. This results in overcontrolling, which worsens the relationships between parents and students. Students also difficult to explore their interests and breath in the sea of learning. The parental pressure came from the parenting style.

Schools arrange many assessments, which over-revising brings heavy loads on students. Also, there is insufficient time to reflect on students' performance. Due to the tight teaching schedule, teachers teach many contents and conduct assessments within limited lessons. The results cannot reflect students' learning progress. Apart, technology is developing fast, which reciting becomes less important. Instead, schools should make their students become unique. They should add content regarding the development of technology and creativity. Reducing mandatory memorization helps to build positive values while creativity can prevent students from jobless after graduation.

Reference to Appendix 8 for the mind map of the 'Factors of Pressure'.

Methodology

In this research, the age is focused between 16 to 18, especially those in 18, they work hard to achieve better result in the public examinations. Meanwhile, students aged 18 suffer from huge changes in their life, as they are turning into an adult. This means they are busy in both academical and lifestyle. Investigating their lifestyle can spot out the effect on the changes in the education system.

The levels in secondary education system are mainly focus in secondary 4 to 6. As these students are affected by the changes in the education system.

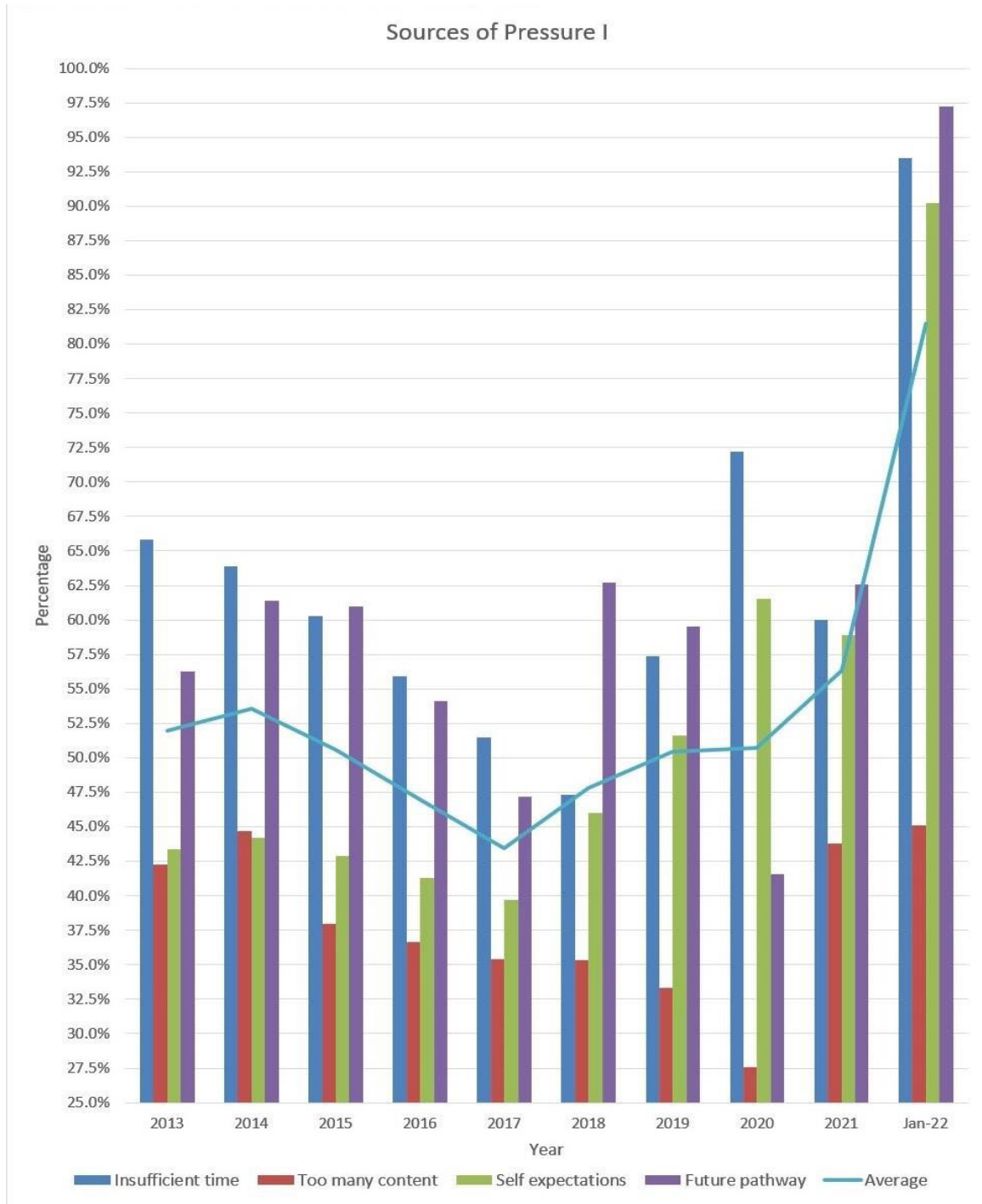
For lifestyle, the major focuses are lifestyle habits, such as, timetabling, sleeping habit, etc. As these are the areas young people found it difficult to manage.

Phenomenon from Journal Articles

Scientific researches reflect the effect on how pressure harms students. As they are facing pressure from many aspects, it is difficult for them to tackle at the same time. Also, journals point out, pressure affects the learning of students, for instance, difficulty with concentration, memory impairment, etc.

Statistics from Reports

The statistics from reports help to reflect the phenomenon, from a personal to an academic perspective.



From figure 3, it reflects the sources of pressure of students. It is significant that future pathway stresses the most.

