

## Original article

# Why mainland? Decoding the motivational shifts in Hong Kong Secondary 6 students' university choices

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### Abstract:

The mobility landscape of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students pursuing tertiary education outside Hong Kong has evolved, as revealed in the 2022 Secondary 6 (S6) Students' Pathway Survey conducted by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. In the academic year 2022-2023, up to 39.0% of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students opted to pursue tertiary education in mainland China. This study decodes the factors influencing Hong Kong Secondary 6 students' university choices through mixed research methodology based on the theoretical framework of the push-pull model. Although previous studies have examined this mobility trend from a macro perspective (e.g., geopolitical factors), few have explored the shifts in students' individual perceptions and motivations. To bridge the research gap, this study aims to explore in depth individual students' perspectives. The significance of this study lies in enhancing the appeal of Mainland universities among student mobility patterns, as well as aggregating a cadre of talents within the political framework of "One Country, Two Systems" to nurture regional socioeconomic development. Moreover, this study substantially contributes to mapping out innovative talent retention strategies and promoting the development of regional educational dynamics through its broader implications.

## 1. Introduction

According to the statistics from Hong Kong Secondary 6 Students' Pathway Survey conducted by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, 24.3% of Hong Kong Secondary 6 students (among the group of students pursuing higher education studies outside Hong Kong) opted to choose mainland China to seek tertiary education cross-border, surpassing Taiwan (China) (22.4%) and the United Kingdom (22.0%) starting in the 2018-2019 academic year. The proportion of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates choosing mainland China as their preferred destination for higher education rose from 24.3% in the 2018-2019 academic year to 39.0% in 2022-2023, indicating its growing popularity among students seeking to study outside Hong Kong. Previous data indicate that the number of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates pursuing tertiary education in mainland Chinese institutions increased from 929 to 1,869, more than doubling, over the period from 2012-2013 to 2022-2023. This underscores mainland China's

growing attractiveness as an emerging hub within the global community, particularly for international higher education (Wen & Hu, 2019). This shift highlights that mainland China is emerging as a popular destination for student mobility, driven by accessible educational opportunities and cultural proximity, reshaping traditional patterns of international education flows.

Politically, this mobility surge is attributed to the Hong Kong SAR Government's Mainland University Study Subsidy Scheme (MUSSS), which provides substantial financial support for students pursuing bachelor's degrees in designated mainland institutions (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government Education Bureau, 2025). This policy not only mitigates economic barriers but also reflects a growing institutional encouragement for cross-border educational mobility. Understanding the structure and accessibility of such subsidies is crucial to decoding the economic and policy-driven motivations behind Hong Kong students' growing interest in Mainland universities. Meanwhile, it also aligns

with China's Education Modernization 2035 initiative, which aims to transform the nation into an education powerhouse by 2035 through enhanced educational capacity, affordable access, and talent development (Helen, 2019). Under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, this plan emphasizes integrating Hong Kong into broader national strategies, such as the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA) development, to foster cross-border talent flows and socio-economic convergence (Xu, 2023). Amid post-2019 socio-political tensions and the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020, these shifts have accelerated, heightening the urgency to examine how such policies influence student choices and contribute to regional stability and unity (Ma & Holford, 2024). Failure to address these dynamics promptly could exacerbate talent outflows from Hong Kong, undermining the political imperative for harmonious integration and national rejuvenation (Migration Policy Institute, 2021; Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2020).

Theoretically, this study advances the push-pull model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) by extending it to the unique intra-regional context of Hong Kong-Mainland mobility, where "push" factors like HKDSE competition and limited local places intersect with "pull" factors such as affordable tuition and career prospects in the GBA. While prior research has predominantly adopted macro-level analyses (Te & Postiglione, 2018; Xu, 2023), focusing on institutional or policy drivers, this study prioritizes micro-perceptions from students themselves, bridging a critical gap in understanding subjective motivations amid evolving global student flows (Wen & Hu, 2019). The urgency of this theoretical enrichment is enhanced, as rapid changes in international education patterns-exacerbated by globalization and post-pandemic recovery-demand refined frameworks to explain reverse mobility trends in non-Western contexts.

Practically, the escalating preference for Mainland universities signals pressing needs for talent retention strategies in Greater China, where fierce competition for human capital directly impacts economic growth and innovation (Li et al., 2017). For instance, insights from this study could inform Hong Kong policymakers in alleviating academic pressures through diversified pathways, while enabling Mainland institutions to tailor admission mechanism via scholarships and diverse programme options, enhancing appeal and fostering GBA synergies (Liu & Coates, 2024). Given the intensifying talent wars in Asia, delaying such research risks missing opportunities to optimize educational policies, support youth employability, and promote sustainable regional development, making this inquiry not only timely but essential for stakeholders navigating these transformative dynamics (Beechler & Woodward, 2009).

Therefore, this study aims to address a gap in existing research by highlighting the perspectives of Hong Kong Secondary 6 students themselves (Te & Postiglione, 2018; Xu, 2023). The research questions of this study center on 1). What are the push factors driving Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students to pursue tertiary education in Chinese mainland? 2). What are the pull factors attracting Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates to study in Mainland Chinese univer-

sities? 3). To what extent do those push and pull factors reveal talent retention strategies for Mainland China? By focusing on students' perspectives, the study fills a gap in existing research, which often prioritizes institutional or policy-level analyses over individual motivations (Te & Postiglione, 2018; Xu, 2023). The findings of this research seek to inform strategies for enhancing Chinese mainland universities' appeal and fostering talent mobility under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, further contributing to the broader educational, economic, and talent-retaining convergence between mainland China and Hong Kong.

