

Original article

Building an international education hub: Addressing non-local students' needs in the associate-to-bachelor transition in Hong Kong

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Abstract:

In recent years, Hong Kong has actively promoted its development as an international education hub. Within this strategic context, enhancing the educational experiences of non-local students and reducing barriers to their enrollment have become critical objectives. For both local and non-local students, the transition from an associate's to a bachelor's degree in Hong Kong presents both opportunities and challenges. Drawing upon Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory and Cobb's Social Support Theory, this study employs a longitudinal qualitative research approach to track 19 associate degree students from 'A University' in Hong Kong (8 local, 11 non-local) across three key transition phases: pre-application (January 2025), post-acceptance (May 2025), and early enrollment (October 2025). The research aims to analyze their experiences, barriers, and strategies during this educational transition. Findings indicate significant differences between local and non-local students concerning support networks, acculturation, and resource accessibility. While non-local students often experience social isolation and language barriers that significantly impact their application process, local students benefit from their familiarity with the educational system. This study seeks to provide policymakers with practical insights to enhance the efficacy and inclusivity of the educational system, ensuring equitable access to higher education pathways for all students.

1. Introduction

The development of international education hubs has become a global trend, with cities and countries such as Singapore actively competing to attract talent and establish themselves as premier destinations for higher learning (Tian, 2024; Weng, 2025). Against this backdrop, Hong Kong has strategically strengthened its position as a key education hub in Asia by proactively expanding its academic offerings and support systems. The Hong Kong Chief Executive, in the 2023 Policy Address, explicitly articulated the vision of transforming Hong Kong into an "international higher education hub and a cradle for future talent." This commitment was further reinforced in the 2024 Policy Address, which proposed the establishment of the "Study in Hong Kong" brand to inject new momentum into this strategic objective. To bolster Hong Kong's aspiration

of becoming a leading international higher education center and to attract more global talent, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has implemented a series of robust measures. These include doubling the quota for non-local students admitted to universities funded by the University Grants Committee, increasing scholarship opportunities and dormitory accommodations, and introducing a program to retain non-local graduates for employment in Hong Kong (The Legislative Council Secretariat, 2025). Within this evolving landscape, enhancing the educational experience for non-local students and mitigating barriers to their enrollment have emerged as critical components in achieving this overarching strategic goal.

However, relevant research has unveiled a critical reality: non-local associate degree students encounter several chal-

lenges throughout their transition process. These challenges encompass language barriers (particularly academic English and Cantonese), cultural adaptation issues, information asymmetry, and social isolation (Jabbar et al., 2022). These students often struggle to obtain specific academic counseling, frequently relying on peer experiences, informal groups, or commercial agents for academic guidance, which can lead to increased time and financial expenditures. Concurrently, support services at Hong Kong's higher education institutions are often designed primarily with local students in mind, offering limited tailored solutions for the distinct needs of non-local students (Jin, 2025). Although Hong Kong government policies have consistently emphasized internationalization goals, such as raising the non-local student ratio cap from 20% to 40%, empirical evidence is still needed to determine whether the actual circumstances and academic adaptation levels of non-local students truly reflect the policy's intended outcomes. This study seeks to address this gap by posing the following three research questions:

(1) What specific resources do local and non-local associate degree students encounter throughout their transfer to higher education?

(2) What are the distinct difficulties that local and non-local associate degree students face when applying for bachelor's degrees? What unique challenges do they encounter, and how do they overcome them?

(3) Are current transition policies and support systems effective in meeting the actual needs of diverse student groups?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the various factors influencing the transition from associate to bachelor's degrees and to provide practical recommendations for policymakers.

This study aims to map the structural and individual factors that influence associate-to-bachelor's transition outcomes, analyze the actual performance of existing institutions' transition policies in meeting student needs, and propose evidence-based strategies to enhance equity and success rates.

2. Research background

Since 2000, Hong Kong's diversified and highly competitive higher education system has actively promoted the associate degree as a non-traditional gateway to further education. An associate degree is a two-year qualification offered by associated colleges of publicly funded universities or self-financed institutions. Its primary goal is to equip high school graduates with a solid foundation for further study or employment, serving as a crucial stepping stone towards a bachelor's degree.

The process enabling associate degree students to progress to bachelor's degree programs is termed the "Associate to Bachelor's Transition" (A2B Transition). This encompasses the entire journey from completing an associate degree program to successfully applying for, gaining admission to, and adapting to a bachelor's degree program. This transition period represents a critical moment in educational mobility, highlighting the interplay between structural resource allocation, individual background variations, and policy guidance. According

to research by the HONG KONG IDEAS CENTRE (2011) on associate degree studies, since the implementation of the "3-3-4" educational system reform in 2012 (three years of junior high school, three years of senior high school, and four years of university), an increasing number of students unable to directly enter university have opted for associate degree programs. This has made the associate-to-bachelor transition one of the primary pathways for further education. While the government has increased the supply of higher education degrees, particularly in the self-funded sector, it remains uncertain whether this will effectively reduce competition for places and enhance educational equality (Wong, 2014).

