

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

SOSC1420 Poverty (Spring 2026) 3 Credits

Course Syllabus

Instructor: Professor 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 1:30 – 2:50 PM; Lecture Theater F.

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

TAs: Ms. Daphne Ying DENG and Miss Enmian WANG.

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

*Optional readings for more advanced levels: Abhijit Banerjee, Esther 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 Discussion and Participation | 15% | Throughout the course |
| Individual Assignment | 5% | Expected week 5 |
| Midterm Exam | 30% | Expected week 8, Mar 24 th |
| Group Project | 20% | Expected week 13 |
| Final Exam | 30% | To be arranged by ARRO |

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

Class Discussion and 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 19th. 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 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.

Exam Policy There will be **NO** make-up exams, except in cases of **critical medical emergencies**, which must be supported by a formal doctor's certificate and are subject to the instructor's approval. The make-up exam, if any, will be composed of two parts: 1) **closed-book essay writing**, AND 2) **an oral test**.

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.

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 3 rd | Introduction |
| Feb 5 th , 10 th | Defining and Measuring Poverty |
| Feb 12 th , 24 th | Poverty and Inequality |
| Feb 26 th , Mar 3 rd , 5 th , 10 th | Inequality and Social Exclusion |
| Mar 12 th , 17 th | The Economic Lives of the Poor |
| Mar 19 th | Causes of Poverty |
| Mar 24 th | Mid-term Exam |
| Mar 26 th | Causes of Poverty Cont'd |
| Mar 31 st , April 2 nd | Fighting Poverty I: Welfare Policy Design |
| Apr 9 th , 14 th , 16 th | Fighting Poverty II: Education |
| Apr 21 st , 23 rd | Mandatory Meetings on the Group Project |
| April 28 th , 30 th | Fighting Poverty III: Health Intervention |
| May 5 th , 7 th | 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