Research Outcome

Pressure Level

After the introduction of HKDSE, average pressure level was 7.17 out of 10 (Hok You Club, 2022). Students' pressure is at high level, meaning the reformation harms students' learning. 2019 was 6.76 (Hok You Club, 2019), while 2020 was 7.48 (Hok You Club, 2020). It increased by 10.7%. The main reason was the outbreak of Covid-19. There were many uncertainties before the examination carried out. For instance, uncertainties on whether the examination would be conducted as normal (The Standard, 2022). This made students stressed. In 2021, the pressure level was 7.60 (Hok You Club, 2021) while 2022 was 7.87 (Hok You Club, 2022). It increased by 3.16%. The main reason is due to the reduction in School-based Assessment (SBA) (HKEAA, 2021). The percentage of SBA for scientific subjects was directly reduced from 20% to 0%. The percentage for each examination paper increases to maintain the total subject scores. This causes high impacts on students' mental health, as the proportion was record high, while the learning hours were reduced or conducted online. Online classes affect learning effectiveness, as real-time support cannot provide. For 2022, the pressure level worsened, mainly because of the future pathway uncertainties, especially the universities offer (The Standard, 2022). Many students did not receive any offers from universities until late April 2022. This means the students did not know the HKDSE requirements to obtain the unconditional offers. It made students feel anxious.

On the other hand, pressure level in January 2022 and March 2022 were 8 and 9 out of 11 respectively (Hok You Club, 2022). It increased by 26%. As the examination period is getting closer, it reflects the fear of failure. As March was within the fifth Covid wave in Hong Kong, schools were closed and switched to online learning. Unforeseeable future, such as, unreleased examination timetable, made candidates become nervous. They worried about the duration, timetabling, and difficulties of the examination. These factors pushed candidates' pressure to a very high level. After the examination board released the timetable, it was closely packed. In previous years, the examination took around 1 month while it took 2.5 weeks in 2022's HKDSE (HKEAA, 2022). The tightened examination schedule means the preparation period left are reduced. Students need to re-schedule their timetable to maximize the effectiveness of their final revision.

The pressure level implies the effect brought by the outbreak, and the examination reformation. In recent years, pressure level was recording high every year. It is estimated the pressure level will remind in a high level in coming years, as the subject reformations are induced to students and the universities requirements are undated to a higher level.

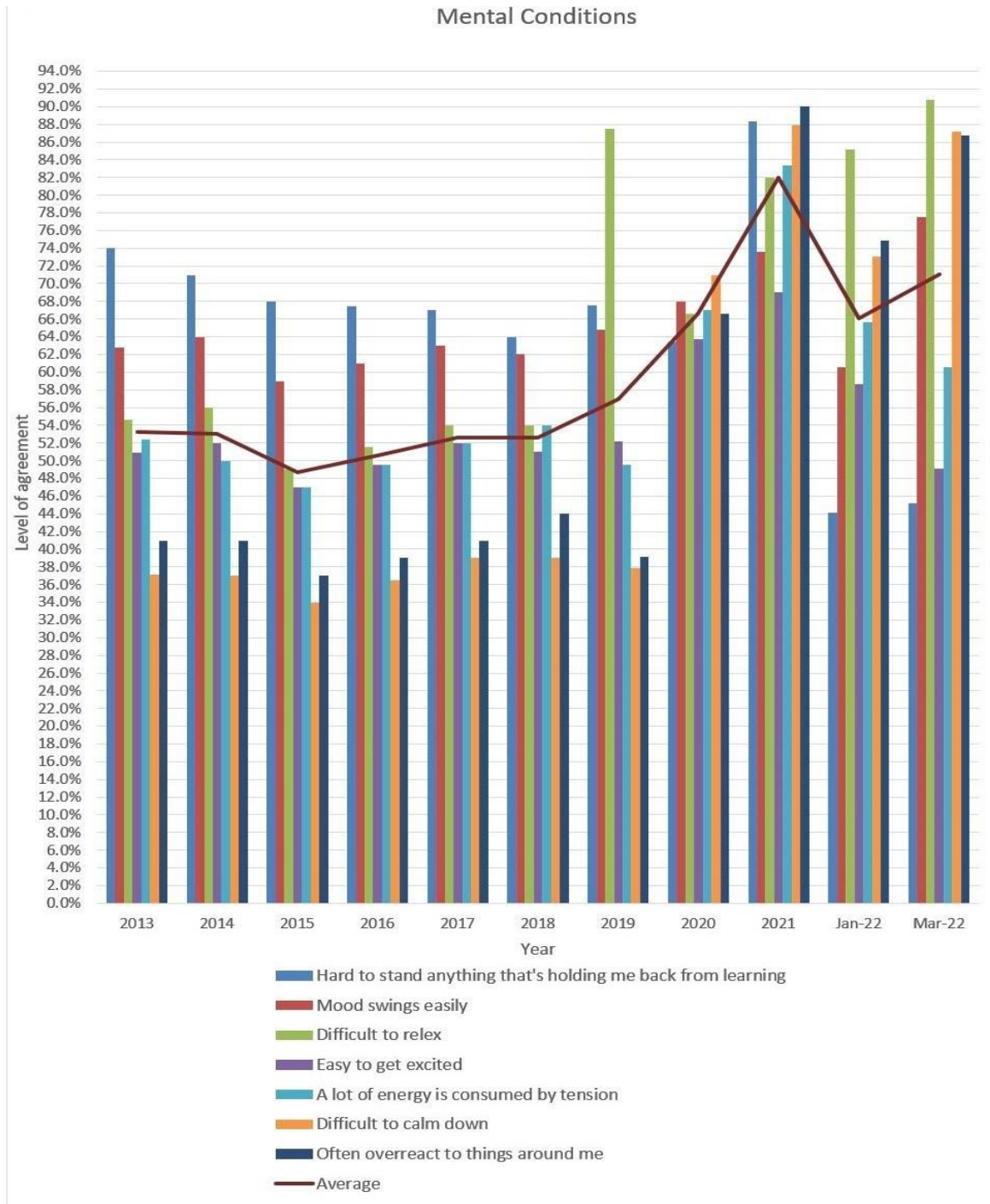
Reference to Appendix 3 Statistics of Pressure Level 2012-2022 and 4 Statistics of Pressure Level 2022.

