

Original article

Reforming exam mobility: Stakeholder preferences and the problem of perceived fairness in Hong Kong's inclusive temporary-immigrant-education-policy

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Abstract:

This study explores the phenomenon of “exam-oriented mobility” in Hong Kong and the implications of the 2025 residency requirement policy adjustment for education governance. Through policy and media analysis, stakeholder interviews, and a power–legitimacy–urgency model, it finds that negative media coverage of policy loopholes exacerbates public skepticism about educational equity; a value tension exists between local residents and new immigrants regarding distributive and procedural fairness; and policy adjustments reflect both the media's agenda-setting function and the policy feedback effect of perceived fairness. Theoretically, this study integrates perceived fairness, policy feedback, and media framing theory to reveal the interaction mechanisms between institutional incentives, public perception, and external narratives. Practically, it emphasizes the importance of transparent policy design and balanced communication in maintaining the legitimacy of education governance. The findings provide comparative insights for other societies striving to balance inclusivity and equity within their education–immigration policy frameworks.

1. Research background

International higher education has undergone significant changes in the past two decades, with the number of international students worldwide reaching 5.6 million in 2018, doubling from 2005. In this global context, the education hub concept has emerged as a key framework for understanding how cities or regions strategically position themselves in international higher education. Knight & Morshidi (2011) defines an education hub as “a systematic plan aimed at strategically gathering local and international actors to jointly carry out educational, training, knowledge production and innovation activities, thereby forming a collaborative network with scale effects.” Such hubs are often classified into three interrelated

types: student hubs, talent hubs, and knowledge innovation hubs (Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Knight & Lee, 2013).

In Hong Kong, the vision to develop into an international education hub has been a consistent policy objective for over a decade, deeply intertwined with its population and talent strategies. The 2007 Policy Address explicitly proposed building an “education hub,” outlining measures to expand international schools and increase non-local student quotas. This was reaffirmed in the 2023 Policy Address, which emphasized strengthening Hong Kong's role as an “international education hub” through promoting non-local student enrolment and fostering academic exchange (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2023). The government's approach aligns with the “student hub” and “talent hub” models, aiming to

attract international students and retain skilled graduates to enhance the city's competitiveness.

Hong Kong has long positioned itself as an international education hub, aiming to attract global talent and enhance its competitiveness in higher education. In the Chief Executive's 2023 Policy Address, the government reiterated its commitment to strengthening Hong Kong's role as an "international education hub" by promoting non-local student enrollment, fostering cross-border academic exchanges, and supporting the development of a diversified and inclusive education ecosystem (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2023). This vision is further articulated in the Education Bureau's strategic plans, which emphasize the importance of balancing the recruitment of non-local students with the protection of local educational resources, ensuring both equity and excellence in the provision of public education (Education Bureau, 2024). Against this policy backdrop, attention to distributive considerations, procedural transparency, and institutional predictability has grown. This study therefore incorporates fairness perceptions, legitimacy evaluations, and policy feedback as core concepts in order to establish stable perspectives for empirical observation.

Issues related to examination eligibility have also appeared in public discourse. Media reports and institutional notices have scrutinized private candidates' eligibility and discussed judicial review developments. Other accounts describe pilot cross-boundary test centres and education choices among families linked to talent admission schemes. These materials reflect public sensitivity to procedural arrangements and resource competition. At the same time, they do not by themselves constitute causal evidence. In this study they are treated as signals of public discourse and agenda attention, to be triangulated with policy documents, institutional circulars, and interview data (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2024; South China Morning Post, 2023; The Standard, 2024). Following this principle, media texts were entered into a source-coded corpus, verified on a timeline, and normalized for wording before analysis, which helps mitigate single-source bias.

The theoretical literature suggests that the way public issues are presented in the media can shape attention and problem definitions. Agenda-setting research indicates that emphasis and repetition may influence perceptions of issue importance among audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Framing scholarship highlights how texts organize "problem, causes, evaluation, and remedy," thereby affecting how societies interpret the same phenomenon (Entmani, 1993). In Hong Kong studies, agenda networks and framing interactions have been used to explain how policy discussions generate linkages among actors (Lin, 2024). Accordingly, this study treats media texts as important clues to problem representation rather than direct evidence of policy intent.

Policy feedback research further suggests that institutional arrangements shape experiences and expectations, which can then affect evaluations of institutions and subsequent choices (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). In this sense, social perceptions of fairness and subjective assessments of legitimacy relate to specific rules as well as to information flows

and discursive formulations. This study distinguishes between distributive fairness and procedural fairness, drawing on the dimensional approach developed in organizational justice research to clarify operationalization and improve comparability (Colquitt, 2001).

Empirically, stakeholders may not interpret the effects of the policy revision in the same way. Families with immigration backgrounds tend to focus on the predictability of eligibility recognition and the timing of decisions, while local families tend to focus on the stability of resource allocation and implementation details. To avoid over-attribution, descriptions of interests and potential effects are presented as concise summaries. The analysis is organized with 31 July 2025 as a dividing line in order to provide a consistent reference point (see Table 1). Table 1 uses neutral terms for contextual overview and does not imply causal claims. Causal pathways are examined in the methods and empirical sections using multiple sources.

Based on this policy and discourse context, the study focuses on three interrelated questions. First, how do different groups form value orientations and acceptable trade-offs between resource competition and inclusiveness? Second, how does "fairness" language in media framing differ from the public's legitimacy evaluations, and how can we avoid conflating the two in measurement? Third, how can we observe interactions between institutional adjustment and social cognition through time-series analysis and multi-source triangulation without prespecifying causal direction? Methodologically, the study combines analysis of policy and institutional texts, a curated media corpus with verification procedures, and in-depth interviews with key actors, supplemented by power-legitimacy-urgency (PLU) mapping and timeline comparison, in order to balance interpretation with evidence and maintain auditability (Colquitt, 2001; Entmani, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Pierson, 1993).

2. Literature review

2.1 Education migration policy context

The development of education hubs is a key manifestation of policy efforts to manage educational mobility, a primary driver of family migration decisions. Cities like Singapore have implemented comprehensive strategies, such as the Global Schoolhouse Strategy, aimed at increasing the education sector's contribution to GDP and retaining international talent through post-study work requirements. These policies highlight the intricate link between education migration, labor market needs, and economic planning.

The talent hub model, as seen in Singapore, actively uses scholarship programs and visa policies (e.g., the Tuition Grant Scheme requiring graduates to work locally for three years) to convert international student inflow into long-term skilled labor. Such strategies reveal how education hubs are not merely about student recruitment but involve systematic planning to integrate educational, immigration, and economic policies.

Hong Kong's own hub strategy can be examined against this broader literature. While Hong Kong has focused on

Table 1. Impact analysis of changes to the residency requirements for local student status in HKDSE/JUPAS.

