The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

SOSC1420 Poverty (Spring 2025) 3 Credits

Course Syllabus

Instructor: Dr. Jin WANG

Course Email: sosc1420@ust.hk Use your university email account for communication. Please do NOT send messages via Canvas.

Class Meeting Time and Venue: Tuesday, Thursday 10:30 – 11:50 AM; Rm 4619 (Lift 31-32).

Office Hours: Thursdays 4:30 – 5:30 PM (or by appointment).

TAs: Ms. Daphne Ying DENG and Mr. Jacky Ziyue FENG.

Course Description

This course aims to make students gain familiarity with poverty issues including poverty measurement, underlying causes of poverty, the impact of poverty on society and government programs and policies that address poverty. We will illustrate principles with real-world applications. Though the course discusses poverty in a broad context of developing and developed countries, an extra emphasis will be put on poverty related issues in Hong Kong and mainland China.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Describe and synthesize core concepts and principles used to study poverty. The concepts include absolute poverty and relative poverty, which the practical choice of living standards, poverty lines and poverty measures depend crucially on.
2. Analyze and discuss poverty related issues critically, including various causes of poverty, the social/economic consequences of being poor and growing up poor.
3. Think independently and suggest potential policies to reduce poverty in the context of developed countries and developing countries.

Textbooks and Materials

The following book discusses poverty from the perspective of developed countries (such as UK and EU policies).

1. Pete Alcock, Understanding Poverty, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 3rd edition

The following book addresses poverty from the perspective of developing countries and summarizes the important viewpoints of economists.

2. Abhijit Banerjee, Roland Bénabou, Dilip Mookherjee, Understanding Poverty, Oxford University Press, 2006

Supplementary readings:

3. Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom, Oxford University Press, 1999

*Optional readings for more advanced levels: Abhijit Banerjee, Ether duflo, Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty, PublicAffairs, 2011.

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

The assessments of the course will be composed of the following parts.

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Class Participation	10%	Throughout the course
Individual Assignment	5%	Expected week 5
Midterm Exam	30%	Expected week 8, Mar 25th
Group Project	25%	Expected week 13
Final Exam	30%	To be arranged by ARRO

NOTE: for all assessments, **late submissions will NOT be accepted**.

Class Participation Lectures will NOT be recorded. Presence in the lecture will benefit the students greatly in understanding related topics. Some lectures involve interactive games, pop-up quizzes and video sessions. Students will be randomly selected to share their opinion.

Individual Assignment Completed problem sets must be handed in to the canvas system by the due date/time (expected week 5).

Group Project Each group (composed of 6 people) is to submit a regional poverty analysis (expected week 13). Please submit the group membership form (one per group) to sosc1420@ust.hk by February 18th. The individual score will be based on the group performance and the individual contribution to the group, which is subject to peer evaluation. To ensure the quality, we will arrange meetings with each group in week 11 before the project starts. Guidelines for the project will be provided in detail in week 8.

Midterm Exam: expected in week 8.

Final Exam: to be arranged by ARRO.

The exams will cover lecture notes, required readings and all materials presented in the class. The mid-term and final exam will be closed book and mutually exclusive. They will include multiple-choice questions and calculations.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Individual assignment, Midterm and final exams	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3.	This task assesses students' ability to explain and apply poverty concepts (ILO 1), critically analyze the causes and consequences of poverty (ILO 2), and synthesize a well-argued solution (ILO 3).
Group Project	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3.	Same as above.

Final Grade Descriptors

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of subject matter, expertise in problem-solving, and significant creativity in thinking. Exhibits a high capacity for scholarship and collaboration, going beyond core requirements to achieve learning goals.
B	Good Performance	Shows good knowledge and understanding of the main subject matter, competence in problem-solving, and the ability to analyze and evaluate issues. Displays high motivation to learn and the ability to work effectively with others.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Possesses adequate knowledge of core subject matter, competence in dealing with familiar problems, and some capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Shows persistence and effort to achieve broadly defined learning goals.
D	Marginal Pass	Has threshold knowledge of core subject matter, potential to achieve key professional skills, and the ability to make basic judgments. Benefits from the course and has the potential to develop in the discipline.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the subject matter and lacks the necessary problem-solving skills. Shows limited ability to think critically or analytically and exhibits minimal effort towards achieving learning goals. Does not meet the threshold requirements for professional practice or development in the discipline.