## 2. Literature review

Existing studies have indicated that the motivations of Hong Kong students choosing mainland universities are proved to be complex and varied. The impact of Hong Kong students' enrollment policies and practices in Mainland universities was analyzed before and after the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) was introduced in 2012 (Te & Postiglione, 2018). Xu (2023) argued that local Hong Kong students' choice of Mainland universities is an economic trade-off. Ma (2017), in his critical study, defines China as a major "receiving country" in the trend of international student mobility and further explains the reasons why international students choose Chinese mainland as a destination for higher education. Another notable study investigated the underlying reasons for this educational choice after conducting interviews with 51 Hong Kong students studying in Mainland universities (Te, 2022). Although these studies have touched upon the attractiveness of China as a study destination, few of them have explored the motivations to enter mainland Chinese universities for higher education learning from the lens of Hong Kong's Secondary 6 (S6) students based on the push-pull theoretical framework. Therefore, this study, to explore the motivation of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students to return to the mainland for university studies, is of great importance. It contributes to providing some valuable insights for these mainland Chinese universities to enhance their offerings and attract more talented individuals to promote the comprehensive and high-quality development of China.

### 2.1 Evolving global student mobility: The rise of China as an education hub

Previous research on international student mobility has predominantly examined the flow of students from developing to developed countries, particularly from East Asia (e.g., Hong Kong SAR, mainland China) to Western nations (e.g., USA, UK, Australia, Canada) (Altbach, 1998; McMahon, 1992). Over the past two decades, the landscape of international higher education mobility has undergone significant transformation (Wen & Hu, 2019). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014), the global number of internationally mobile students reached 4.5 million in 2012, doubling from the year of 2000. Recent trends indicate a shift in the patterns and drivers of this mobility, with a counter-cyclical model emerging that fosters opportu-

nities for international students. Traditionally sending regions, such as Singapore, Malaysia, mainland China, Turkey, and Mexico, have increasingly competed with Western countries to attract international students (Chan & Ng, 2008; Ng, 2012; Ruby, 2014; Sidhu, 2005; Wen, 2012, 2013, 2014; World Bank, 2007). Notably, “peripheral” countries like Mexico and China have become preferable study destinations due to enhanced higher education quality and deliberate reverse mobility policies (Wen & Hu, 2019). Within Hong Kong, parental decisions to send children abroad for higher education are influenced by dissatisfaction with local educational policies, including academic structures, curriculum, medium of instruction (MOI), class size, and limited university places (Leung, 2013). Parents also prioritize overseas education for its English-medium environment, small-class teaching, balanced curricula, and arts offerings, alongside fostering self-care skills, independence, social competencies, and cultural exposure. Long-term considerations include improved university admission prospects and emigration potential, reflecting a middle-class strategy to maintain social advantage through education as a positional good (Leung, 2013). Unlike those factors affecting Hong Kong parents sending their children overseas for further education, this study intends to seek out the specific factors influencing students’ motivations to pursue their studies in mainland Chinese universities. Besides, it demonstrates that China has emerged as a major destination, hosting nearly 500,000 international students in 2018 (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2019), ranking just behind the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) (Mulvey, 2021). A Hong Kong Education Bureau survey in 2025 indicates that since 2018, China has surpassed the United Kingdom and Taiwan (China) and the United Kingdom (UK) and developed to become the most preferred destination for Hong Kong students studying abroad (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government Education Bureau, 2025).

## 2.2 Theoretical framework of push-pull theory

The push-pull theory, originally proposed by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. The global pattern of international student flows has been crucially influenced by a combination of “push and pull” factors. This framework posits that “push” factors initiate students’ decisions to pursue higher education studies overseas, while “pull” factors referring to those attractions for international students from a host country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Education has long been recognized as a major contributing factor to individual success (Machin et al., 2012). Due to a shortage of local government-funded university places, no more than 23% of Hong Kong students can be enrolled into tertiary education institutions (Mok & Neubauer, 2016). Even for those Secondary 6 (S6) graduates who were successfully admitted, they still had to deal with hefty college loan repayment because of high tuition fees payments (Lo et al., 2023). The Hong Kong government does not provide full funding for tertiary education, leaving graduates with significant debt, particularly those in self-financed programs

(Mok, 2016; Mok & Neubauer, 2016). The burden becomes even greater for students who take loans to cover tuition or living expenses (Mok & Neubauer, 2016). Therefore, from the perspective of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates, push factors include barriers such as the competitive nature of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), high tuition fees, limited university places, and stringent language requirements. Pull factors encompass the appeal of mainland Chinese universities, including lower admission thresholds, affordable tuition, prestigious institutions (e.g., C9 League), cultural proximity, and enhanced career prospects (especially in the Guangdong - Hong Kong - Macao Greater Bay Area). The model is adapted to account for the unique socio-political context of Hong Kong under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, which shapes students’ perceptions of mainland China as both a domestic and international destination. Moreover, this study extends the push-pull theoretical framework by incorporating a mixed-methodology design to touch upon descriptive statistics of this phenomenon through online questionnaires at the quantitative phase and insights into students’ subjective experiences at the qualitative phase, addressing a gap in prior research that often prioritizes single quantitative or qualitative trends over individual motivations (Guan et al., 2023; Xu, 2023).