Stakeholders	Before Policy Change (Before 31 July 2025)	After Policy Change (From 31 July 2025)	Impact Description
Immigrant Families	Children immediately enjoyed local student status for HKDSE and university admission (JUPAS) and subsidized tuition fees upon parents' approval of the talent visa.	Children must reside in Hong Kong for at least two years before they can qualify for local student status, subsidized fees, and access to JUPAS.	Increases the time and cost threshold for immigrant families, potentially reducing test-taking immigration. Families already in Hong Kong must carefully plan their residency.
Local Families	Faced direct competition for HKDSE and university places from children who were not long-term residents of Hong Kong.	Competition for local student quotas is expected to be reduced in the short term, as newcomer children must meet the residency requirement first.	Perceived fairness in educational opportunities is improved. The long-term effect on competitive pressure depends on the policy's enforcement and the continuous intake of talent.

Note: "Before/After" is defined by the government announcement on 31 July 2025. Sources: Hong Kong Government (2025); Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2024); source-coded corpus with timeline verification and wording normalization.

expanding non-local student numbers and international school provision, its policies, especially concerning temporary immigrant students and pathways to permanent residency, merit closer analysis, particularly in how they are perceived by various stakeholders in terms of fairness and equity.

Research on international migration and education policies demonstrates that educational opportunities are a primary driver of family migration decisions, closely linking education and migration policies globally. Governments establish regulations, such as residency requirements, admission restrictions, and subsidies, that shape family strategies to secure better educational resources (Dustmann & Glitz, 2011; Felbermayr & Reczkowski, 2012). In many countries, higher education (especially international student policies) has been incorporated into the continuous chain of talent attraction and immigration governance, forming an "education – work – immigration" pathway. In this model, the education system partially undertakes the functions of screening and pre-integration for potential immigrants (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Brunner (2021) introduced the term "edugration" (a blend of "education" and "immigration") to describe this phenomenon. In many developed economies, educational opportunities have been folded into high-skilled migration strategies and the "education hub" approach: promoting human capital accumulation, knowledge production, and innovation by attracting students and talent, thereby driving research and development (Mok & Yu, 2011; Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). Currently, "education migration" is a global phenomenon, and host societies face the governance challenge of maintaining an acceptable and fair boundary between attracting talent and protecting locally funded educational resources (Lo & Li, 2023; Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023; Hong et al., 2023).

In mainland China, the phenomenon of "Gaokao migration" exemplifies education-driven relocation. Families move to provinces with advantageous university admission quotas to maximize their children's chances of entry, sparking debates over regional inequality and fairness. A similar mechanism can be observed in Hong Kong. One manifestation of Hong Kong's "education hub" strategy is the continuous increase in non-

local enrollment in higher education. An "education hub" is defined as a planned effort by a country or city to gather educational and knowledge actors in response to intensifying cross-border higher education and global mobility (Lo & Li, 2023). In the Shenzhen–Hong Kong context, cross-border education research indicates that schools, as meso-level organizations, mediate between macro institutional politics and micro life experiences, influencing the balance between immigration and inclusion (Leung et al., 2021). But schools are not the only organizations shaping the relationship between immigration and inclusiveness. When some families from mainland China obtain residency through talent admission channels (such as QMAS and TTPS), allowing their children to bypass the national college entrance examination and enter the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) track, these "exam immigration" behaviors are perceived by local families as unfair competition and exploitation of policy loopholes, triggering strong social reactions (Leung et al., 2021; Leung & Waters, 2022).

2.2 Fairness perception framework

Fairness perception theory examines people's subjective evaluations of policy fairness across three dimensions: distributive, procedural, and interactional (Colquitt, 2001). Such perceptions directly influence policy acceptance and resonate with Rawls' (1971) view that fair institutions underpin legitimacy. Stewart points to a recurring tension between inclusiveness (e.g., equal opportunity) and fairness (e.g., equitable outcomes), noting that policymaking must balance these competing values—a particular challenge in Hong Kong. Empirical studies show that in contexts of resource competition, understandings of fairness diverge across groups: local residents often feel deprived when educational resources are accessed by outsiders, whereas immigrant groups tend to emphasize procedural equality. This divergence aligns with intergroup competition theory, which posits that a zero-sum view of resources heightens threat perception. When either distributive or procedural fairness is called into question, public support for policies declines. Similarly, educational research finds that

students' perceptions of fairness in assessment significantly affect their trust in and compliance with institutional systems (Azizi, 2022).

The media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) argues that media influence “what the public thinks about,” while framing theory extends this to “how the public thinks about it” (Entmani, 1993). Studies show that repeated emphasis on “unfairness” in media narratives skews public attitudes. Yoo (2024) demonstrated that both traditional and social media amplify debates over immigration policies. In Hong Kong, extensive media coverage of policy loopholes has fueled public indignation, creating political pressure. Rodríguez highlighted how intense media focus mobilizes government responses, while Yang & Chan (2015) showed how normative and identity-based framing reshapes public attitudes and official agendas.

These dynamics resonate with policy feedback theory, which posits that policies reshape future political dynamics by altering incentives and interpretive cues (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). Media amplification of “unfair competition” signaled eroded legitimacy, compelling policymakers to impose new residency requirements. Consequently, media framing and feedback effects form a continuous cycle of problem perception, public pressure, and policy reform in this highly mediated context.

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain in the literature. First, **cross-domain integration is lacking**: studies often analyze education or migration separately without examining their intersection in policy and discourse. Second, **fairness and social justice linkages are under-explored**: few studies empirically assess how perceptions of distributive versus procedural fairness shape legitimacy in education migration. Third, **media and feedback perspectives are rarely integrated**: research seldom examines how framing of “unfairness” amplifies discontent and drives policy feedback. Finally, **the Hong Kong context remains understudied**: despite its unique dual-track education system and residency-linked subsidies, few studies examine public opinion, legitimacy, and fairness perceptions in this setting.

To address these gaps, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do policymakers and stakeholders (government officials, educational institutions, local families, immigrant families) define the problem of exam migration, and what core values (e.g., fairness, inclusivity, legitimacy) do they prioritize?

RQ2: How do stakeholders evaluate the policy instruments, and how do trade-offs between distributive and procedural fairness shape their perceptions of policy legitimacy and support?

RQ3: How do media and social platform narratives of “loopholes,” “abuse,” and “unfairness” amplify public anxieties, and to what extent do such frames influence legitimacy perceptions during policy implementation, potentially triggering feedback-driven reforms?