There are notable differences between "local students" and "non-local students" among associate degree students concerning system familiarity, access to social and cultural resources, language proficiency, and support systems. The Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) defines "local students" applying for local post-secondary programs as applicants possessing any of the following documents: a Hong Kong Permanent Resident Identity Card, documents granting Hong Kong residency or entry rights, a one-way Hong Kong and Macao Mainland Travel Permit, an employment visa for Hong Kong, an entry permit, a dependent visa approved before the age of 18, or other visas related to the Quality Migrant Admission Scheme, the Capital Investment Entrant Scheme, and the Second Generation Scheme for Chinese Nationals with Hong Kong Permanent Residency. Any candidates who do not meet the above criteria are categorized as "non-local students," including those with student visas, visas obtained under the Non-local Graduate Stay/Return to Hong Kong Employment Arrangement, and dependent visas approved beyond the age of 18.

Local students primarily access higher education through the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) and the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS), which provides clearer institutional guidelines and benefits from subsidized degree programs. Non-local students, predominantly from mainland China, constitute 74.8% of the entire non-local student population (SILK ROAD INSTITUTE et al., 2023). They typically apply for associate degree programs through non-JUPAS or mainland-specific admission schemes. Due to differences in identity and admission mechanisms, they face systemic disparities with local students regarding application procedures, policy applicability, and access to on-campus support. These factors form a critical context for understanding their educational transition experiences.

3. Literature review and theoretical framework

3.1 Associate degree programs and academic transition

Associate degrees serve a dual purpose in various higher education systems: they function as a transitional platform for bachelor's degree programs (transfer-oriented) and are also regarded as short-term higher education qualifications with an employment-oriented focus. In the United States, Canada, and other regions, associate degree programs have well-established articulation agreements that facilitate a smooth transition into

bachelor's degree programs, often referred to as the "2+2 model" (Crosta & Kopko, 2014). Research by Belfield (2013) and Wang et al. (2017) indicates that students who complete an associate degree demonstrate a significantly higher rate of completing a bachelor's degree, underscoring the positive systemic function of this qualification.

Since 2000, Hong Kong has actively promoted revisions to its associate degree program system, positioning associate degrees as a primary pathway to bridge the gap between high school graduation and university degrees (Wong, 2011). Lee (2014) emphasizes that associate degrees in Hong Kong are not merely stepping stones to bachelor's degree programs but also play a vital role in students' personal and professional growth. This perspective highlights the dual function of associate degree programs, which foster academic achievement while simultaneously encouraging holistic development. Similarly, Lee (2019) examined the learning experiences of associate degree students through the lens of Human Capital Theory, investigating how this educational level enhances students' skills and talents. The study noted a scarcity of empirical information regarding students' learning experiences, despite ongoing policy discussions, thereby highlighting the need for more extensive research to ascertain the actual impact of associate degree programs on student development.

The transition from associate's to bachelor's degrees has also been explored in terms of articulation pathways and policy implications. Lee (2014) observed the increasing number of associate's degree students, underscoring the importance of these programs as a bridge to higher education and employment. Wong (2014) conducted a critical analysis of community college policies, noting that while these policies aim to broaden access to education and improve educational quality, their actual implementation and implications are complex and multifaceted.

3.2 Comparison of academic advancement situations for local and non-local students

Local students typically navigate the transition from associate degrees to bachelor's degrees with relative ease through the JUPAS system, owing to their familiarity with the educational system, language, and culture (Shek & Shek, 2013). They are often geographically proximate to institutions, which simplifies their participation in college events, facilitates the building of social networks, and provides access to both on-campus and off-campus support (Jin, 2025). In this context, local students frequently benefit from superior academic preparation and social integration.

Conversely, non-local students encounter numerous challenges when pursuing higher education. They frequently must apply through the non-JUPAS system or institutional internal channels, which involve more complex procedures and reduced transparency (Jabbar et al., 2022). Language barriers are particularly pervasive in English-medium instructional settings (Shepard & Rose, 2023), requiring students to adapt to academic writing, classroom interactions, and a non-native cultural context. Furthermore, differences in course standards and credit recognition exacerbate their concerns regarding

academic advancement (Chung, 2021).

Significant differences also exist in terms of social integration. Local students, having entered the local academic system at a young age, possess more established social experiences and a stronger sense of cultural identification. In contrast, non-local students often lack the community resources necessary to cultivate a sense of belonging, particularly on large campuses where new environments and cultural differences can lead to feelings of loneliness (Jin, 2025). Research by Wang & Woo (2022) indicates that many non-local students struggle to establish peer support networks and participate in community activities, resulting in a phenomenon known as social isolation.

Another notable difference is economic pressure. Non-local students incur higher tuition, housing, and living expenses and may face limitations in accessing relevant financial aid and academic agreements due to visa restrictions and their non-local status (Chung, 2021; Jin, 2025).