Course AI Policy

Restricted use of Generative AI: AI tools can assist but cannot substitute for students' own work. Students must disclose the use of any AI-powered tools or models in their work whenever they are employed. Failure to do so may result in plagiarism or academic dishonesty.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include comments on strengths and areas for improvement. Students who have further questions about the feedback, including marks, should consult the instruction team within five working days after the feedback is received.

Exam Policy

There is **NO** make-up exam, except for **CRITICAL** medical reasons with doctor's formal letter. The make-up exam, if any, will be composed of two parts: 1) **closed-book essay writing**, AND 2) **an oral test**.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism and cheating in any form are **NOT** allowed. Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.

Lecture Schedule

Dates	Topic
Feb 4th	Introduction
Feb 6th, 11th	Defining and Measuring Poverty
Feb 13th, 18th	Poverty and Inequality
Feb 20th, 25th, 27th, Mar 4th	Inequality and Social Exclusion
Mar 6th, 11th, 13th	The Economic Lives of the Poor
Mar 18th, 20th	Causes of Poverty
Mar 25th	Mid-term Exam
Mar 27th	Causes of Poverty Cont'd
Apr 8th, 10th	Fighting Poverty I: Welfare Policy Design
Apr 15th, 17th	Fighting Poverty II: Education
Apr 22nd, 24th	Mandatory Meetings on the Group Project
April 29th	Fighting Poverty III: Health Intervention
May 6th, 8th	Fighting Poverty IV: Credit and Finance

* Course content may change; any changes will be announced in class and on the course website.

Tentative Topics

Introduction

1. Why Study Poverty? A Bird View of the Course
Alcock, Chapter 1; Banerjee, Introduction and Overview

Part One: Who is Poor?

2. Defining and Measuring Poverty
An overview of the poverty definition, official poverty measure and critiques
Alcock, Chapter 5, 6; Banerjee Chapter 1; Sen, Chapter 4
Case study: measuring world poverty/Hong Kong's poverty/mainland China's poverty

Part Two: Consequences of Poverty

3-4. Inequality and Social Exclusion
1) Inequality: Lorenze Curve (Gini Coefficient)
Alcock, Chapter 6, 8; Banerjee, Chapter 4
Case study: inequality and Gini coefficient in Hong Kong and mainland China

2) Dimensions of Inequality and Social Exclusion
• Gender Discrimination, Fertility and Poverty: Sen, Chapter 8; Banerjee, Chapter 9, 10; Alcock, Chapter 9
• Ethnicity and Poverty: Banerjee, Chapter 12; Alcock, Chapter 10
• Age and Poverty: Banerjee, Chapter 16; Alcock, Chapter 11

5. The Economic Lives of the Poor
Banerjee, Abhijit, and Esther Duflo (2007), "The Economic Lives of the Poor." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 1: 141-167.
Case study: The Economic Lives of Hong Kong's poor

Part Three: Different Views on the Causes of Poverty

6-7. "Culture" vs. "Institution"; "Pathology" vs. "Structure"
Alcock, Chapter 3; Banerjee, Chapter 2, 3
Case study: the causes of poverty in Hong Kong

Part Four: Fighting Poverty

8-9. Welfare Policy Design
Alcock, Chapter 14-17; Banerjee, Chapter 13, 14

11. Education
Education and Human Capital Accumulation: Banerjee, Chapter 18

12. Health Intervention
Vaccines and Eradication of Disease: Banerjee, Chapter 21

13. Credit and Financial Institutions
To provide the poor with access to credit and get out of poverty: Banerjee, Chapter 23

Summary