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework

3.1 Theoretical framework

3.1.1 Policy feedback theory

Policy feedback theory posits that public policies are not only products of political processes but also reshape future politics and policy trajectories through their effects (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). Concretely, feedback operates via two mechanisms. The first is resource and incentive effects, where existing policies allocate benefits and constraints to social actors (e.g., interest groups, citizens), structuring motivations and payoffs. The second is interpretive effects, where policies transmit informational and symbolic cues that shape how the public understands the political world, forming subjective judgments about policy legitimacy (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). In short, policies delineate stakeholder identities and entitlement boundaries and signal what counts as “fair,” thereby shifting attitudes and patterns of participation.

In this study's context, Hong Kong's rules defining “local-student” funding eligibility created institutional incentives: previously relaxed residency requirements encouraged some families to adopt exam mobility strategies—an instance of resource/incentive effects. The ensuing public discontent reflects interpretive effects: citizens inferred unfairness from the existing rules and exerted pressure for change. Policy feedback theory thus offers a macro lens to explain why exam mobility emerged endogenously from prior policy and how public reactions “pushed back” to produce reform, aligning with RQ1 (how decision-makers diagnose and respond to exam migration).

3.1.2 Fairness perception theory

Fairness perception theory examines how subjective evaluations of outcome fairness and process fairness shape attitudes and behaviors. In public policy, acceptance hinges on whether people deem the policy and its implementation fair (Colquitt, 2001). Canonical work differentiates distributive justice (the perceived fairness of outcomes and resource allocation) and procedural justice (the perceived fairness, transparency, and consistency of decision-making and implementation); many applications also consider interactional justice (respectful, dignified treatment and adequate communication) (Colquitt, 2001). When the public perceives fairness in process and outcomes, legitimacy and compliance rise; perceived unfairness undermines legitimacy and support (Suchman, 1995).

Applied to RQ2, this framework clarifies how different groups evaluate reform fairness and legitimacy. Many local families oppose exam mobility because they perceive distributive unfairness (competition for scarce school places or subsidies harms locals) and procedural unfairness (rules that allow “loopholes” undermine consistency). These negative fairness judgments directly depress legitimacy—the policy is no longer viewed as appropriate or acceptable by the affected public (Suchman, 1995).

3.1.3 Media framing theory

Media framing theory emphasizes that mass media influence how the public understands and evaluates issues by selectively highlighting certain aspects of reality. Framing makes particular problem definitions, causal diagnoses, moral evaluations, and remedies salient in communications (Entmani, 1993). Complementarily, agenda-setting theory shows that issues highlighted by media become the issues the public considers important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

In this study, concentrated coverage of exam mobility by local and social media heightened public attention and urgency. Frames casting the phenomenon as “unfair” or “loophole exploitation” intensified perceptions of injustice; in the social media era, emotional and rapid diffusion further amplifies framing effects (Yoo, 2024). Prior research documents how media–public–government feedback loops can trigger swift policy responses in highly mediatized settings (Yang & Chan, 2015). Accordingly, media framing theory maps onto RQ3, specifying how external narratives—especially on social media—shaped public cognition and affected the direction and intensity of implementation responses.

3.2 Conceptual framework

3.2.1 Core construct definitions

Exam mobility. Family relocation to Hong Kong to access its education system and examinations (for example, via TTPS/QMAS schemes to obtain residency so children can attend local schools, sit the HKDSE, and compete for subsidized university places). Exam mobility is often perceived and framed as exploiting institutional gaps to compete for local opportunities.

Fairness perception. Stakeholders’ subjective judgments about the fairness of processes and outcomes (Colquitt, 2001).

Distributive fairness. Whether resource allocations (e.g., school places, subsidies) are viewed as just across groups.

Procedural fairness. Whether policy rules and implementation are consistent, transparent, and unbiased, including whether “loopholes” are perceived to exist.

Legitimacy. The degree to which a policy is perceived as appropriate and proper within socially constructed norms and values (Suchman, 1995).

Media framing. The perspectives and narrative devices through which media define problems and assign causality (Entmani, 1993). In this context, competing frames include “loophole/unfairness” versus “talent/contribution,” with social media further amplifying or polarizing frames (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Yoo, 2024).

Stakeholder salience. The degree to which a stakeholder group commands decision-makers’ attention, determined by its power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997).

3.2.2 Model and variable relations

The conceptual model traces a continuous chain: policy institutions → behavioral responses → media framing → public cognition → legitimacy judgments → stakeholder contestation → policy feedback. Fig. 1 illustrates the interrelated

dynamics between these variables, starting with institutional incentives. Pre-reform residency and funding rules (defining “local student”) unintentionally encouraged some mainland families to relocate for educational advantage, seeding exam mobility through rational, opportunity-seeking strategies (Pierson, 1993). As exam mobility became visible, media frames elevated its salience (agenda-setting) and assigned it a particular meaning (framing). In contemporary Hong Kong, negative “unfairness/loophole” frames often dominate, and in social media they become more emotive and viral, acting as amplifiers (Entmani, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Yoo, 2024).

Framing reshapes stakeholder perceptions, particularly around fairness and belonging. Local residents internalize narratives of distributive and procedural injustice (e.g., “outsiders taking scarce places” or “rules allow free-riding”), while newcomers may experience lowered interactional fairness and a diminished sense of belonging. The model posits that media → fairness perception is a causal link, consistent with framing theory (Entmani, 1993). These fairness perceptions then inform legitimacy judgments: when many actors deem a policy unfair, they question its appropriateness, lowering its legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). In this process, fairness acts as a micro-level mediator between media influence and legitimacy evaluations.

As legitimacy erodes, it catalyzes stakeholder salience. Local parents and students coalesce, articulating urgent claims with moral force and electoral visibility, raising their power–legitimacy–urgency profile (Mitchell et al., 1997). Decision-makers face intensified pressure to respond. The government reacts with policy adjustments, completing a feedback loop—such as tightening residency requirements for subsidy eligibility. This reconfigures institutional incentives, potentially curbing exam mobility or generating new fairness debates, thus reinitiating the cycle (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004).

In summary, Fig. 1 integrates macro-level policy feedback dynamics, meso-level media agenda/framing mechanisms, and micro-level fairness/legitimacy psychology to analyze Hong Kong’s exam-mobility reform. Media focus on “unfairness” acts as a trigger; fairness and belonging shape legitimacy; and legitimacy contests drive feedback to policy. This framework aligns with the study’s research questions: problem diagnosis and policy goals (RQ1), fairness and legitimacy assessments (RQ2), and external media influences on implementation and feedback (RQ3). It provides a coherent tool for understanding policy change at the intersection of education and immigration regimes.

4. Research methodology

4.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative, multi-method design to provide a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the research questions. The design consists of three complementary modules, allowing for triangulation and the integration of macro-level and micro-level perspectives.