Despite these structural challenges, research suggests that institutions providing well-structured, targeted support systems can help alleviate stress during the transition to higher education. Brown et al. (2017) utilized an engineering dual-degree program as an example to demonstrate that clear academic pathways and collaborative strategies with community institutions can significantly boost students' GPA and retention. The study also found that specific and coordinated academic support measures are crucial for the academic success of low-resource groups. Furthermore, peer support networks assist students in building social ties and adjusting to academic life. For instance, non-local students can interact with senior peers who share comparable experiences through peer mentoring, study groups, and student organizations, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of belonging (Jin, 2025).

3.3 Cultural capital theory in the transition to higher education

This study emphasizes differences in resources. Understanding these differences requires not only an examination of institutional factors but also an investigation into how individuals mobilize their own resources to overcome transition challenges. This study employs Bourdieu's (1986) theory of Cultural Capital and Cobb's (1976) theory of Social Support as analytical frameworks. According to Cultural Capital Theory, students' resources—encompassing language ability, familiarity with the education system, academic qualifications, and family background—significantly influence their position within the educational field and their future educational choices. Embodied cultural capital, such as language proficiency and learning habits, often confers an advantage upon local students, whereas non-local students may encounter difficulties in writing and interviews. Furthermore, institutionalized capital, including an understanding of local admission criteria and transfer processes, affects students' capacity to select appropriate pathways and mitigate risks.

Bourdieu categorized Cultural Capital into three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized, emphasizing that these states are mutually transformable. Educational qualifications, as an institutionalized form of Cultural Capital, reflect

an individual's prior cultural accumulation and educational investment, and they can be converted into economic and social capital. Consequently, in the context of educational transition, students' ability to effectively transform their Cultural Capital becomes a crucial criterion for differentiating their educational strategies and resource mobilization capabilities.

According to Wong's (2011) research, within the context of Hong Kong's community colleges, students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds exhibit variations in the state and conversion capacity of their Cultural Capital. Local students often possess higher levels of embodied capital, such as language fluency and familiarity with the local educational system, which provides them with an advantage in admissions and credit transfers. Non-local students, conversely, may experience greater difficulty in interviews or written communication due to language challenges and differences in educational values. Moreover, objectified capital refers to materialized cultural resources such as family background and socioeconomic status (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). Students with greater economic capabilities may be able to access additional academic training or counseling services, while those with fewer economic resources may face barriers to obtaining such assistance. Institutionalized capital pertains to academic qualifications like degrees (Cooper et al., 2021). Local students typically possess a better understanding of Hong Kong's credit transfer systems and institutional articulation rules, which enables them to avoid information asymmetry and select high-success-rate admission pathways. Non-local students, however, may encounter information gaps that impede their decision-making and academic planning.

Cultural Capital is pivotal for shaping educational performance and enhancing social mobility. It influences students' academic performance, access to higher education, and their ability to succeed in an increasingly competitive educational environment (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Additionally, Cultural Capital affects students' goals, help-seeking behavior, and their capacity to mobilize resources during critical educational transitions, such as the transition from high school to university (Richards, 2022). Empirical studies demonstrate a positive correlation between Cultural Capital and academic achievement, particularly during significant transition periods like the transfer from secondary to higher education (Roksa & Robinson, 2016; Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010; Tan & Zheng, 2023). Students with greater Cultural Capital, including familiarity with academic norms, language, and cultural conventions, are frequently better prepared to navigate educational transitions, leading to improved academic achievement and retention rates (Roksa & Robinson, 2016; Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). In contrast, a deficit in Cultural Capital can hinder students' integration into institutional expectations, potentially resulting in marginalization and academic underachievement (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010).

Educational transitions are crucial phases where students progress from one educational level to the next, such as from early childhood to primary school, primary school to secondary school, and secondary school to higher education (Roksa & Robinson, 2016). These changes are typically complex processes influenced by personal, institutional, and

social factors. Successfully navigating these stages depends not only on academic preparation but also on the availability and mobilization of Cultural Capital, which can either facilitate or impede students' development (Roksa & Robinson, 2016; Lessky et al., 2021). The development and mobilization of Cultural Capital significantly impact the transition from secondary to higher education, which in turn affects university entrance, choice, and success. According to Yamamoto & Brinton (2010), students from families with substantial embodied and institutionalized cultural capital—such as social networks, knowledge of the application process, and familiarity with the university environment—have a higher probability of succeeding in college. However, students from marginalized backgrounds often face challenges due to their limited access to social capital and information, which are crucial at this juncture (Lessky et al., 2021; Roksa & Robinson, 2016).

Differences in access to Cultural Capital profoundly impact educational equity and frequently exacerbate social stratification. Research indicates that marginalized students, such as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or first-generation college students, often lack embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital (Košutić, 2017). Studies in Croatia and Austria reveal a strong link between students' cultural capital—including family educational background, participation in extracurricular activities, and familiarity with institutional norms—and academic achievement and transition outcomes (Košutić, 2017; Lessky et al., 2021). Unequal resource distribution, language barriers, and limited exposure to the valued cultural norms of educational institutions all contribute to these inequities (Yamamoto & Brinton, 2010). Consequently, students lacking adequate Cultural Capital encounter difficulties during educational transitions, potentially limiting their access to further education and social mobility (Roksa & Robinson, 2016).