Sources of Stress

To sum up, students are receiving pressure from people and uncontrollable factors surrounding them. Most students found future pathways as the largest pressure, as there are too many uncertainties. In 2013 was 56.3% (Hok You Club, 2013) while 2018 was 62.7% (Hok You Club, 2018). It increased by 6.4%. This reflects how students are stressed on it. In 2020 was 41.6% (Hok You Club, 2020) while 2022 was 97.2% (Hok You Club, 2022). It increased by 55.6%. It means the uncertainties worsened. Students cannot ensure their future pathway before attending the examination. Some even lose directions for the future. This reflects the influence of pressure on students' mental and physical health.

Reference to Appendix 6 Statistics of Source of Pressure (Part I) and 7 Statistics of Source of Pressure (Part II).

Mental Condition



Students become difficult to relax. In 2013 was 54.6% (Hok You Club, 2013) while 2018 was 54.0% (Hok You Club, 2018). It reduced by 0.6%. However, 2020 was 66.6% (Hok You Club, 2020) while 2022 was 90.8% (Hok You Club, 2022). It significantly increased by 24.2%. In 2013-2018, the reasons were insufficient resting time

and closely packed schedule. It affects students' concentrations and memories. Commonly, parents enrol at least 2 extra academic classes for their children (Katherine, 2021). It reduces students' learning motivation and passion. Meanwhile, online learning brought huge inconvenience to students, as they cannot ask for real-time support. Therefore, students' desire to learn is further discouraged. This affects the future pathway for the students and worsens their mental conditions.

Students become difficult to calm down. In 2020 was 71.0% (Hok You Club, 2020) while 2022 was 87.2% (Hok You Club, 2022). It increased by 16.2%. It is getting worse in recent years. This results in concentration impairment, which affects the learning outcomes. As the assessment performance is weakened, the result is lower than expected. Teachers then ask students to join extra classes, which pushes their fears to a high level. This causes harm to both the student and the class atmosphere.

Students often overreact to the surroundings. In 2020 was 66.6% (Hok You Club, 2020) while 2022 was 86.8% (Hok You Club, 2022). It increased by 20.2%. As online learning increases, it depends on students' self-discipline. But students are easily affected by the motions at home. For instance, some students told their teachers, his/her camera was broken when asked. Indeed, he/she is playing mobile game. This makes students less focus on class's content. It results in weakening the academic result. As a result, the learning motivation drops to a low level.

Reference to Appendix 8 Statistics of Students' Mental Conditions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination reformation since 1997 has negatively affected the social and academic development of students in secondary age in Hong Kong. The influence by the outbreak of Covid made students unable to have standard learning experience. This affects students' learning motivation and outcomes. Also, the changes in the percentage of examination paper affects their performance. Previously, students can obtain some points from schoolbased assessments (SBA) (The Standard, 2022). In 2020-2022, it was cancelled, and the percentage of each paper increased. Meanwhile, there are many uncontrollable factors, for instance, the late release of offers from universities (Hok You Club, 2022). This affects the future pathway planning for students, which brought huge mental effects to students.

Many students suffer from anxiety and insomnia. They overreact to the surroundings. In 2020-2022, it increased by 20.2% (Hok You Club, 2022). This means more students are suffering. Also, it is estimated to increase in the coming years. Mood swings become common, which increases the fear of failure. This results in losing academic motivation, which affect students' performance. For insomnia, students found it difficult to calm down and relax. In 2020 to 2022, difficulties in calming down and relaxation increased by 16.2% and 24.2% respectively (Hok You Club, 2022). As they have high self-expectations, they forced themselves to achieve certain score or complete certain amount within limited time. These doubly increase their pressure to a very high level and worsening their mental illnesses.

Appendix 1

Appendix 1: Percentage of paper in each subject

Subject	Paper (Original % → DSE 2022)	Structure	Duration
Core Subjects			
Chinese Language	Paper 1: Reading (24% → 32%)	Section A: Classics Passage in Compulsory Module (30%)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
		Section B: Extended Reading (70%) Consist of: Chinese Classical x 1 Chinese Vernacular x 1-2	
	Paper 2: Writing (24% → 32%)	Choose 1 from 3 questions (At least 600 words)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
	Paper 3: Integrated Skills and Listening (18% → 26%)	Section A: Listening (20%)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
		Section B: Integrated Skills (80%) (At least 500 words in 1 hour 15 mins)	
Paper 4: Oral (10% → 0%)	Cancelled due to Covid		
English Language	Paper 1: Reading (20% → 23%)	Section A: Compulsory Part (50%)	90 minutes (1hr 30 mins)
		Section B: Elective Part (50%) Section B1: Easier Level (Highest level: 4) Section B2: Difficult Level (Highest level: 5**)	
	Paper 2: Writing (25% → 28%)	Section A: Guided Writing (40%)... (Around 200 words)	120 minutes (2 hours)
		Section B: Extended Writing (60%)... (At least 400 words)... Choose 1 from 8 questions	
	Paper 3: Integrated Skills and Listening (30% → 34%)	Section A: Listening (50%)	120 minutes (2 hours)
Section B: Integrated Skills (50%)... (Task 8 – 10 → within 1 hr 30 mins)			
Paper 4: Oral (10% → 0%)	Cancelled due to Covid		
Mathematics (Compulsory)	Paper 1: Structural Questions (Total Score: 105 marks - 65%)	(Foundational)... Section A1: 8-11 Level 1-3 Questions... Section A2: 4-7 Level 3-4 Questions	135 minutes (2 hrs 15 mins)
		(Non-foundational)... Section B: 4-7 Level 4-5** Questions	
	Paper 2: Multiple-Choice Questions (Total score: 45 marks – 35%)	Section A: 30 Questions... (Consists of $\frac{2}{3}$ of total score)	75 minutes (1hr 15 mins)
		Section B: 15 Questions... (Consists of $\frac{1}{3}$ of total score)	
Mathematics (Extended Module)	Paper M1: Structural Questions & Multiple-Choice Questions (Total Score: 100 marks)	Section A: Short Questions (8-12 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score)	150 minutes (2 hrs 30 mins)
		Section B: Long Question (3-5 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score)	