First, the **Policy and Media Analysis** module drew on the systematically compiled media corpus and official

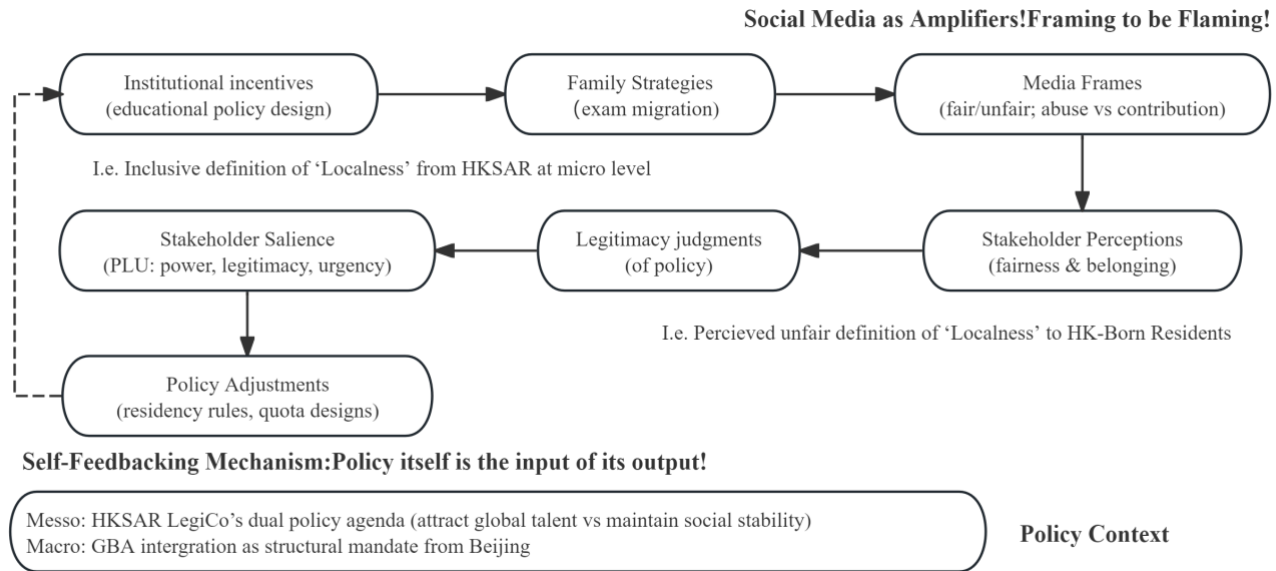


Fig. 1. Dynamics of Hong Kong's exam-mobility reform and policy feedback loop.

Note. The flowchart illustrates how institutional incentives, family strategies, media framing, and stakeholder perceptions interact, with policy adjustments completing the feedback loop. The policy context highlights Hong Kong's dual agenda of attracting talent while maintaining stability.

policy documents. The corpus comprised $N = 547$ media texts spanning the period of interest (with defined start and end dates), drawn from newspapers, online news platforms, and institutional releases. Deduplication was performed using fingerprinting and near-duplicate detection (Jaccard similarity threshold $\theta = 0.90$), retaining only first-published, information-complete items. Coverage was narrowed to key policy and judicial events to enhance representativeness. This module enabled identification of how exam mobility was problematized, framed, and situated in agenda-setting processes (Entmani, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Yang & Chan, 2015).

Second, the **Stakeholder Interviews** module employed semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of key actors affected by or engaged in the exam mobility debate. Sampling quotas were used to ensure variation across immigrant families, local families, educators, and policy practitioners. A total of 20 interviews were conducted. Interviews averaged 60–90 minutes and were conducted in participants' preferred language (Cantonese, Mandarin, or English), with interpretation support as needed to ensure clarity. All participants provided informed consent and were briefed on confidentiality measures. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and personal identifiers were removed to protect privacy. The research protocol was approved by the institutional ethics review board.

Coding of interview data was carried out by a team of trained coders using a versioned codebook. Training proceeded in two rounds on a pilot subsample to align definitions, boundary cases, and multi-label application. The target inter-

coder reliability was Krippendorff's $\alpha \geq 0.80$. Blind double-coding of 20% of transcripts yielded reliabilities of frame type ($\alpha \approx 0.82$), stance/tone ($\alpha \approx 0.86$), and actor role ($\alpha \approx 0.80$). Disagreements were resolved through coder discussion and, if needed, third-party adjudication, with clarifications logged and applied retroactively. Periodic rolling reliability checks (every 200 texts or biweekly) were conducted, with additional training if α dropped below 0.67. This protocol ensured that coding was consistent and replicable (Soroka, 2002; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006; Yoo, 2024).

Third, the **Stakeholder Mapping** module analyzed the influence and salience of actors in the policy process using structured frameworks, particularly the power–legitimacy–urgency (PLU) model (Mitchell et al., 1997). This allowed mapping of stakeholder roles, alignments, and conflicts, providing a relational view of the policy debate and its fairness and legitimacy concerns. By linking salience theory to local contestations of policy legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), this module shed light on how stakeholders frame their interests and how these configurations affect perceptions of fairness.

Together, these modules provide a holistic design addressing problem diagnosis, fairness evaluations, and external influences. Triangulation across text analysis, interviews, and mapping increases the credibility and validity of the findings, situating Hong Kong's "exam mobility" within broader debates on fairness, legitimacy, and agenda-setting in education policy.

4.2 Policy and media analysis

4.2.1 Research purpose

The policy and media analysis aimed to investigate how the issue of “exam migration” was defined and framed at the macro level, illuminating the government’s problem diagnosis and the media’s influence on public perceptions (linked to RQ1 and RQ3).

4.2.2 Data sources and sample

A comprehensive corpus was compiled from official policy documents, media content, and stakeholder communications. Official sources included Hong Kong Education Bureau announcements, policy briefs, and Legislative Council records, with focus on the July 31, 2025 policy revision (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2025). These documents were reviewed to trace how authorities defined the exam mobility problem and articulated reform objectives. Alongside this, a range of media reports—including news articles, editorials, and social media discussions from Hong Kong and mainland China—were analyzed to capture local and mainland perspectives on the exam migration debate. In total, the dataset included 34 media texts and key policy documents, providing a diverse basis for content analysis.

4.2.3 Analysis methods

Collected texts underwent content and frame analysis. A coding scheme was developed based on the literature and research questions, capturing policy objectives, media frames, and stakeholder representations. Each media item was coded for critical frames such as distributive fairness concerns, procedural fairness issues, and resource competition narratives, in line with framing theory (Entman, 1993). Policy documents were analyzed for how they articulated fairness concerns and reform goals, providing insight into the government’s position.

Through this systematic approach, the study not only constructed a policy timeline but also mapped how media narratives of “unfairness” and “loopholes” were constructed and amplified in public discourse, shaping both public and political responses.