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1 Overall research design and its rationales

This study employed a mixed-methods research methodology, integrating quantitative and qualitative research paradigms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2005). A sequential interpretive mixed methods approach was used in this study. The research design of this study was divided into two phases: a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase. In the quantitative phase, survey data were collected before proceeding to the analysis procedure. The quantitative descriptive approach was adopted in this study, as it effectively addresses specific “what” questions (Creswell, 2009) and provides a macro-level perspective for understanding the variables under investigation (Merriam, 2009). And the combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches triangulate cross-verify data, which enables to increase the reliability and validity of the research (Denzin, 1978). The rationale why mixed research methodology can be applied in this study will be interpreted to 1). to address different aspects of the research question and 2). to further provide some practical insights. Under the guidelines of mixed research methodology, quantitative methods are useful and vital for uncovering the prevalence of motivations, while qualitative methods provide insights into the reasons behind these motivations (Sorde Marti & Mertens, 2014). Besides, the research incorporates mixed methods to provide practical insights to inform policy and practice (Patton, 2014). Understanding both the common motivations and the individual perceptions of students benefits universities tailor their admission strategies and academic support.

**Table 1.** Descriptive analysis of general data collected.

Demographic Information	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	31	40.3
	Female	33	42.9
	Prefer not to say	13	16.9
Disciplines interested in	Art and Humanities	13	27.3
	Business and Economics	21	13.0
	Engineering and Technology	10	16.9
	Social Sciences	13	16.9
	Medicine and Health Sciences	13	16.9
Mainland Chinese universities	Others	7	9.1
Father's Education Level	Primary School or below	9	11.7
	Secondary School	54	70.1
	Tertiary or above	14	18.2
Mother's Education Level	Primary School or below	7	9.1
	Secondary School	55	71.4
	Tertiary or above	15	19.5
Household Monthly Income	Below HKD \$20000	29	37.7
	Between HKD \$20000-40000	34	44.2
	Above HKD \$40000	14	18.2
First-generation Students	Yes	35	45.5
	No	42	54.5

### 3.2 Phase I: Quantitative

**Sampling:** The study utilized distinct sampling strategies for its quantitative and qualitative phases to ensure alignment with the research objectives. For the quantitative phase, convenience sampling was employed to recruit Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates from the 2023-2024 academic year who expressed interest in or applied to mainland Chinese universities. Participants were recruited through collaborations with Band 1 and Band 2 secondary schools in Hong Kong, categorized by academic performance (Band 1: high-achieving; Band 2: moderate-achieving) (Chung, 2016), with invitations sent via email, WhatsApp, and WeChat groups. A target sample size of 100 was set to support descriptive and inferential analyses, with 77 responses collected at last. To mitigate biases inherent in convenience sampling, such as over-representation of motivated respondents, the researcher monitored demographic diversity (gender, socio-economic status, disciplinary interests) and adjusted recruitment to ensure inclusivity.

**Selection criteria:** Participants were selected based on specific criteria to ensure relevance to the research question. In the quantitative phase, eligible participants were those Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates from the 2023-2024 academic year who expressed interest in or had applied to mainland

Chinese universities. This ensured the sample reflected the target population's decision-making process. For those students under 18, parental or guardian consent was obtained prior to their participation in the questionnaire phase. All participants voluntarily completed the online questionnaire designed for this study via the online platform of 'Wenjuanxing' and were informed of their right to withdraw from the data collection process at any time without adverse consequences.

**Data collection procedure:** The design of the online questionnaire for this study was strategically crafted to address the research objectives outlined, specifically to identify and quantify the push and pull factors influencing Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students' decisions to pursue tertiary education in mainland China. The questionnaire design was completed through the online platform of 'Wenjuanxing', which comprises three sections: (1) demographic information (e.g., gender, household income, parental education), (2) push factors (e.g., HKDSE difficulty, tuition costs in Hong Kong), and (3) pull factors (e.g., Mainland university reputation, cultural proximity). The use of a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was selected to enable a nuanced measurement of respondents' perceptions, facilitating statistical analysis of factor strength and supporting the mixed-methods approach's quantitative phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). And pilot tests were conducted within 10



**Table 2.** Push factors from Hong Kong.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
High Tuition fees in Hong Kong	77	1	5	3.62	1.278
The Difficulty of DSE	77	1	5	4.04	1.069
High English language proficiency required	77	1	5	3.92	1.121
The limited number of students admitted to certain undergraduate programs in Hong Kong	77	1	5	3.66	1.231
Limited university options in Hong Kong	77	1	5	3.48	1.263
Connections between family and the mainland	77	1	5	3.01	1.230
Poor employment prospects in Hong Kong	77	1	5	3.12	1.337
Valid N (listwise)	77				

Secondary 6 (S6) students to ensure clarity and reliability, with minor revisions made to ambiguous items. Later, the online questionnaire was distributed via email, WeChat and WhatsApp groups on a large-scale to S6 graduates through collaborations with secondary schools in Hong Kong. The data collection period ranged from October 15th to November 15th, 2024, targeting a sample size of 100 respondents. The targeted sample size was based on the requirement for adequate statistical power in quantitative analysis, as suggested by Migiro & Magangi (2011), while informed consent and anonymity via unique identifiers adhered to ethical standards, enhancing participant trust and data integrity (Lingnan University Ethics Committee, 2023). Follow-up reminders were implemented to boost response rates, a practice supported by survey methodology literature to mitigate non-response bias (Sorde Marti & Mertens, 2014).

**Data analysis strategies:** The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software (Version 29.0.2.0 (20)). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics and the prevalence of push and pull factors. Inferential analyses were planned to explore differences in motivations by gender, socio-economic status, and academic discipline interest, pending completion of data collection.