	Paper M2: Structural Questions & Multiple-Choice Questions (Total Score: 100 marks)	Section A: Short Questions (8-12 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score) Section B: Long Question (3-5 Questions) (Consists of $\frac{1}{2}$ of total score)	150 minutes (2 hrs 30 mins)
Liberal Studies	Paper 1: Data-based Questions (50%)	3 questions with 2-3 sub-questions each	120 minutes (2 hours)
	Paper 2: Extended Questions (30%)	Choose 1 from 3 questions (2 sub-questions)	75 minutes (1 hr 15mins)
Elective Subjects (Category A)			
Chemistry	Paper 1: Compulsory Module (75%)	Section A: Multiple Choice Questions (22.5%) (Consist of 36 questions) Section B: Structural Questions (52.5%) Part I: 8 Level 1-4 questions Part II: 5 Key chapters & Level 4-5** questions	120 minutes (2 hrs)
	Paper 2: Elective Module (25%)	3 questions with 10 sub-questions each	60 minutes (1 hour)
ICT	Paper 1: Compulsory Module (55%)	Section A: Multiple Choice Questions (40%) (Consist of 40 questions) Section B: Structural Questions (60%) Consist of 5 questions (At least 4 sub-questions per questions)	120 minutes (2 hours)
	Paper 2: Elective Module (25%)	4 questions with at least 8 sub-questions each 2A Database 2B Data Communication and Networking 2C Multimedia Production and Web Site Development 2D Software Development	90 minutes (1 hour 30 minutes)
History	Paper 1: Data-based Questions (60%)	4 compulsory questions	120 minutes (2 hours)
	Paper 2: Descriptive Questions (40%)	Choose 2 from 7 questions	90 minutes (1 hour 30 minutes)

Appendix 2

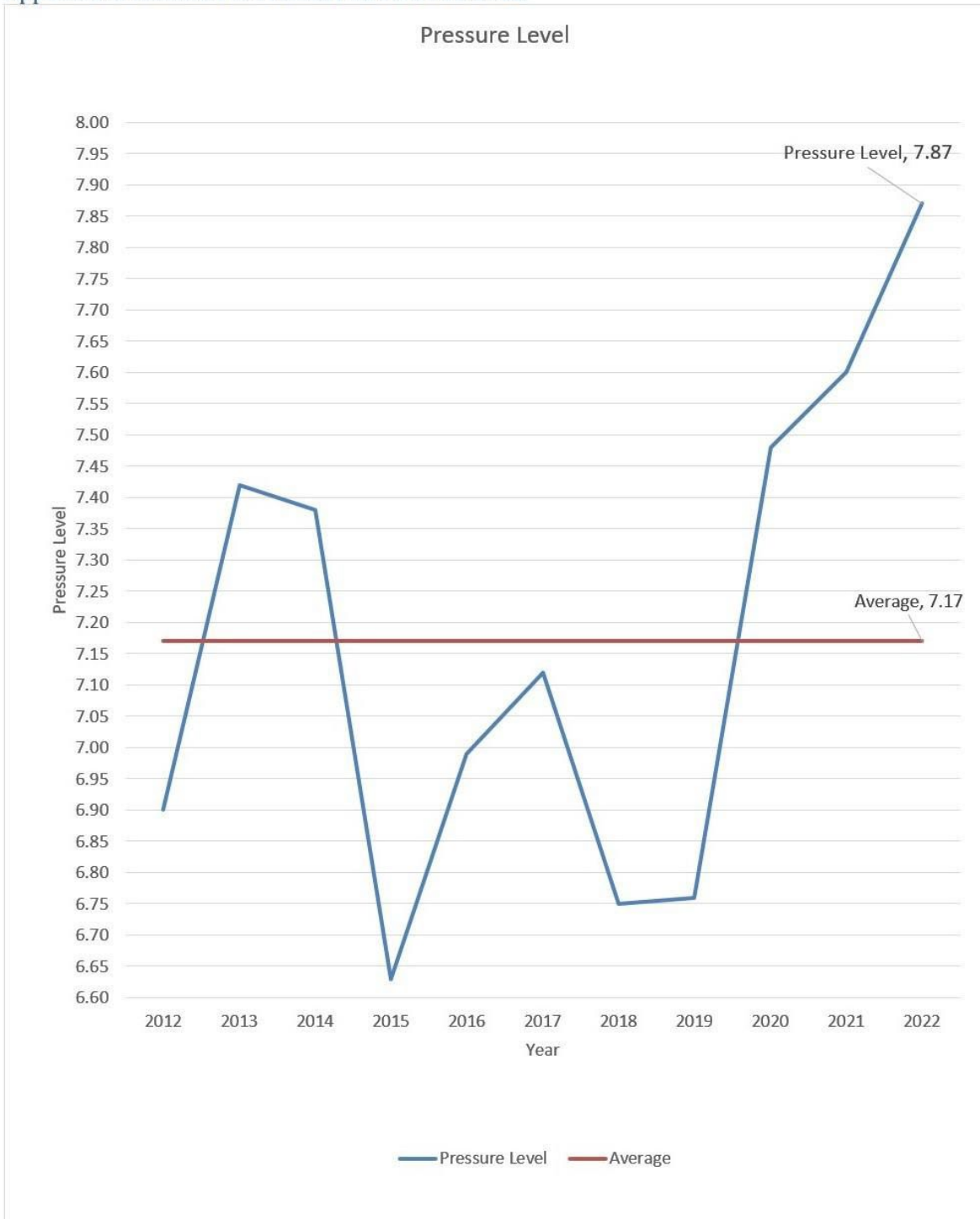
Appendix 2: Reduction in School-based Assessment (SBA)

Category A: Senior secondary subjects	Weighting of SBA in the final result			
	2020	2021	2022 – 2023	2024
Core Subjects				
Chinese Language	24%	10%		15%
English Language	25%	15%		
Liberal Studies	20%	10%	0%	x*
Elective Subjects (Science)				
Biology	20%	0%		20%
Chemistry	20%	0%		20%
Physics	20%	0%		20%
Combined Science	20%	0%		x
Integrated Science	20%	0%		x
Information and Communication Technology	20%	0%		20%
Elective Subjects (Humanities)				
Chinese Literature	15%	0%		15%
Literature in English	20%	0%		20%
Elective Subjects (Non-science or <u>Non-humanities</u>)				
Design & Applied Technology	40%	20%		40%
Technology & Living	30%	0%		30%
Health Management & Social Care	20%	0%		20%
Visual Arts	50%			

* Starting from academic year 2024, Liberal Studies has changed to Citizenship and Social Development.