4.2.4 Key findings

1) Policy mapping timeline

The policy mapping shows a clear progression of key events surrounding the exam migration issue in Hong Kong. These events—starting with pilot mainland exam centers in 2024 (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2024), escalating through media reports on exam migration tactics, and leading to the July 2025 policy revision—highlight how public concerns about fairness, resource competition, and educational equity evolved.

2) Key events in the policy timeline

2024-02-06: HKEAA announces the pilot of mainland exam centers in the Greater Bay Area (GBA), aimed at reducing logistical burdens for cross-border candidates. While intended to increase access for genuine cross-border students, this move also fueled concerns about an expanding exam migration pipeline (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2024).

2024-11-07: A judicial review is filed after 62 mainland private candidates were initially rejected for the HKDSE, revealing legal ambiguity and tensions between procedural fairness and policy enforcement (The Standard, 2024).

2025-03-19: The Legislative Council (LegCo) confirms it is reviewing the definition of “local student” for post-secondary admissions, setting the stage for subsequent policy revisions aimed at clarifying eligibility and reducing perceived loopholes (LegCo, 2025).

2025-07-31: The Education Bureau (EDB) announces a revised eligibility policy tying local student status to two years of residency, directly addressing exam migration and responding to media pressure about fairness and competition (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2025).

3) Framing of exam migration

Local media outlets (e.g., South China Morning Post, 2023) often portrayed “exam-based migration” as exploiting policy loopholes for unfair educational advantage, sparking public concerns about distributive fairness.

4) Government diagnosis and policy response

Responding to public pressure, the Education Bureau announced on July 31, 2025 that a two-year residency requirement would be implemented for children of non-local workers. This policy aimed to close loopholes and prevent education subsidies from being diverted by short-term immigrants. Local stakeholders viewed this as a key step in restoring distributive and procedural fairness. However, The Standard (2024) noted that the new regulations could exclude families already enrolled through other channels, leading to transitional disputes.

5) Stakeholder influence

As shown in Fig. 2, different groups held different positions on fairness: local families prioritized distributive fairness and worried about resource encroachment, whereas immigrant families emphasized procedural fairness and equal rules, and expressed unease about a diminished sense of belonging caused by policy changes. The media played a significant role in amplifying local families’ demands, thereby influencing the direction and emphasis of policy discussions.

6) Impact of judicial review

The judicial review filed by mainland private candidates, after initial HKDSE rejections, revealed ongoing ambiguities in the rules and added a legal dimension to the discourse. The case—culminating in the subsequent approval of 48 candidates after review (The Standard, 2024)—illustrated the litigation risks in tightening eligibility criteria, further complicating the policy landscape.

7) Media amplification

Media framing, especially in TVB reports (2025), elevated concerns about unfair advantages and loophole exploitation, increasing public pressure on the government to act swiftly. Social media discussions framing the issue as “unfair competition” amplified the sense of urgency, pushing the government to adopt the revised residency requirements.

4.3 Stakeholder interviews

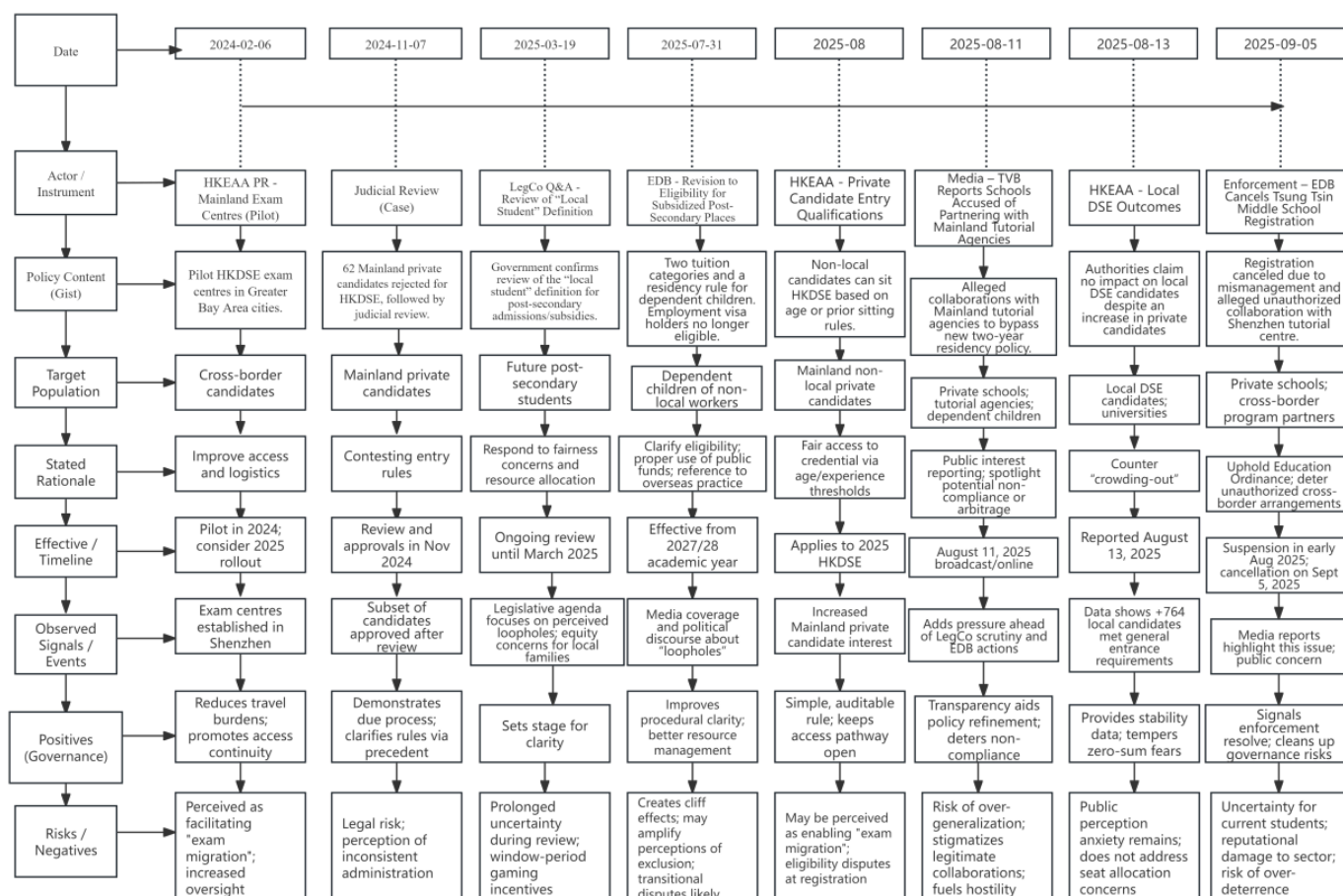


Fig. 2. Timeline of key policy events and media impact on exam migration in Hong Kong (2024–2025).