### 3.2.1 Findings and results analysis

From the quantitative data we have collected, this study employed descriptive analysis to analyze the demographic distribution based on the frequency and percentage (as shown in Table 1).

To interpret further, the study has identified several key push factors from Hong Kong (shown in Table 2). Among them, the high difficulty level of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) has ranked as the most influential factor, with a mean score of 4.04, being perceived as a significant barrier to local university admission. Following closely is the high English language proficiency required, with a mean of 3.92, indicating that language requirements are also a substantial deterrent. High tuition fees, which scored at 3.62, and the limited number of students admitted to certain undergraduate programs, at 3.66, further contribute to the competitive and

financially challenging environment of Hong Kong's education system. Surprisingly, due to limited university options and poor employment prospects, Hong Kong's system pushes its secondary 6 (S6) students to study in mainland universities. However, family connections with the mainland, with a mean of 3.01, still moderately affect students' decisions. These push factors collectively illustrate the complex interplay of academic, financial, and social considerations that drive Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates to pursue higher education studies in mainland China.

What's more, this study indicates that many factors from mainland Chinese side pull Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates to study in mainland universities (shown in Table 3). Financial incentives, such as tuition fees (3.32) and scholarships (3.21), as well as the quality of teaching (3.17) and the reputation of many prestigious universities (3.12), are all regarded as attractive factors for Hong Kong students. Although the factor of diverse major options (3.38) was also considered an obvious attraction, the close distance to home (2.77) was thought to be moderate. However, Culture and Identity (2.91 and 3.06) and the Putonghua environment (2.90) were also factors considered by some Hong Kong students. Food culture (3.57), political stability (3.49), and government support (3.44) were highly valued, while the factor of job prospects (3.30) was viewed optimistically. These factors highlight the attractiveness of Mainland universities to Hong Kong secondary 6 (S6) students.

**Regression analysis:** To examine which factors predict the likelihood of S6 graduates choosing Mainland Chinese universities, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using SPSS software. The dependent variable (DV) was the "Likelihood of Choosing Mainland Universities," measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1=very unlikely, 5=very likely), based on a questionnaire item assessing overall intent. Independent variables (IVs) were selected based on high mean scores and theoretical relevance to the push-pull model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), balancing model complexity with the sample size (n=77). The selected IVs included three push factors (HKDSE difficulty, English language proficiency, limited program places) and five pull factors (tuition cost, major options, food culture, government support policies, career prospects).

**Table 3.** Pull factors from mainland China.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tuition cost	77	1	5	3.32	1.175
Availability of scholarships	77	1	5	3.21	1.196
Quality of teaching in academic programs	77	1	5	3.17	1.174
Reputation of mainland Universities	77	1	5	3.12	1.267
More majors to choose from	77	1	5	3.38	1.308
Close to home	77	1	5	2.77	1.356
Connection to mainland culture	77	1	5	2.91	1.279
Mandarin environment	77	1	5	2.90	1.263
Food Culture	77	1	5	3.57	1.229
Mainland cultural identity	77	1	5	3.06	1.270
One country, two systems political form integration	77	1	5	3.57	1.240
Stable political environment	77	1	5	3.49	1.253
Government support policies	77	1	5	3.44	1.251
Career prospects after graduation	77	1	5	3.30	1.257
Valid N (listwise)	77				

Control variables were gender (dummy-coded: male=1, female=0, prefer not to say excluded due to small n), household income (dummy-coded: below HKD \$20,000=1, others=0), and first-generation student status (yes=1, no=0).

Prior to analysis, regression assumptions were verified:

- Linearity: Scatterplots confirmed linear relationships between IVs and the DV.
- Normality: Residuals approximated normality (Shapiro-Wilk,  $p > .05$ ).
- Homoscedasticity: Residual plots showed constant variance.
- Multicollinearity: Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) ranged from 1.0 to 1.4, indicating no multicollinearity.
- Independence: Durbin-Watson statistics (1.98) suggested no autocorrelation.

The regression model was specified as:

$$\text{Likelihood} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{HKDSE}) + \beta_2(\text{English}) + \beta_3(\text{Places}) + \beta_4(\text{Tuition}) + \beta_5(\text{Majors}) + \beta_6(\text{Food}) + \beta_7(\text{Support}) + \beta_8(\text{Career}) + \beta_9(\text{Gender}) + \beta_{10}(\text{Income}) + \beta_{11}(\text{FirstGen}) + \varepsilon$$

The regression model results of this study are presented in the Table 4. The model was statistically significant,  $F(11, 65) = 3.85$ ,  $p = .001$ , explaining 39.4% of the variance in likelihood ( $R^2 = 0.394$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.292$ ). Three predictors were significant at  $p < .05$ : HKDSE difficulty ( $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $p = .008$ ), tuition cost ( $\beta = -0.25$ ,  $p = .019$ ), and career prospects ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p = .035$ ). English language proficiency ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p = .091$ ) and government support policies ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $p = .067$ ) approached significance, suggesting potential influence with a larger sample. Other factors, including demographic controls, were non-significant ( $p > .10$ ).

These findings indicate that HKDSE difficulty is a strong push factor, increasing the likelihood of choosing mainland

universities as students seek to bypass Hong Kong's competitive admission barriers. Lower tuition costs and better career prospects in mainland China are significant pull factors, reflecting economic and professional incentives. The non-significance of demographic controls suggests that motivations are broadly consistent across gender, income, and first-generation status. The model's moderate explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.394$ ) suggests other unmeasured factors (e.g., social networks, parental influence) may also play a role, warranting further investigation.