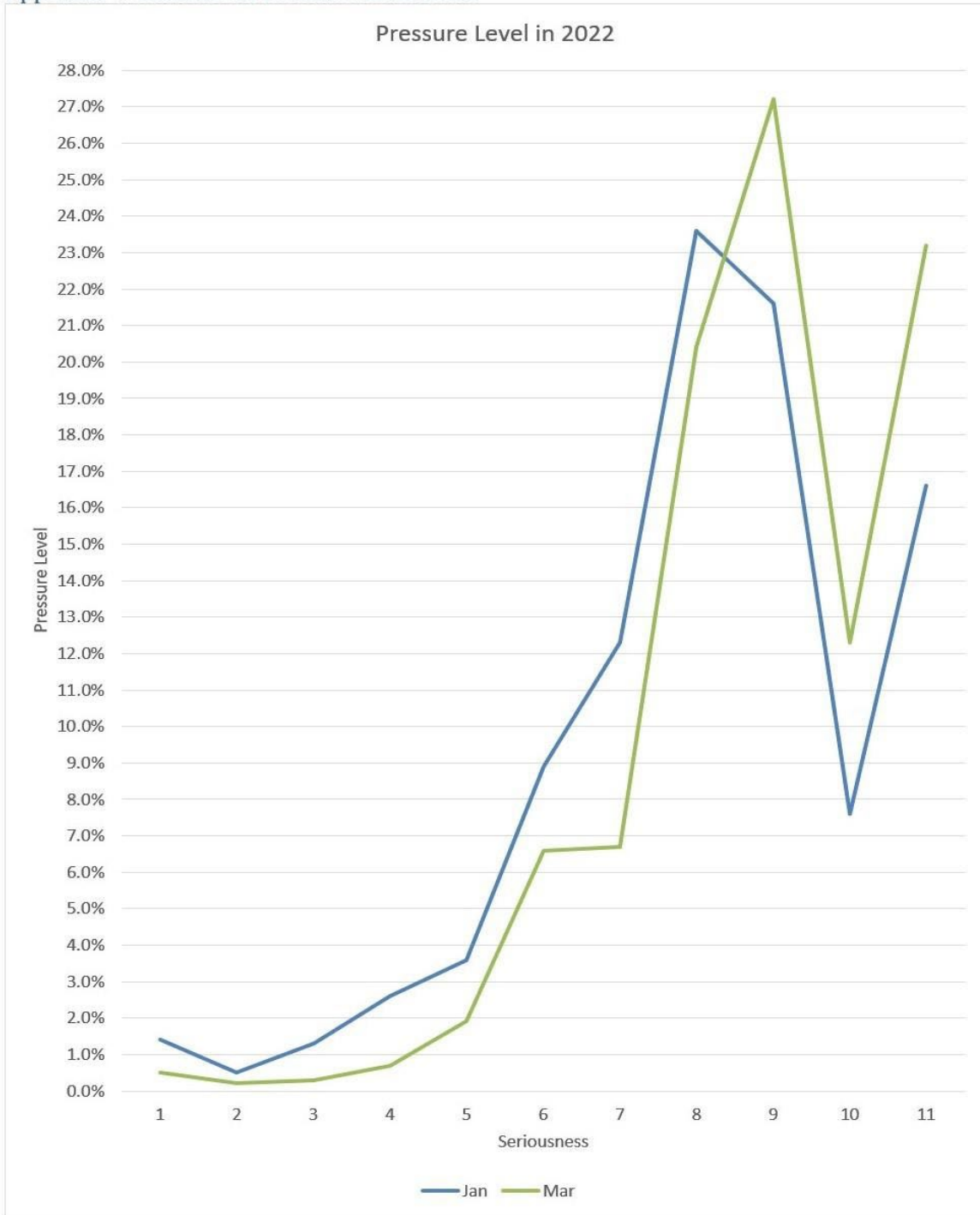
Appendix 3

Appendix 3: Statistics of Pressure Level 2012-2022



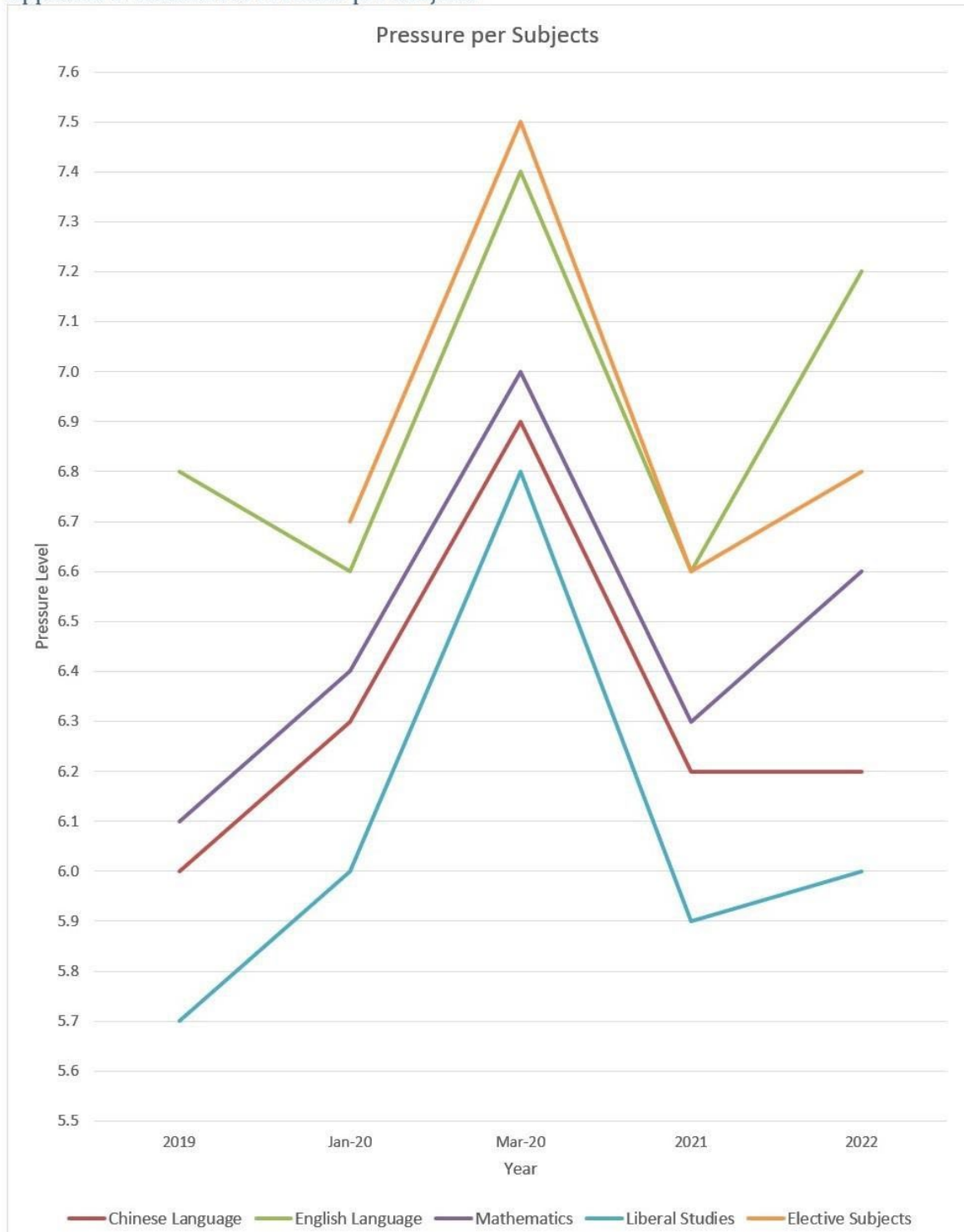