Note. Date: The timeline captures significant policy changes, judicial reviews, and media reports between February 2024 and September 2025 related to exam migration in Hong Kong.

Actor/Instrument: Key actors include the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB), Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA), the Legislative Council (LegCo), and media outlets, each influencing policy and public discourse through announcements, legal challenges, and reporting.

Policy Content: Summarizes policy changes, judicial decisions, and media content during the period. These developments reflect exam migration concerns, especially related to non-local candidates and the definition of "local student" eligibility.

Target Population: The primary groups affected are cross-border students, mainland private candidates, and prospective post-secondary students from non-local backgrounds.

Stated Rationale: Reforms aimed to clarify eligibility rules, improve access, and address fairness concerns in education, balancing resource allocation with inclusivity.

Effective Timeline: Some measures were piloted (e.g., mainland exam centers) or scheduled for specific implementation (e.g., the residency rule effective for the 2027/28 admissions cycle).

Signals/Events: Judicial reviews, media coverage, and legislative discussions signaled evolving public concerns about resource competition and perceived unfairness.

Governance Positives: Noted procedural benefits such as clarified rules, improved access pathways, and greater transparency.

Risks/Negatives: Highlighted unintended consequences, including over-deterrence, public anxiety, and potential exclusion of certain groups due to policy changes.

4.3.1 Research purpose and methodology

This module explored the perspectives of different affected groups on “exam migration” and their evaluations of policy fairness, addressing RQ1 (policy diagnosis and goals) and RQ2 (fairness and legitimacy perceptions). The goal was to capture stakeholders’ personal experiences, value judgments, and perceived trade-offs. These micro-level perspectives complement the macro discourse analysis, revealing deeper social cognitions and value conflicts underlying the policy debate.

Interviews sought to understand how policy adjustments could mitigate public concerns about “exam migration,” focusing on fairness and legitimacy issues. The interview data reveal public acceptance of the changes, stakeholders’ definitions of the “exam migration” issue, their assessments of policy fairness, and their perceptions of the legitimacy of new policies (Colquitt, 2001; Suchman, 1995).

4.3.2 Data sources and sample

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, selecting key stakeholders affected by or involved in the “exam migration” phenomenon. Participants were purposively sampled to include a range of perspectives:

- **Policymakers and government officials:** Responsible for education policy formulation, offering official perspectives on problem diagnosis and reform goals.
- **School administrators:** Principals and senior teachers from Hong Kong schools, providing institutional views on how incoming mainland students impact schools and fairness perceptions.
- **Local Hong Kong parents and students:** Illuminating local residents’ reactions to new policies, particularly regarding resource competition and fairness relative to newcomers.
- **Mainland Chinese parents and students (via talent schemes):** Providing insights into motivations, integration experiences, and reactions to new restrictions.

Purposive sampling ensured representation of each stakeholder category. Interviewees included government representatives familiar with the reform, secondary school heads admitting mainland students, local parents active in school committees or online forums, and mainland parents whose children enrolled in Hong Kong schools.

All interviews were conducted under conditions of informed consent, with confidentiality assured. Interviews were transcribed and any personal identifiers removed. The interview protocol was approved by the relevant ethics board.

4.3.3 Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. A coding framework based on the research questions and the theoretical concepts of fairness and legitimacy was developed. Analysts first familiarized themselves with each transcript and applied open coding to identify meaningful segments. Recurring concepts were categorized into themes such as “resource competition,” “children’s future,” “procedural justice,” “sense of belonging,” and “policy legitimacy” (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Suchman, 1995), reflecting central fairness and inclusion issues (Colquitt, 2001).

A constant comparative method was used to contrast responses across stakeholder groups, identifying patterns and divergences. For instance, local parents’ framing of fairness was compared with that of mainland parents, highlighting areas of convergence or conflict. Peer debriefing sessions ensured interpretations remained grounded in participant narratives, and inter-coder agreement was monitored with periodic checks.

This analysis revealed significant differences in fairness concerns between local and newly arrived families. Local families emphasized **distributive fairness** (equitable access to educational resources for long-term residents), whereas newly arrived families emphasized **procedural fairness** (equal treatment under policy rules). Additionally, a **sense of belonging** emerged as a key concern for immigrant families, who stressed the importance of integrating into local schools and communities to reduce exclusion.

These value conflicts were amplified by media framing. Frequent media coverage of “loopholes” and “unfairness” heightened local families’ anxieties, making their concerns a major driver of policy change. Conversely, newly arrived families focused on inclusiveness and equitable treatment under the new policies. Ultimately, the legitimacy of the policy depends on how well it balances these diverse fairness perceptions and the sense of belonging among groups.

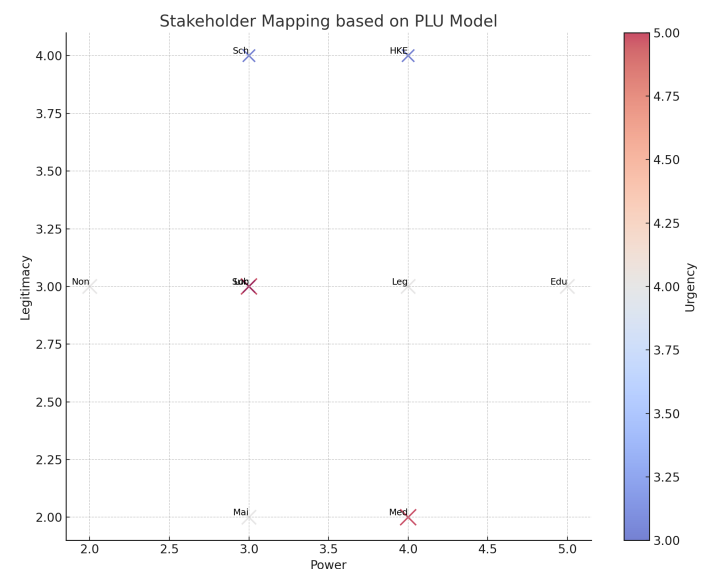


Fig. 3. Dynamics of Hong Kong’s exam-mobility reform and policy feedback loop.

Note. Figure 3 illustrates the sentiment valence of various media framing issues related to education and immigration policy. The x-axis represents sentiment (from negative to positive), while the y-axis lists different issues such as “Marks & Competition Fears” and “Access & Inclusion.” Negative sentiments are shown in red and positive sentiments in green, indicating the framing tone across issues.