3.4 Social support theory in the transition to higher education

Social Support Theory offers a perspective on how students acquire emotional, instrumental, and informational support through social interaction. Formal academic assistance from institutions, peer-to-peer experience sharing, and family encouragement can all contribute to students' ability to cope with stress and make academic decisions (Jin, 2025). Non-local students, who frequently lack institutional resources, rely significantly on online communities and peer support. In this study, these two theories complement each other: Cultural Capital represents the initial structural resource that determines students' starting position, whereas Social Support moderates the stress they encounter throughout the educational pathway process, akin to financial support from their family.

While Cultural Capital is undeniably a crucial factor influencing educational opportunities, students' ability to obtain sufficient social support during the transition to higher education is equally critical. Cobb proposed the Social Support Theory, which underscores the importance of feeling cared for, loved, and respected, as well as being part of a network of mutual obligations, in coping with stress and maintaining

mental health. The theory further categorizes Social Support into three types: informational, instrumental, and emotional support.

All three types of support are essential for associate degree students as they transition to higher education. Students benefit from informational support, such as application guidelines and document preparation advice; instrumental support, such as academic counseling and mock interviews, aids in practical preparation; and emotional support provides comfort and motivation during stressful times. Local students typically receive such support from family, school, and community networks, whereas non-local students frequently depend on informal channels like social media, peer contacts, and the experiences of seniors to compensate for a lack of institutional support (Jabbar et al., 2022). If non-local students do not experience trust and a sense of belonging throughout the transition period, they are more susceptible to anxiety, uncertainty, and dropout.

Empirical research (London et al., 2011) has demonstrated that Social Support is critical to students' academic performance, mental health, and overall resilience. Students can enhance their sense of belonging, learning motivation, and psychological resilience during educational transitions (e.g., from secondary to higher education) by cultivating supportive relationships with their families, teachers, peers, and school staff (Morosanu et al., 2010). However, research indicates that many students face significant challenges during transitions, including uncertainty, social isolation, and inadequate preparation, which can negatively impact their learning outcomes and mental health (Worsley et al., 2021; Nthabiseng et al., 2024).

Recent research has highlighted the relevance of Social Support systems for disadvantaged or marginalized student groups, as they can assist them in accessing the resources, knowledge, and opportunities required for academic success. For example, peer mentoring programs (Hayman et al., 2022) and parental involvement (Stefani, 2024) have been found to improve students' perseverance in STEM fields and overall academic achievements. Feeney & Collins (2015) also found that support from family, peers, and institutions can effectively reduce stress, inspire students, and boost engagement, making it an important aspect in higher education transfer and learning.

These two theories are complementary in this study. Cultural Capital Theory examines the structural differences in students' access to educational resources, whereas Social Support Theory investigates how individuals acquire support through social interactions and how this promotes educational adaptation. Cultural Capital serves as a student's initial resource, and Social Support can moderate the impact of these resources on academic achievement. For instance, students with lower Cultural Capital may be able to compensate for their disadvantages during the educational process if they receive strong social support, thereby enhancing their chances of success. Local students, with their higher Cultural Capital, may be more inclined to utilize institutional support systems, whereas non-local students may rely on informal support networks. This study will integrate these two theories to systematically examine how associate degree students leverage Cultural Capital and Social Support to influence their academic

advancement, as well as to identify the challenges and opportunities experienced by different groups.

3.5 Research gaps

A review of the current literature reveals that researchers have primarily focused on associate degree program reforms, graduation rate analyses, and the cultural adaptation issues experienced by non-local students. However, few studies have explored the differences between local and non-local students in terms of resource mobilization, institutional adaptability, and strategic decisions throughout the A2B transition using a Cultural Capital and Social Support perspective. While Kember (2010) and Wong (2014) developed frameworks for the associate degree transfer system, their examination of student agency was insufficient. There is a shortage of empirical evaluations based on student experiences, particularly focusing on non-local students' educational demands and adaptation issues, especially in light of the continued policy emphasis on increasing the share of non-local admissions. Jabbar et al. (2022) demonstrated the marginalized status of non-local students within support networks but did not adopt an analytical approach to Cultural Capital differences.

Although significant progress has been made in understanding the role of Cultural Capital in education and transformation, considerable gaps persist. Firstly, much research remains fragmented, focusing on specific populations or circumstances and failing to integrate concepts across groups or educational stages. Secondly, there is a scarcity of longitudinal and comparative research that examines how Cultural Capital influences transformation over time and across cultural or national contexts. While research on Social Support and educational reform has yielded substantial results, important gaps remain. Existing research (Worsley et al., 2021) frequently lacks a longitudinal perspective, making it challenging to track the influence of Social Support throughout the transformation process (from initial enrollment to long-term success). Currently, few studies investigate how Cobb's Social Support operates during educational transitions, particularly in multi-cultural and socioeconomic settings. According to O'Toole et al. (2024), there is still a lack of understanding regarding the lived experiences of students from marginalized backgrounds, as well as how Social Support and Cultural Capital interact during crucial transition periods.