Appendix 4

Appendix 4: Statistics of Pressure Level 2022



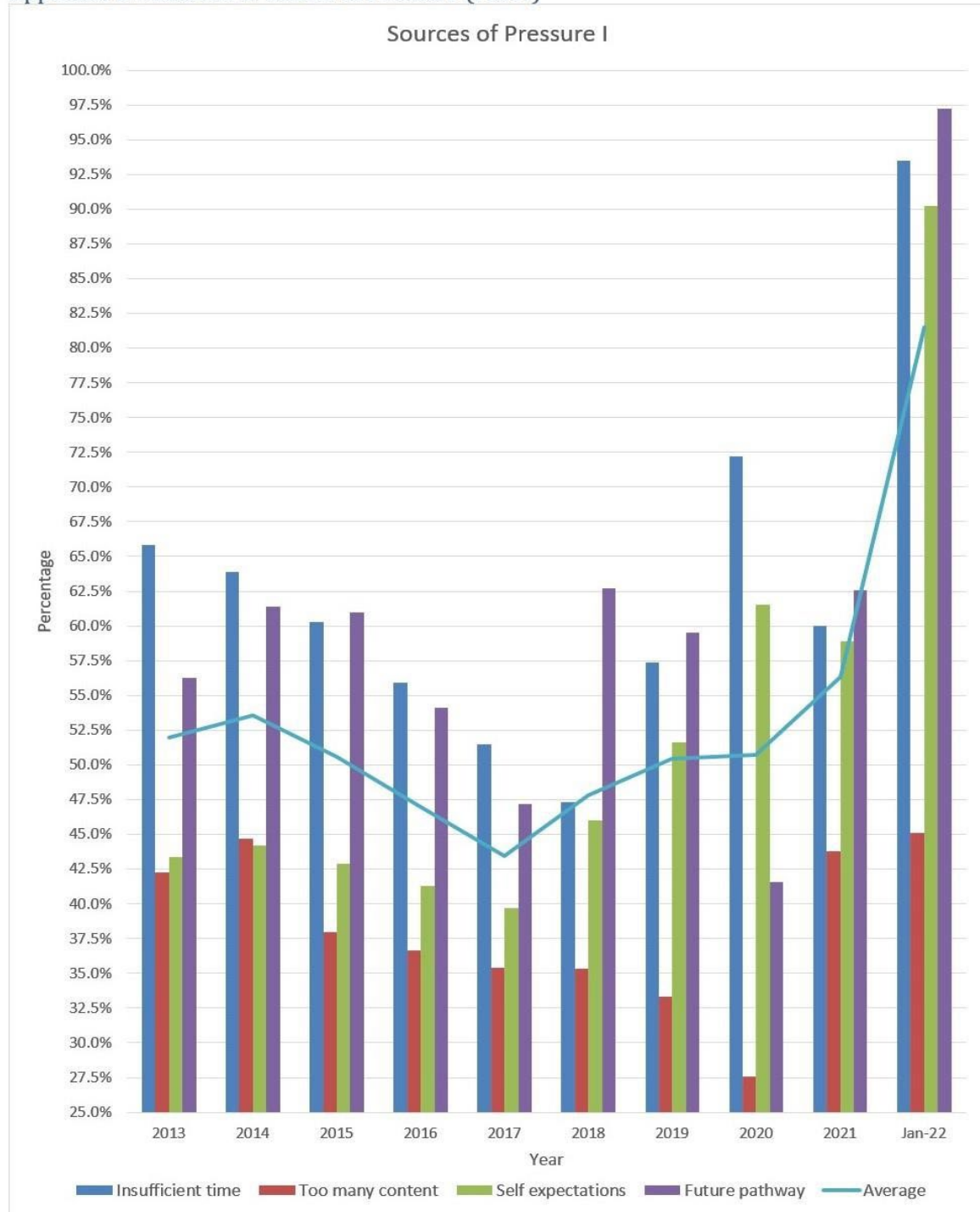
Appendix 5