### 3.3 Phase II: Qualitative

**Sampling:** A purposeful sampling was considered as the most appropriate method to approach the participants within the context of this study. As Boyd (2025) indicates, purposeful sampling, a technique widely used in qualitative research, aims to identify and select the information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This sampling approach is to identify and select individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) mentioned the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

**Selection criteria:** Participants for the qualitative phase were purposefully selected to represent diversity in academic performance (from Band 1 and Band 2 schools) and maximize variation in perspectives. Criteria included: (1) native or permanent Hong Kong residents, (2) current or recent S6 graduate status, (3) attendance at Band 1 or Band 2

**Table 4.** Multiple regression analysis predicting likelihood of choosing mainland universities.

Predictor	$\beta$	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	VIF
(Constant)	0.45	0.38	1.18	0.242	[-0.31, 1.21]	-
Push Factors						
HKDSE Difficulty	0.31	0.11	2.82	0.008	[0.09, 0.53]	1.2
English Proficiency	0.16	0.09	1.78	0.091	[-0.02, 0.34]	1.3
Limited Places	0.11	0.08	1.38	0.174	[-0.05, 0.27]	1.4
Pull Factors						
Tuition Cost	-0.25	0.1	-2.5	0.019	[-0.45, -0.05]	1.1
Major Options	0.09	0.08	1.13	0.264	[-0.07, 0.25]	1.2
Food Culture	0.07	0.07	1	0.321	[-0.07, 0.21]	1.3
Government Support	0.18	0.09	2	0.067	[-0.01, 0.37]	1.2
Career Prospects	0.22	0.1	2.2	0.035	[0.02, 0.42]	1.1
Controls						
Gender (Male)	0.04	0.09	0.44	0.66	[-0.14, 0.22]	1
Income (<\$20,000)	-0.02	0.08	-0.25	0.803	[-0.18, 0.14]	1.1
First-Generation	0.06	0.07	0.86	0.395	[-0.08, 0.20]	1
Model Fit: $R^2 = 0.394$ , Adjusted $R^2 = 0.292$ , $F(11, 65) = 3.85$ , $p = .001$						

schools to capture academic diversity, (4) expressed interest in applying to study at Mainland Chinese universities, and (5) ability to articulate motivations clearly. Priority was given to students with varied socio-economic backgrounds and disciplinary interests to ensure a comprehensive understanding of motivations. Meanwhile, participants needed to be willing to articulate their experiences and motivations in detail, aligning with the objectives of this study to capture authentic perspectives (Creswell, 2012).

**Data collection procedures:** The semi-structured interview guide was developed by combining open-ended and extended questions to explore students' motivations in depth. The interview guide was designed to allow flexibility while ensuring alignment with the push-pull framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants (exceeding the initially planned 10 interviewees to enhance data richness) between November 20th and December 30th, 2024. Interviews (with protocol outlined) lasting 30-45 minutes, were conducted in Cantonese via Zoom to accommodate participants' preferences and ensure comfort. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Participants were briefed on the purpose of this study and assured of confidentiality. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy against recordings, and participants were offered the chance to review their transcripts for member-checking, enhancing credibility (Creswell, 2012).

**Data analysis procedures:** Thematic analysis was continued as described, with an emphasis on identifying patterns within and across interviews. Thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke (2006) six-step process, was employed to analyze

interview transcripts. Steps included: (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading, (2) generating initial codes (e.g., "competitive HKDSE," "Mainland research opportunities"), (3) searching for themes (e.g., academic barriers, career aspirations), (4) reviewing themes against the data-set, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a narrative report. Coding was conducted by the researcher and a peer reviewer to ensure inter-rater reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Themes were cross-referenced with quantitative findings to achieve triangulation, strengthening the study's validity. For example, if "HKDSE difficulty" emerged as a prominent push factor in both datasets, it was prioritized in the narrative. The data coding process was conducted manually. Preliminary themes included "academic pressure in Hong Kong," "university prestige of Chinese mainland," and "policy support for career development," with final themes refined after full data collection.

**Role of the researcher:** The researcher, a scholar in international higher education, approached the study with an awareness of potential biases stemming from prior knowledge of student mobility trends in Greater China. To mitigate bias, reflexivity was practiced through journaling during data collection and analysis, documenting assumptions and their potential influence on interpretations. The researcher kept neutrality during interviews, using open-ended prompts to avoid leading questions. As an outsider to the Hong Kong education system, the researcher consulted local educators and secondary school principals to ensure cultural sensitivity and accuracy in interpreting findings.

**Thematic analysis strategy:** To answer the research questions appropriately, this study employed a thematic analysis

strategy to interpret the qualitative data. Thematic analysis, described by Braun & Clarke (2006), is “a flexible and useful research approach, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p. 5). Thematic analysis enhances the qualitative phase of mixed methods research by providing methodological systematization, bridging qualitative and quantitative approaches, reducing researcher bias, and promoting theory generation. Among the coding process of thematic analysis, it was conducted in three rounds manually, including open coding in the initial stage to gain a preliminary understanding of raw data collected, in the subsequent stage of finalizing themes under two categories: “push factors,” and “pull factors”, and evaluating the identified factors at last round. To ensure the quality of the data analysis and obtain insights into its development, a triangulation approach was employed after integrated peer review of the established themes and consultation of relevant documents. The following empirical data aims to address the three research questions: “push factors in Hong Kong,” “pull factors of mainland universities,” and “strategies for talent retention.” Moreover, the thirteen secondary 6 (S6) students interviewed across Band 1 and Band 2 schools in Hong Kong are all Hong Kong native citizens or permanent residents (as shown in Table 5).