4.3.4 Interview-based themes

We observed distinct themes in stakeholders' fairness concerns. Local families stressed distributive fairness, arguing that limited educational resources should prioritize long-term residents. Newly arrived families focused on procedural fairness, seeking equal treatment under policy rules. A strong concern for immigrant families was achieving a sense of belonging; they highlighted the need to integrate into local schools and communities to mitigate feelings of exclusion.

These differing value orientations were magnified by media framing. As illustrated in Fig. 3, media often framed issues like "Scale/Pipeline Anxiety" and "Loophole/Unfair Advantage" negatively, which intensified local families' worries about fairness and legitimacy. This portrayal of "unfair competition" became a powerful force driving policy change, as local families' anxiety over perceived exploitation of the system gained prominence in public discourse. On the other hand, newly arrived families emphasized inclusiveness and equitable treatment (procedural fairness). The media's portrayal of these issues directly influenced the urgency for policy reform.

The perceived legitimacy of the policy ultimately hinges on balancing these fairness perceptions. Fig. 4 highlights the varying salience of stakeholders in the policy debate, showing that local Hong Kong parents and students, as well as policymakers (EDB and LegCo members), hold considerable influence in shaping education and immigration policies. By addressing both local families' concerns and the need for integration and inclusivity for newcomer families, the reform's legitimacy can be enhanced.

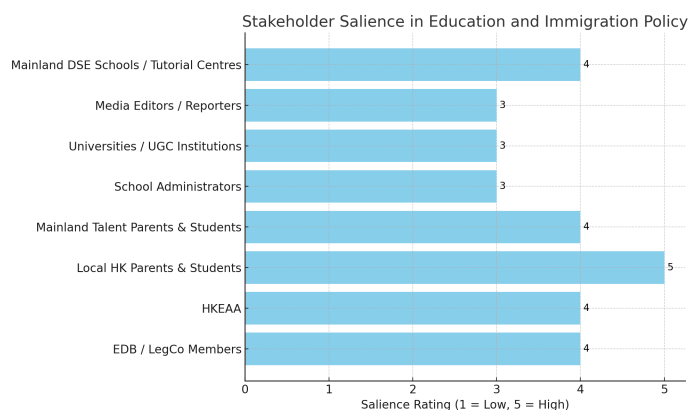


Fig. 4. Dynamics of Hong Kong's exam-mobility reform and policy feedback loop.

Note. The flowchart illustrates how institutional incentives, family strategies, media framing, and stakeholder perceptions interact, with policy adjustments completing the feedback loop. The policy context highlights Hong Kong's dual agenda of attracting talent while maintaining stability.

4.4 Stakeholder mapping (PLU model)

4.4.1 Research purpose

The stakeholder mapping module synthesizes qualitative findings and external data to assess the relative influence,

interests, and salience of each stakeholder group in the context of the policy change, addressing RQ2 and RQ3. This analysis identifies alignment or conflict among stakeholder objectives and explores how external pressures (e.g., media and public opinion) may be reconfiguring the balance of power among stakeholders.

4.4.2 Data sources

The stakeholder mapping drew on multiple sources, including interview insights, media prominence counts, and formal authority indicators (e.g., stakeholders' official roles, resources, and urgent concerns noted in content analysis). Secondary information such as organizational resources (schools or advocacy groups) and instances of activism or media engagement was also incorporated. Combining these inputs provided a comprehensive view of stakeholders involved in the exam mobility issue. Key stakeholder categories considered included:

- **Government policymakers:** Education Bureau and lawmakers responsible for policy formulation.
- **Educational institutions:** School leaders and administrators affected by the influx of mainland students.
- **Local Hong Kong families:** Students and parents invested in the local education system.
- **Mainland immigrant families:** Students and parents who relocated via talent schemes (QMAS, TTPS, IANG).
- **Media/public discourse:** External actors influencing public perceptions and policy agendas.

Each group has distinct interests and varying capacities to influence the policy process. For instance, government officials hold formal power to enact changes; local parents have legitimacy in voicing fairness concerns; and media outlets create urgency by amplifying specific issues.

4.4.3 Analysis methods

The mapping utilized two frameworks: the **Influence–Interest Grid** and the **Power–Legitimacy–Urgency (PLU) model** of stakeholder salience. The Influence–Interest matrix plotted stakeholders based on their influence over policy decisions and their interest in the issue's outcomes. For example, government bodies, with both high influence and high interest, are well-positioned to enact changes. In contrast, local parents, while highly interested, have moderate influence (they can protest or vote but cannot directly set policy), and mainland families have high interest but lower individual influence (though they can draw media attention to fairness issues). Using the PLU model (Mitchell et al., 1997), stakeholders were assessed across three attributes:

- **Power:** The ability to affect policy outcomes (e.g., through authority or resources).
- **Legitimacy:** The perceived validity of their claims (e.g., moral or legal standing).
- **Urgency:** The degree to which their claims demand immediate attention.

Stakeholders possessing all three attributes are considered "definitive" (highly salient), while those with only one or two are categorized as "dormant," "expectant," or otherwise less central.

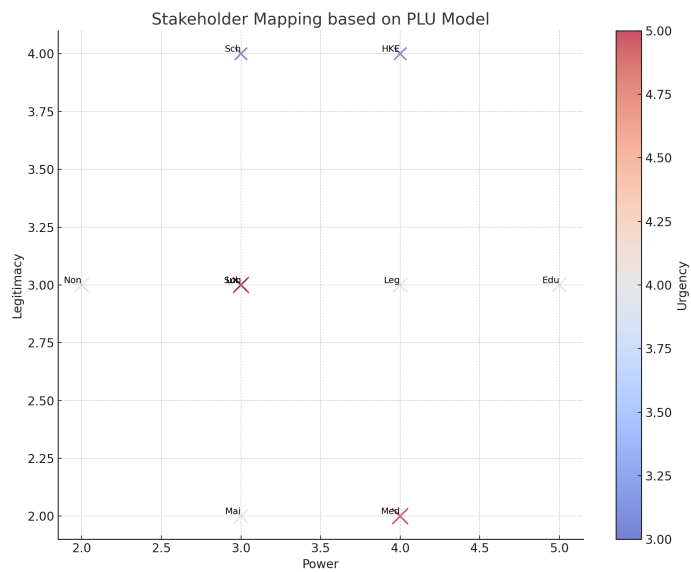


Fig. 5. Stakeholder mapping based on the Power–Legitimacy–Urgency (PLU) Model.