Based on the literature reviewed above, local and non-local associate degree students exhibit significant differences in their transition to bachelor's degree programs due to variations in Cultural Capital and access to Social Support. Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital posits that the education system favors students with mainstream Cultural Capital, whereas Cobb's theory of Social Support underscores the importance of various support systems for student adaptation. To address this research gap, this study employs a longitudinal qualitative research design, delving into students' real-world experiences and strategies during the three stages of application, admission, and enrollment. The ultimate goal is to provide scientific data for policymaking, thereby promoting educational equity and inclusion.

4. Research methodology

4.1 Research design

This study employs a longitudinal qualitative research method, incorporating three follow-up interviews, to observe and analyze the academic transition process among second-year associate degree students at ‘A University’ in Hong Kong. The interviews will explore the various resources students encounter and utilize during the transition process, such as cultural capital (e.g., application information) and social support (from teachers, peers, and family), as well as the differences in resource access pathways between local and non-local students. The study will identify specific difficulties (e.g., language barriers, qualification recognition) and requirements that students face during the application process. Based on students’ narratives, the study will determine if current academic transition policies and school support systems adequately meet their actual requirements. This iterative interaction enables researchers to examine change and continuity, leading to a deeper understanding of social phenomena (Saldaña, 2003). Furthermore, longitudinal qualitative research can uncover the complex relationships between individuals and contextual elements in educational settings (Holmegaard et al., 2012).

4.2 Participants selection

The study participants were second-year associate degree students who were actively applying for a bachelor’s degree (Table 1). The cohort included both local and non-local groups, with academic backgrounds in business, psychology, and history. Emails were disseminated to target classes by university teaching staff, inviting students to voluntarily participate in the study. These emails provided a clear overview of the research aims, schedule, and incentives, alongside an informed consent document. The selection of ‘A University’ associate degree students as the primary research sample was largely driven by research design and feasibility considerations. Firstly, longitudinal qualitative research necessitates documenting changes in participants’ experiences over time, which imposes stringent demands on interview continuity and data quality (Hermanowicz, 2013). Secondly, while the study is currently focused on a single institution, ‘A University’s’ associate degree programs encompass both local and non-local students and offer a diverse range of disciplines, ensuring a degree of representativeness and laying the groundwork for future expansion to other institutions. Commencing with an in-depth examination of a specific educational context facilitates the collection of experiential knowledge within an institutional framework and establishes a foundation for future comparative studies.

To ensure a balanced group and disciplinary variety, 22 students were initially selected for the study (11 local and 11 non-local). Following the first interview (January 2025), three participants’ interviews were deemed invalid due to incomplete responses, resulting in 19 participants (8 local and 11 non-local) proceeding to the second interview (May 2025). No new samples were added for the third interview (October 2025), and the current participants will continue to be tracked to

assess the long-term impact of the school adjustment phase. The study enhanced participation persistence by offering a small stipend (a HK\$100 supermarket coupon distributed after the completion of the three interviews).

Table 1. Interview participants.

No.	University	Gender	Major	Local or Non-local	Code
1	UA	Male	Business	Local	T
2	UA	Male	Business	Local	O
3	UA	Male	Business	Non-local	A
4	UA	Female	Business	Local	K
5	UA	Female	Psychology	Local	W
6	UA	Male	Business	Non-local	C
7	UA	Female	Business	Non-local	Q
8	UA	Male	Business	Non-local	H
9	UA	Female	Business	Non-local	B
10	UA	Female	Business	Local	M
11	UA	Female	Business	Local	P
12	UA	Female	Business	Non-local	L
13	UA	Female	Psychology	Local	N
14	UA	Male	Psychology	Local	Y
15	UA	Female	Business	Non-local	Z
16	UA	Female	History	Non-local	E
17	UA	Male	Business	Non-local	U
18	UA	Male	Business	Non-local	R
19	UA	Female	Business	Non-local	X

The study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews (approximately 40 to 60 minutes each), utilizing an interview outline based on open-ended questions that allowed for revisions during the interview process. The interview questions were developed using the practical components of Cultural Capital Theory (three states) and Social Support Theory (three types), which include resource mobilization, educational strategies, social network construction, and emotional support needs. The initial draft of the questions was created by consulting relevant research (e.g., Shek & Shek, 2013; Wong, 2011; Richards, 2022) and was refined through small-scale testing to improve clarity and specificity. For example, “How do you obtain information about applying to different bachelor’s degree programs?” corresponds to informational and institutionalized cultural capital, whereas “Have you ever sought advice from peers or teachers about credit transfer or academic progression processes?” corresponds to instrumental and emotional support.

The first two interviews were conducted offline at ‘A University.’ The third interview will be arranged flexibly based on the location of the participants’ bachelor’s degree institutions (e.g., at the campus of Hong Kong B University, or via Zoom online if they were not in Hong Kong) to capture nonverbal information (e.g., body language, environmental interactions).

The first two interviews were conducted in Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese; however, the researcher translated quotes from the findings into English for analytical purposes, and all names used are pseudonyms to protect the respondents' information.