Appendix 5: Statistics of Pressure per Subjects



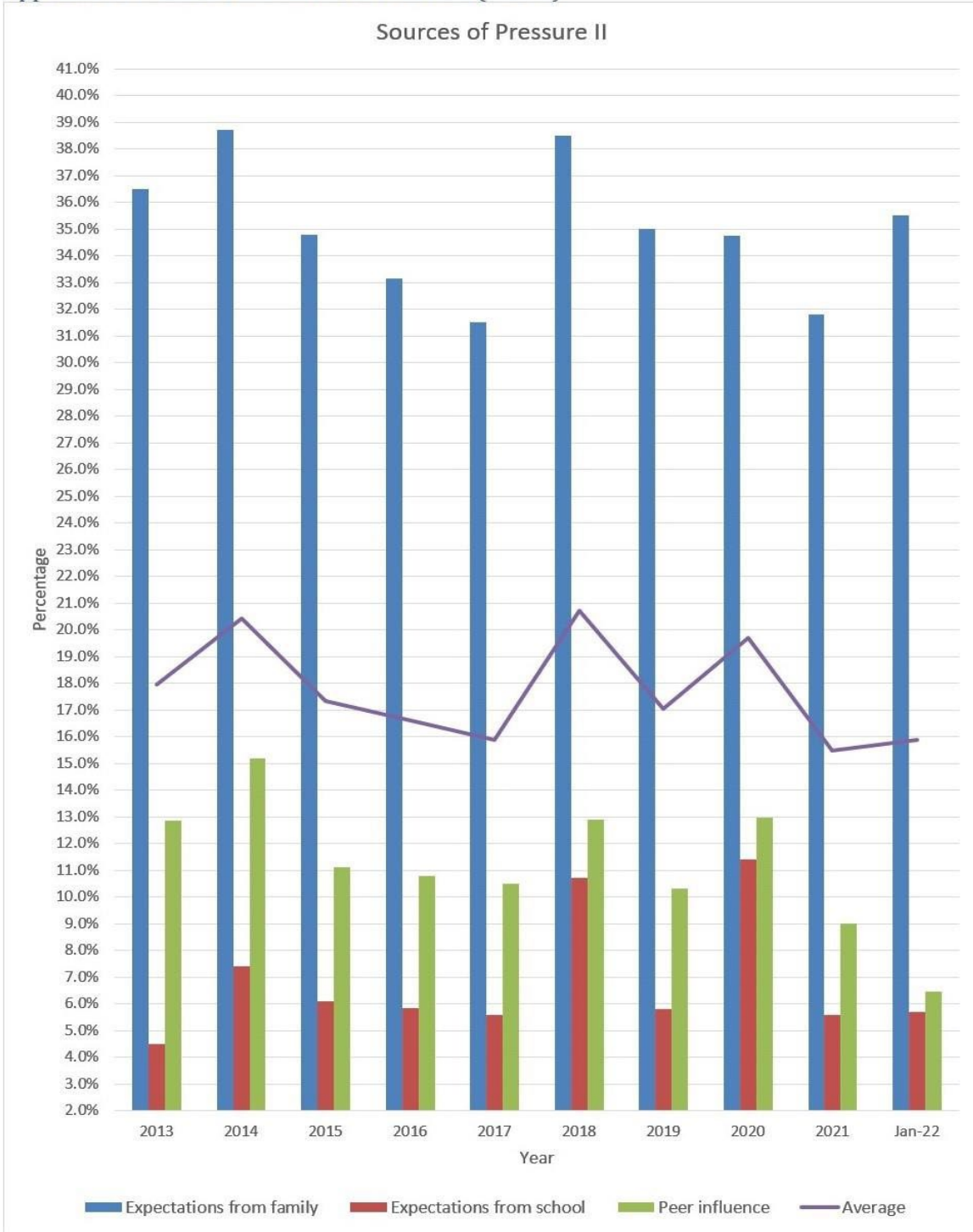
Appendix 6

Appendix 6: Statistics of Source of Pressure (Part I)