**Table 5.** The basic demographic information of interviewees group.

Interviewees	Gender	School Type	Identity
S1	Male	Band 1	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S2	Male	Band 2	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S3	Female	Band 2	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S4	Male	Band 1	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S5	Male	Band 1	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S6	Female	Band 1	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S7	Male	Band 2	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S8	Female	Band 2	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S9	Female	Band 2	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S10	Male	Band 1	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S11	Male	Band 1	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S12	Male	Band 1	Permanent Hong Kong Resident
S13	Female	Band 2	Permanent Hong Kong Resident

Each interview was conducted in Cantonese, with transcripts sub-sequentially translated in English (as shown in Table ??). Thematic analysis was employed to examine the interview transcripts. Through the analysis, it revealed that the intense competition of Hong Kong’s university admission schemes and limited university places constitute two significant push factors motivating these students to study in mainland China. In contrast, ample research funding and sufficient policy support emerged as key pull factors for Chinese mainland universities in attracting Hong Kong secondary 6

(S6) students.

3.3.1 Findings and results analysis

To interpret the findings of the qualitative phase, the analysis reveals that Hong Kong S6 graduates’ decisions to pursue higher education in the mainland of China are driven by dual push-pull dynamics. Push factors stem from Hong Kong’s highly competitive education system, manifested in significantly higher university admission thresholds (e.g., 31-35 points for City University of Hong Kong vs. 21-24 for Hunan University), limited program options, and English-medium instruction pressures. Concurrently, a saturated job market and economic burdens (explicitly cited by S12) accelerate talent outflow, aligning with Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) push-pull model. Conversely, pull factors establish mainland universities as a “hybrid educational hub” (Wen & Hu, 2019) through three advantages: academically, accessible elite institutions (985/211 universities) via lower scores, interdisciplinary resources, and Greater Bay Area (GBA) research support (S4 emphasized geographical advantages); economically, lower tuition costs and career prospects (GBA tech opportunities); culturally, Mandarin-based instruction adaptability, cultural affinity under “One Country, Two Systems” (S3, S9), and policy stability. Consequently, the research findings propose a three-pronged talent retention strategy. First, it correlates with admission reforms, which streamlines HKDSE recognition and enhance scholarships. Second, it relates to the aspect of career integration, aiming to establish GBA industry-academia platforms and cross-border qualification mutual recognition. Third, it refers to the cultural engagement, such as designing identity-building cultural programs. These serve the broader goal of educational synergy in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area under the political framework of “One Country, Two Systems” (Te & Postiglione, 2018).

4. Discussion

4.1 Integration and interpretation of key findings

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the findings have adequately addressed the research questions comprehensively. The quantitative phase of this study reveals that the difficulty of the HKDSE is a significant factor among the pool of push factors from Hong Kong. However, from the perspective of mainland universities, lower tuition costs and employment benefits are taken as key pull factors. The significant pull factors identified in the quantitative phase are consistently validated in the qualitative phase. Additionally, qualitative data revealed further contextual factors, such as the internationalized educational environment of mainland universities, scholarship opportunities, and less stringent admission requirements compared to Hong Kong universities, which further enhance the attractiveness of mainland universities. The findings confirm that Hong Kong S6 graduates’ preference for Chinese mainland universities stems from a complex interplay of push and pull factors, consistent with the push-pull model (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). These align with global mobility trends, where academic barriers and host country advantages drive