4.3 Data analysis methods

This study applies theory-driven thematic analysis, which directly integrates existing theoretical frameworks or concepts into the qualitative data analysis process. Unlike purely inductive approaches, which extract themes from data without preconceptions, theory-driven analysis employs deductive coding and theme generation based on preexisting theories or assumptions (Naeem et al., 2023). This method seeks to carefully analyze how data align with, challenge, or expand existing theoretical constructs, thereby improving understanding of the study phenomenon within a given conceptual framework (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher conducted a systematic analysis of the research data using Cultural Capital Theory and Social Support Theory as guidelines. They began by thoroughly reading the materials, performing preliminary coding, and identifying core themes consistent with the current theoretical framework, such as capital mobilization strategies, institutional interaction experiences, emotional adaptation, and social resource networks. The analysis procedure prioritized the dialogue between data and theory while maintaining interpretive space for newly developing subcategories and forms of experience.

5. Findings

This section presents the findings from the first two rounds of interview data collected from 19 participants, illustrating how they mobilize Cultural Capital, acquire Social Support, and adapt to various challenges during their transition from an associate degree to higher education. The analysis utilizes Bourdieu's three types of Cultural Capital (embodied, institutionalized, and objectified) and Cobb's three types of Social Support (informational, instrumental, and emotional) as theoretical lenses to address the three research questions.

All 19 interviewed students are enrolled in 'A University's associate degree program, which encompasses three disciplines: business, psychology, and history. Local students typically enter the associate degree system through the DSE or a bridging diploma and are generally familiar with the local higher education system. Non-local students, come from various provinces in mainland China, hold student visas, and apply for the associate degree program based on their Gaokao scores. The majority of respondents are actively applying for bachelor's degree programs, with four students having already secured conditional offers.

5.1 Differences in resources available to local and non-local students

There is a clear difference in resource availability between local and non-local students, particularly concerning information channels and language accessibility. Local students frequently obtain information about application requirements

and course details from institutional resources such as college transition seminars, university open days, and guidance from instructors or peers.

"The university offers consultation seminars where you can stay behind to ask questions, learn about the curriculum, and help yourself choose university subjects." (Student O)

"I consulted with school staff, and they said that previous students were most likely to choose to pursue psychology." (Student Y)

"Check the score sharing on the Non – JUPAS website to see which schools I could apply to." (Student T)

"Obtain first – hand information about marketing courses and teachers from friends studying for a bachelor's degree at C University." (Student M)

These statements reflect that local students have more direct access to information and greater familiarity with the system, providing strong institutionalized cultural capital for educational decision-making.

Conversely, non-local students also attend open days and lectures but frequently express dissatisfaction with their effectiveness. For example:

"The lectures are in Cantonese, and I understand about 70% of it. Although I may be at a disadvantage, I still have to accept it." (Student C)

This highlights the pressure they face in comprehending and integrating information.

"The school lectures are tailored for local students, discussing their admission scores and requirements, which are not very helpful for us." (Student L)

Consequently, non-local students heavily rely on informal resources, such as agents, Xiaohongshu posts, or experiences shared by seniors or friends in Hong Kong. For example:

"There are some shared posts on Xiaohongshu, and that's how I learned about it." (Student A)

"The associate instructor doesn't understand much about undergraduate programs, and the lecture content is too superficial." (Student X)

These quotations illustrate the language and institutional comprehension gap, which constitutes a major source of academic concern for non-local students, and underscore the entry barriers posed by cultural capital within institutional contexts.

5.2 Difficulties encountered during the college application process and ways to overcome them

Multiple factors contribute to college transition difficulties, including language barriers, a lack of transparency, time-consuming application processes, and psychological pressure. For local students, language proficiency remains a significant challenge. For example:

"English requirements are stressful. I plan to take the Password Test at the end of May." (Student O)

"English grades are definitely my main obstacle. I don't do well on grammar questions in English exams." (Student T)

Additionally, the complicated application system and document requirements also pose problems. For example:

"Each institution has different word count requirements, so I have to rewrite multiple times, which is quite cumbersome." (Student K)

This indicates that the technical and administrative design did not adequately consider user experience.

Some students are puzzled by inconsistent information, such as Student P, who stated, *"Initially, it required a GPA of 3.0, but later it was 2.8."* This raises questions about the clarity of admission standards.

Non-local students face additional challenges concerning language barriers and information gaps. While local students can take the school's internal Password Test to fulfill language requirements, non-local students must submit an IELTS score of 6 or provide documents proving their language skills, such as:

"Preparing for the IELTS exam has been challenging, and I haven't passed it yet." (Student X)

"The agent neglected to mention that the Gaokao English language score could be used as proof of English proficiency, leading to the need to return to mainland China to obtain the certificate and engage in repeated communication with the school." (Student C)

This highlights the system's lack of flexibility regarding language proficiency verification and the high communication costs involved.

Furthermore, several non-local students have expressed concern about the lack of transparency in information.

"With a GPA of 3.74, I haven't received any offers. On the official website, I saw that a college has a quota of 400 spots for non-local students, but I didn't get a spot." (Student A)

"The school does not provide clear information about resources and academic outcomes for non-local students. When I asked teachers about prior seniors' universities and GPAs, I received no really valuable information." (Student B)

Local students seek information from various sources, including instructors, friends, social workers, and online platforms.