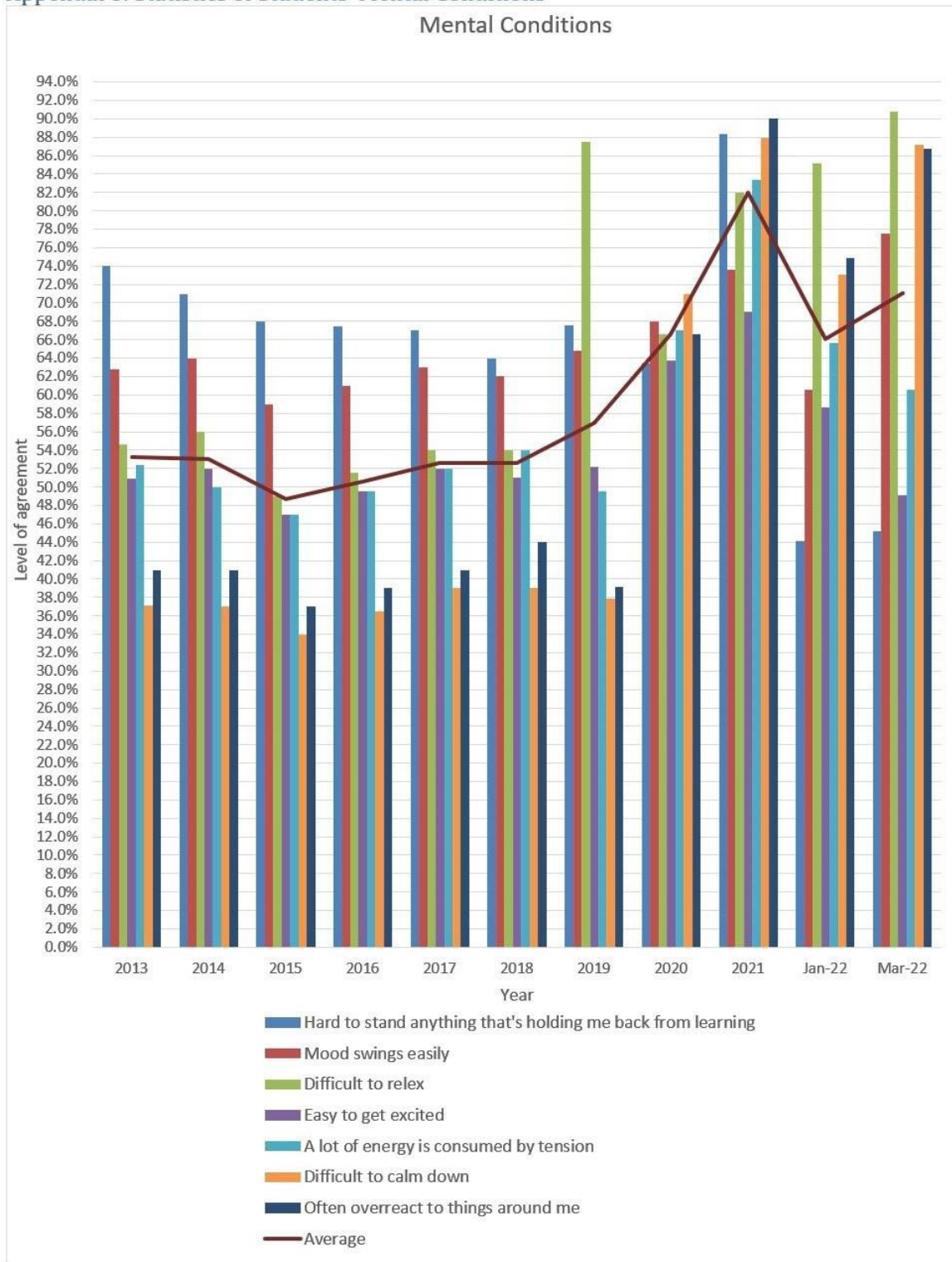
Appendix 7

Appendix 7: Statistics of Sources of Pressure (Part II)



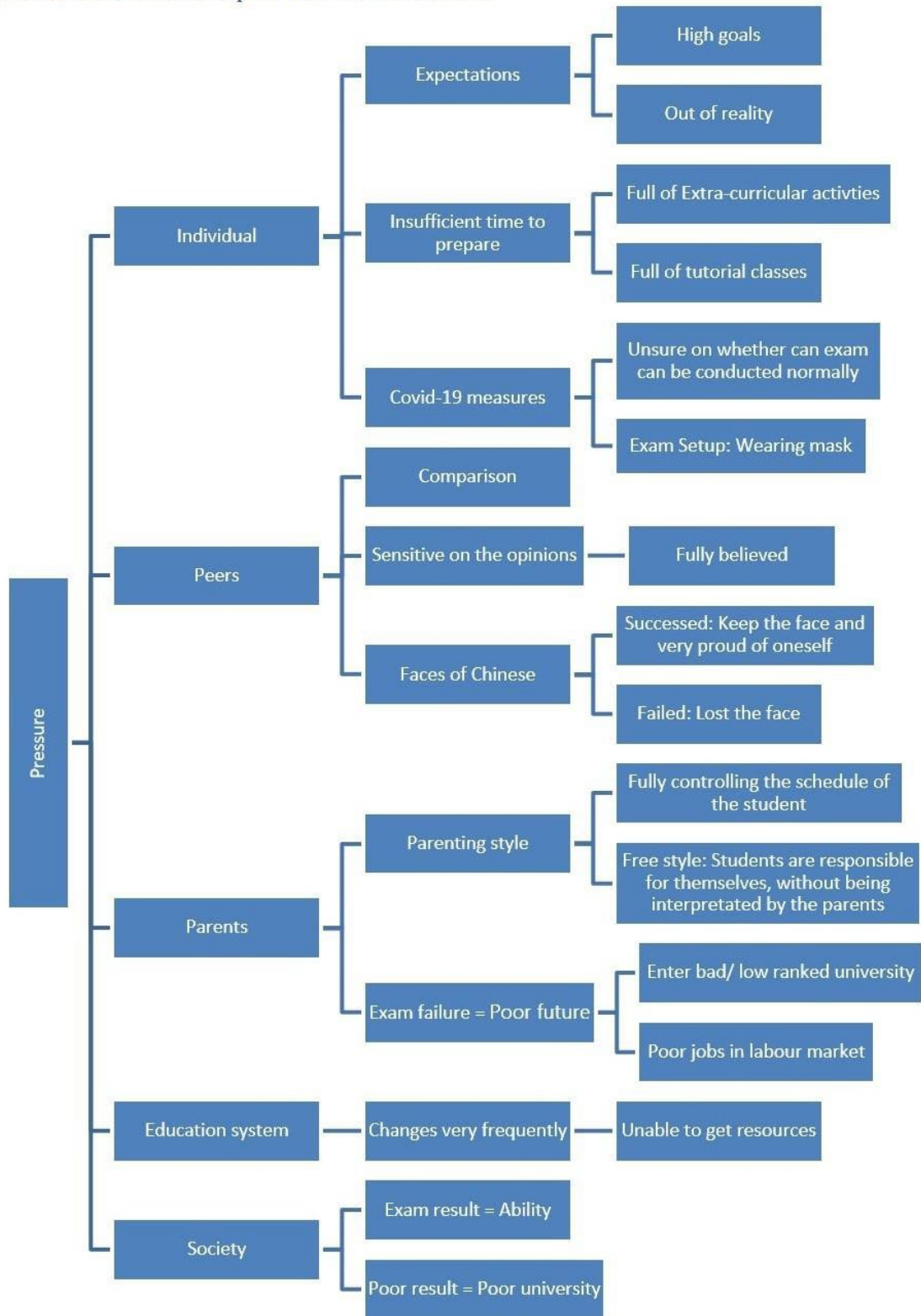
Appendix 8

Appendix 8: Statistics of Students' Mental Conditions



Appendix 9

Appendix 9: Structure map of 'Factors of Pressure'



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