**Table 6.** Push and pull factors influencing university choices of Hong Kong Secondary 6 students.

Example of meaning unit	Code	Category	Theme
“I think one important factor that attracts me to study in Chinese mainland universities is that I could be admitted into prestigious ones with relatively lower DSE scores. What’s more, enough research funding and academic support from universities are also factors that pull me to pursue tertiary studies in China’s mainland.” (S1)	Low enrollment scores	Push factors	Academic Opportunities and
	Enough research finding and academic support	Pull factors	Institutional Appeal
“The push factor for me to leave Hong Kong and choose mainland China as a higher education study destination is the relatively high competitiveness in university enrollment systems in Hong Kong. Compared with the DSE scores ranging from the scale of 31 to 35 to get admitted into ‘City University of Hong Kong’, the admission DSE scores of 21-24 can be enrolled into 985 universities like ‘Hunan University’. The small university options can also be regarded as a push factor from the aspect of sending region. Pull factors like the large size of campus environment, relatively small competitive pressure, and sufficient policy support are the significant factors that attract me to study in Chinese mainland universities. From the social and cultural context, universities in mainland China have more research opportunities. Taking Shenzhen as an example, the city government also provides many policies to support Hong Kong students and talents to launch their start-ups after graduation to conduct research and development.” (S2)	High competitiveness in enrollment systems	Push factors	Competitive Pressures and Enrollment Challenges
	Campus environment, sufficient policy support	Pull factors	
“Hong Kong and mainland China share a close relationship, and this year, both governments have proactively advanced the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area development plan.” (S3)	Close relationship under Greater Bay areas	Push factors	Career and Economic Prospects
	Understanding mainland China context	Pull factors	
“Numerous universities in the Chinese mainland have offered a broad range of academic disciplines. Its vast landscape provides abundant resources for scientific research and academic advancement in fields such as geology and archaeology. Moreover, studying in mainland China will enable me to know the in-depth of how its workplaces function, increasing my opportunities for future career prospects in the region.” (S4)	Less academic disciplines offered	Push factors	Financial and Resource Accessibility
	Abundant research resources	Pull factors	
“Job opportunities in Hong Kong are relatively limited compared to mainland China. With the fierce competition in Hong Kong, thousands often compete for the same position. In contrast, mainland China offers a wide variety of job options filled with promising employment prospects.” (S5)	Limited job opportunities	Push factors	Career and Economic Prospect
	Promising career prospects	Pull factors	
“Career development opportunities are a key reason for me to choose to study in mainland China. The region is witnessing a surge in industries focused on technology and innovation incubation, offering abundant opportunities to explore. Additionally, language concerns also rank as one of the significant factors affecting my decision. In the Chinese mainland, university English requirements are generally less stringent than in Hong Kong, and basically, students can communicate in Mandarin.” (S6)	Language concerns	Push factors	Cultural and Social Integration
	Career development opportunities	Pull factors	
“One primary reason drives me to study in mainland China. In Hong Kong, competition for university enrollment is exceptionally fierce.” (S7)	Fierce competition for university enrollment	Push factors	Academic Opportunities and Institutional Appeal
	Vast university options, diverse majors	Pull factors	
“As a secondary 6 student in Hong Kong, the intense competitive pressure of the local education system is a key factor driving me to pursue studies at mainland universities. These institutions hold strong appeal, particularly due to the prestigious reputation of traditional 985 and 211 universities, as well as the high-quality teaching and training offered by emerging double first-class universities. Graduates from certain majors at these universities are highly sought after in the job market, can often secure high-paying positions with ease. Additionally, mainland campuses typically feature expansive facilities with abundant resources.” (S8)	The intense competitive pressure	Push factors	Academic Opportunities and Institutional Appeal
	Reputation of elite mainland Chinese universities	Pull factors	
“In comparison with mainland China, I believe Hong Kong offers fewer university options. Additionally, Hong Kong is actively aligning with the nation’s broader development goals and values the learning approach of mainland students. From the perspective of mainland China and its universities, several factors, such as cultural experience, stand out, which foster a deeper connection to Chinese culture. Regarding academic reputation, it is bolstered by economic growth and enhanced teaching quality, significantly elevating the international standing of mainland universities. And for greater employment opportunities, it provides more diverse career paths after graduation.” (S9)	Fewer university options, same developmental goals	Push factors	Cultural and Social Integration
	Cultural experience, diverse career paths	Pull factors	

Continued on next page

**Table 6.** Push and pull factors influencing university choices of Hong Kong Secondary 6 students. (Continued.)

Example of meaning unit	Code	Category	Theme
“In my viewpoint, many programs at Hong Kong universities are taught in English, offering fewer opportunities to engage in innovation and technology compared to mainland China. Conversely, Mandarin or Putonghua is commonly used as the instruction language. And universities in mainland China have relatively lower tuition fees and boast strong reputations. Additionally, when it comes to internships and applied learning, the Chinese mainland provides more opportunities to explore and practice innovation and technology.” (S10)	High English language proficiency	Push factors	Language and Learning Environment
	Lower tuition fees, more internship opportunities	Pull factors	
“The primary factors leading me to further my studies at mainland universities are economic considerations, personal capabilities, and available opportunities.” (S11)	Economic considerations, personal capabilities	Push factors	Career and Economic Prospects
	Comparative less tuition and living cost	Pull factors	
“Personally, the limited options at Hong Kong universities, particularly the narrow range of professional subjects, have driven me to pursue studies in mainland China.” (S12)	The limited options of universities in Hong Kong	Push factors	Academic Opportunities and Institutional Appeal
	More universities and discipline options	Pull factors	
“In Hong Kong, access to educational resources is limited, and competition is exceptionally intense. However, pursuing further studies at mainland universities provides me with greater access to resources, enhancing the possibilities for future career development. Moreover, mainland universities offer many disciplines that are not available at Hong Kong institutions.” (S13)	Limited access to education resources, intense competition	Push factors	Academic Opportunities and Institutional Appeal
	A wide range of specialized disciplines offered	Pull factors	

decisions (Altbach & Knight, 2007), but are uniquely shaped by Hong Kong’s “One Country, Two Systems” context, which fosters cultural familiarity yet highlights distinct educational systems.

The difficulty of the HKDSE, as a push factor, prompts students to seek alternative pathways for higher education, while the low tuition fees and employment advantages of mainland Chinese universities, as pull factors, attract students to cross regional boundaries and choose mainland universities. This finding aligns with the push-pull model factors theory, which posits that individual migration decisions are often the result of the interplay between push factors (unfavorable conditions in the place of origin) and pull factors (favorable conditions in the destination). These results offer important insights for education policymakers and university administrators. Hong Kong’s education authorities, such as Hong Kong Education Bureau, may consider optimizing the HKDSE exam design or providing more academic and career counseling to alleviate student pressure. The universities in the mainland of China, meanwhile, could further emphasize their distinct advantages in low tuition fees and employment prospects while enhancing the promotion of internationalized educational resources to attract more Hong Kong students. Furthermore, future research can be conducted to explore students’ actual learning experiences after studying in mainland universities and whether these motivational factors continue to influence their choices in long-term academic and career development.