"Friends are more reliable because they apply to the same school." (Student M)

"I've talked to friends, school social workers, who give some advice, I've also met seniors from previous years and asked them questions." (Student N)

"I know classmates who attend different universities, so I ask them about their college application strategies and academic experiences." (Student K)

Non-local students heavily rely on agents for assistance, including essay writing, application sequencing, and mock interviews, and seek to bridge information gaps through senior students or platforms like Xiaohongshu.

"I found an agency to help me write my application documents for a bachelor's degree because agencies have a more detailed understanding of the application process, and I didn't know how to write the documents myself and didn't have the time." (Student X)

However, when the quality of agencies is inconsistent, it can lead to greater frustration and misallocation of resources.

For example, Student Z shared: *"I missed the first interview due to the first agent's carelessness, but the second time I was successful,"* highlighting the underlying fragility of relying on such external services.

5.3 Evaluation of the effectiveness of transition policies and support systems

Overall, the current transition policies and support systems for different student groups suffer from three major problems: lack of transparency, cumbersome procedures, and ineffective communication. Local students generally point out issues such as unclear admission requirements, slow response times, and inconvenient data submission. For example:

"The system only shows 'in progress,' so I have no idea what the current status is. Moreover, the application has a deadline, and if the rejection comes too late, it will be too late to reapply." (Student N)

"The departments do not communicate with each other and do not know what each other is doing." (Student W)

This reveals obvious gaps in the application process concerning administrative systems and departmental collaboration.

"Before applying for further education, could all requirements be clearly stated? If English scores aren't needed, students can focus entirely on their GPA; if a high GPA isn't required, they can adjust their priorities and focus on other areas." (Student P)

Non-local students face greater institutional isolation, particularly in terms of language support and the responsiveness of application processes that lack inclusion and efficiency. For instance:

"Lectures are mainly for locals, using Cantonese to explain complex content, which is hard to understand." (Student H)

Student H also encountered challenges such as confusing application permissions, administrative buck-passing, and a lack of communication clarity during the 'University B' main campus transfer process. He was constantly transferred between departments and ultimately failed to meet his needs, feeling that the system lacks understanding and support for non-local students.

Student Z felt the application process was too lengthy and suggested: *"Could the school make the process more transparent? Like update students every month on the current stage of review/where in the process/whether on the waiting list. This would prevent wasting everyone's time, allowing students to plan their affairs accordingly."*

"The admission criteria for each school are not very clear, with only basic requirements listed. We don't know the internal screening logic, and both high and low scores are admitted. We also don't understand why our high scores are rejected while lower scores are accepted." (Student U)

This highlights that non-local students often cannot access timely, effective application information or appeal support, exacerbating feelings of frustration and distrust.

In summary, while the current admission system provides a range of basic resources (lectures, open days, counseling, language tests, etc.), it fails to adequately address the diverse

needs of students in terms of specificity, transparency, and administrative efficiency. Especially for non-local students, the system not only fails to provide sufficient support but also creates additional barriers through language barriers, information asymmetry, and overly complex processes.

6. Discussion

The study's findings corroborate existing literature on the functions and challenges of the associate degree system. Within the theoretical framework of Cultural Capital and Social Support, they reveal the differentiated experiences and action logics of local and non-local students during their transition to higher education. A review of the literature indicates that scholars have primarily focused on institutional reforms (Kember, 2010), academic performance (Wong, 2014), or cultural adaptation (Jabbar et al., 2022). However, few have integrated Cultural Capital and Social Support theories to compare the agency and strategic choices of different student groups during the transition to higher education (O'Toole et al., 2024). This study endeavors to bridge this gap by conducting an experience-based analysis using students' firsthand narratives.

Firstly, as Lee (2014, 2019) pointed out, associate degrees fulfill two functions: academic transition and career development. In this study, local students typically utilize the associate degree as a formal stepping stone to enroll in bachelor's degree programs, demonstrating consistent academic motivations and clear expectations. Conversely, non-local students perceive the associate degree as a strategic gateway to the international education system or Hong Kong residency status, indicating a greater degree of instrumental rationality and the extended influence of family cultural capital in their educational decisions. This difference underscores the varied agency of Cultural Capital in educational transformation situations, aligning with Bourdieu's concept of Cultural Capital conversion. Furthermore, this finding addresses the prior study's inadequate portrayal of student agency (Kember, 2010), highlighting that Cultural Capital not only impacts institutional thinking but also creates logical distinctions in educational choices.

Secondly, this study complements Jin (2025) and Wang & Woo (2022) depiction of the institutional challenges faced by non-local students by revealing how language barriers, information gaps, and difficulties in understanding institutional processes interact to create a "marginalized educational experience." Unlike previous studies, which primarily focused on macro-level institutional analysis, this paper uses student data to demonstrate how non-local students frequently rely on agents, social media platforms (like Xiaohongshu), and information from previous cohorts to make educational decisions. While this phenomenon can result in information biases and strategic lock-in, preventing them from grasping the system's internal logic, it also emphasizes their structural disadvantages in terms of institutionalized cultural capital and formal support networks. Meanwhile, local students can effectively mobilize embodied and institutionalized cultural capital through teacher consultations, course lectures, and college admissions sharing sessions, selecting suitable strategies for diverse scenarios.

This reveals a significant bias in institutional resources, consistent with the findings of Roksa & Robinson (2016) and Yamamoto & Brinton (2010), who discovered that students with higher Cultural Capital are often better able to navigate educational transitions.

In terms of Social Support, previous research has rarely employed Cobb's three-category support framework to properly analyze the function of support resources in the transition to higher education (Worsley et al., 2021). This study addresses this gap from a longitudinal approach. Most local students have consistent access to informational support provided by institutional systems (such as academic counseling centers and teacher-student consultations), which provides a sense of security and predictability throughout the academic transition process, consistent with London et al.'s (2011) emphasis on the positive impact of family and school support. However, the support systems available to non-local students are more fragmented and non-institutionalized. They rely on an "alternative information ecology" comprising agents, peer experiences, and small communities, which, although useful, still possesses vulnerabilities and risks due to limited choices. This is consistent with Jabbar et al.'s (2022) finding that non-local students frequently rely on informal channels to compensate for the lack of institutional support.

Overall, this study not only validates the applicability of Cultural Capital and Social Support theories in the context of associate degree students' further education but also highlights the logical differentiation between local and non-local students in terms of resource mobilization and educational planning: the former rely on institutional familiarity and formal support systems to make stable choices, while the latter utilize family mobilization and informal networks. This discrepancy has the potential to drive cultural reproduction during educational transition while also revealing previously unknown exclusionary practices within policy and institutional operations.

This study's findings lead to the following recommendations for future policy and institutional design: Firstly, create more language-inclusive and culturally sensitive admission support mechanisms for non-local students, such as introducing multilingual application guidelines and sharing experiences from previous students. Secondly, information gaps should be addressed through enhanced institutional transparency, including open data initiatives and analysis of historical admission trends to provide clearer decision-making references. Thirdly, a student-centered and diversified strategic approach must replace institutional designs merely replicating local student frameworks, thereby creating more inclusive transitional mechanisms that advance educational equity and social integration. As scholars have cautioned (Mok & Zhang, 2022), international education systems risk reinforcing inequality when predominantly serving select groups; Hong Kong's hub vision must therefore proactively remove structural barriers to ensure transitional pathways genuinely benefit students from diverse backgrounds.

7. Conclusion

This study investigates the variations in resource mobilization, institutional adaptation, and strategic choices between local and non-local associate degree students during their academic transition process, utilizing the theoretical perspectives of Cultural Capital and Social Support. The findings demonstrate that students' understanding of the academic system and behavioral orientations are significantly influenced by the accessibility and transformative capacity of Cultural Capital. Concurrently, Social Support, acting as a compensatory mechanism at both psychological and informational levels, profoundly impacts students' strategic choices and emotional adaptation. When non-local students encounter structural constraints related to language, culture, and institutional information, they typically rely on informal communities and family support to compensate for institutional gaps, thereby highlighting the unequal distribution of resources caused by institutional biases.

This study fills gaps in previous research regarding the portrayal of student agency within the associate degree system while also aligning with theoretical discussions in the literature on cultural reproduction and institutional exclusion in higher education. Through comparative analysis, this study underscores the varied agency demonstrated by different student groups in the context of educational transition, as well as the potential impact of institutional design in fostering or hindering educational equity. The strategies proposed by this study—multilingual support, information transparency, and culturally sensitive teaching—provide an empirical foundation and policy recommendations for creating a more inclusive and responsive higher education system.

However, further education is a dynamic, multi-stage process. The interpretations and observed trends offered in this discussion must be examined, deepened, and potentially amended in follow-up monitoring interviews using data from both the application outcome and school adjustment periods. Subsequent analyses will seek to reveal how these early factors interact with key events (admissions, enrollment) to influence students' future educational success and long-term educational experiences, thereby providing a more comprehensive and in-depth empirical rationale for facilitating more equitable and effective associate-to-bachelor's degree transitions.

The main limitation of this study at this stage is that the discussion is based on data from a single early point in the further education journey (the preparation stage). While preliminary findings reveal important initial differences and mechanisms, they: 1) do not capture the immediate impact of application outcomes (acceptance/rejection) on students, decision-making adjustments (e.g., whether to accept a guaranteed offer or wait, whether to consider a gap year), and emotional changes. 2) do not show the actual post-participation academic adjustments (course difficulty, shifts in learning styles), social integration (cross-cultural communication, establishing new social circles), and institutional challenges (credit recognition, smooth course articulation). 3) It was not possible to determine whether group differences (e.g., information access, decision-making drivers) identified early on persisted, intensified, or

decreased in the face of subsequent critical events (admissions, enrollment). Therefore, future data collection should delve deeper into their coping strategies, the effectiveness of their academic information sources, the impact of family background on decision-making, and non-local students' cultural and identity adaptation in order to provide more targeted support and resources.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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