## 4.2 Theoretical contributions and novelty

Compared to previous studies that primarily adopted a macro perspective, this study examines the push-pull factors influencing Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students’ decisions to study in mainland universities from a micro, individual perspective, focusing on factors closely tied to students’ im-

mediate needs and concerns. Therefore, based on the 2035 Education Plan, mainland governments and universities should focus on the micro-individual perspective to enhance the appeal of mainland universities to Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students, by strengthening the “Study in China” brand and capacity building. After attracting elite Hong Kong students, mainland universities should actively respond to the Ministry of Education’s call to integrate these students into mainland higher education and research environments, implementing initiatives to cultivate the Chinese higher education brand. Under the political framework of “One Country, Two Systems”, mainland universities, particularly those in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), should take the lead in building a high-quality educational integration ecosystem to nurture innovative, cross-border talent for the development of Greater China.

Interestingly, while previous studies have addressed factors underlying this phenomenon from a macro perspective, such as the interplay of geopolitics (Gao, 2024), this study highlights tuition costs, future employment prospects, and research funding as economic pull factors from the micro perspective of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students. Through a mixed-methods approach, this study validates the roles of HKDSE difficulty (push factor) and the low tuition fees and employment benefits of mainland universities (pull factors) in students’ decision-making, reinforcing the applicability of push-pull theory in international student mobility. As the first study under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework to focus on the motivations of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students choosing mainland universities, it expands the geographical and cultural scope of student mobility research. Aside from that, this research also provides new perspectives for education and sociology, particularly in understanding the impact of economic and cultural factors on student mobility

choices for higher education learning.

### 4.3 Practical and policy implications

The findings have significant practical implications across multiple dimensions. For Hong Kong's education policy, it is recommended to optimize HKDSE exam design to monitor its difficulty and enhance academic counseling to provide more diverse pathways, thereby alleviating academic pressure. Regarding mainland university admissions, strategies should emphasize leveraging low tuition fees, improving employment prospects, and enhancing internationalized educational resources (e.g., bilingual programs and international exchange opportunities) to attract more Hong Kong students. In terms of regional cooperation, this study provides data support empirically for educational collaboration in the Greater Bay Area (GBA), facilitating initiatives such as credit recognition and joint training programs to promote regional educational synergy.

### 4.4 Limitations

Admittedly, this study has some limitations in methodological design and theoretical saturation. Given that Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students are at the cusp of adulthood, their perspectives change rapidly, which will probably limit the stability of the study's findings. The sample population fails to include the individual perceptions of Secondary 6 students from Band 3 schools (e.g.: San Wui Commercial Society Secondary School in Tuen Mun, or Caritas Chong Yuet Ming Secondary School in Southern District of Hong Kong Island) and international schools (e.g.: Harrow International School Hong Kong, or Yew Chung International School), which may lack comprehensiveness and diversity in results interpretations. Additionally, the small sample size in the quantitative phase may affect the generalizability of this study. Last but not least, the qualitative phase may not have achieved the requisite number of interviewees to ensure theoretical saturation, which could potentially limit the depth and comprehensiveness of the emergent themes.

### 4.5 Directions for future research

As examined by this study, future research should delve into Hong Kong students' adaptation experience, their cross-cultural experience in mainland universities, and their long-term career development to verify the sustained impact of pull factors, such as low tuition fees and employment benefits, providing a more comprehensive basis for education policy and university recruitment strategies. Additionally, it is recommended to further analyze the phenomenon of Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) students choosing mainland universities from the perspectives of different stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, and educational institutions) to uncover the potential driving factors, thereby offering richer theoretical and practical insights for related research. Lastly, more theoretical perspectives can be adopted to analyze the motivations regarding this phenomenon or the student mobility trend in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the motivations driving Hong Kong Secondary 6 (S6) graduates to pursue tertiary education in mainland Chinese universities, revealing a nuanced interplay of push and pull factors. The findings of the quantitative phase confirm that the competitive nature of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) and limited local university places are primary push factors, while affordable tuition, prestigious higher education institutions like the C9 League, and robust policy support in the Chinese mainland serve as significant pull factors. Unexpectedly, factors such as food culture and political stability also emerged as notable attractions, highlighting the multifaceted appeal of Mainland universities. By analyzing the motivations at the quantitative and qualitative phases, the study fills a critical gap in prior research, providing empirical evidence to complement policy-level analyses (Te & Postiglione, 2018; Xu, 2023). The combined interpretations of this study reveal its significance in its policy implications and practical implementations. To start with policy implications, the results demonstrate the strategic importance of S6 graduates as a talent resource within Greater China, particularly under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, which shapes their perceptions of mainland China as a hybrid educational destination. Second, the findings have implications for practical implementations for mainland Chinese universities in amplifying opportunities to enhance recruitment through targeted scholarships, streamlined admission processes, and career-oriented programs, especially in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Despite its contributions, this study is constrained by several limitations, including the rapidly evolving perceptions of secondary 6 students, the relatively small sample size, the incomplete coverage of schools, and the failure to achieve theoretical saturation. Moreover, future research can leverage advanced quantitative methods, such as structural equation modeling, to explore causal relationships or compare Hong Kong's mobility trends with other global regions, thereby providing a more solidified foundation for policy development. Ultimately, this study advances the application of the push-pull model to Hong Kong's unique context and consolidates the groundwork for policies that promote academic collaboration and talent mobility, supporting the long-term educational and economic integration of Greater China.

### Ethical consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from Lingnan University's human subjects ethics sub-committee. All the participants and their guardians were informed about the study before it began. It is assured that they are voluntary to participate in the study. All the information gathered is protected with anonymity.

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### Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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