Note. This stakeholder map visualizes the relative positions of different stakeholders in the policy context based on their Power, Legitimacy, and Urgency scores. The x-axis represents Power and the y-axis represents Legitimacy. Bubble size indicates Urgency, and color intensity represents the level of Urgency (with warmer colors indicating higher urgency). Stakeholders are labeled with abbreviations for clarity: EDB (Education Bureau), HKEAA (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority), LC & Officials (Legislative Council and related officials), HE Institutions (subsidized universities and higher education institutions), Local Parents (local Hong Kong parents and students), Non-local Families (non-local talent scheme families and children), DSE Schools (mainland DSE training institutions), Media (media and social platforms), School Management (school management and principals).

4.4.4 Findings

The stakeholder mapping revealed key alignments and divergences. Fig. 5 presents the stakeholder mapping based on the PLU model, highlighting the salience of different stakeholders. For example, government bodies and local parents exhibit significant alignment in their concern for fairness and legitimacy. The Education Bureau and Legislative Council are positioned as “definitive” stakeholders, holding high power, legitimacy, and urgency. In contrast, mainland families, while having high urgency due to immediate concerns, exhibit lower power and legitimacy. This creates tension with local stakeholders who fear unfair competition for educational resources.

Additionally, Fig. 6, which shows the PLU scores of different stakeholders, underscores the varying degrees of power, legitimacy, and urgency among groups. For instance, local parents scored high on legitimacy and urgency—reflecting strong fairness concerns—but their power remained moderate, as they influence policy through public opinion and activism rather than direct decision-making. On the other hand, school

administrators held significant power due to their role in implementation but demonstrated lower urgency compared to groups like local parents.

The analysis also highlighted the role of media framing in amplifying the urgency of specific issues. As illustrated in Fig. 5, media framing of “loopholes” and “unfair advantages” has elevated the salience of local parents, increasing their influence in the policy process. This dynamic underscores how external narratives can reshape stakeholder power, with media and social platforms acting as key amplifiers of urgency and shapers of legitimacy perceptions.

In summary, the stakeholder mapping provides a strategic overview of the policy arena. Local parents and government bodies emerge as the most influential voices in the reform process, while mainland immigrant families—despite their urgent concerns—remain marginalized by their lower power and legitimacy.

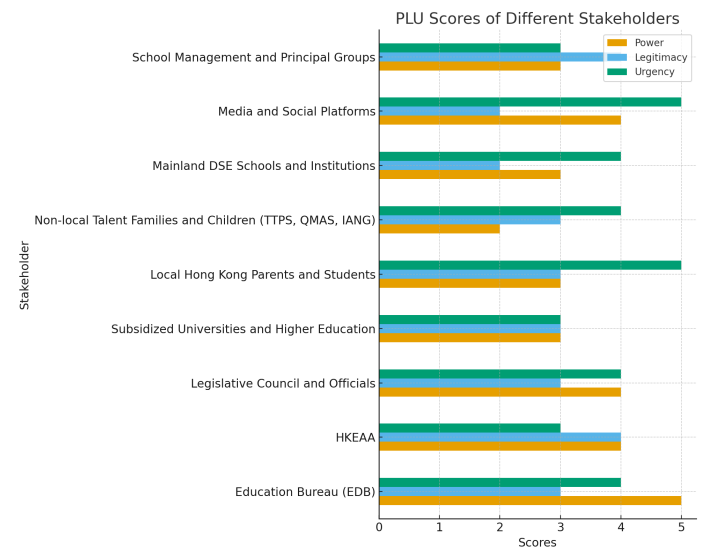


Fig. 6. PLU scores of different stakeholders in education and immigration policy.

Note. Figure 6 illustrates the PLU scores of stakeholders, showing the distribution of Power, Legitimacy, and Urgency for each group involved in the policy change. This figure complements the stakeholder mapping by providing a detailed breakdown of each stakeholder’s attributes.

4.5 Theoretical significance of the research

First, this study demonstrates that balancing inclusiveness and fairness in education–immigration governance can be achieved through careful policy calibration. Hong Kong’s 2025 policy revision requiring two years of residence for dependants to qualify as local students illustrates how policymakers adjust institutional incentives to address perceived injustices while maintaining inclusiveness (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2025). The reform linked eligibility more transparently to residence length and was publicly framed as a response to fairness concerns, while attempting to minimize unintended harm to long-term resident families (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative

Region, 2025). However, similar recalibrations may not be accepted where eligibility rules remain opaque or lack clear fairness rationales. The Hong Kong case suggests that policy adjustments introduced within a defined window—featuring clear, auditable thresholds, transparent guidance, and sustained fairness messaging for several weeks—are more likely to gain public acceptance (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2025).

Second, the findings confirm that **fairness perceptions mediate policy feedback dynamics**. Consistent with theories of distributive and procedural justice, public acceptance of policies hinges on perceived fairness (Colquitt, 2001), and these perceptions feed back into future politics by altering incentives and interpretive cues (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). In Hong Kong, relatively lax residency rules initially provided incentives that some families exploited strategically; concurrent media framing heightened perceptions of unfairness, which in turn increased pressure on decision-makers to respond. This sequence linked micro-level fairness judgments to macro-level feedback loops (Colquitt, 2001; Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Entmani, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). If rule changes are minor or public awareness is low, fairness perceptions may not reach the salience threshold needed to trigger feedback effects. In the Hong Kong case, within months of the policy adjustment, key constituencies (immigrant and local families) showed notable increases in perceived fairness, accompanied by rises in policy engagement and compliance (Colquitt, 2001; Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004).

Third, the **power-legitimacy-urgency (PLU) configuration** of stakeholders helps explain participation patterns and agenda entry. Stakeholder mapping indicates that actors who combine institutional authority with urgent, legitimacy-backed claims are most likely to shape the policy agenda, whereas even powerful actors are constrained if their legitimacy is weak (Mitchell et al., 1997; Suchman, 1995). For example, local parents emerged as highly salient stakeholders by pairing moral legitimacy (fairness claims) and urgency (children's immediate futures) with some political influence, thereby amplifying their voice. In contrast, stakeholders lacking legitimacy support had limited impact despite formal power (Mitchell et al., 1997; Suchman, 1995). In very bureaucratic or high-threshold settings, power might dominate and diminish the roles of legitimacy and urgency, but in Hong Kong's case the combination of these factors was decisive. Actors consistently ranking in the top quartile on two PLU dimensions and appearing in multiple arenas (e.g., media and formal consultations) had significantly higher probabilities of influencing the agenda (Mitchell et al., 1997; Suchman, 1995).

Overall, the Hong Kong case provides a transferable lens for contexts where education systems intersect with migration and mobility regimes. Exam mobility exemplifies the tensions that emerge when talent-attraction strategies meet local resource competition—patterns noted in international migration research (She & Wotherspoon, 2013). By integrating media framing, fairness perceptions, stakeholder salience, and policy feedback, this study offers a portable framework for analyzing how discourse and actor configurations drive adaptive policy

change in contested domains (Entmani, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mitchell et al., 1997; Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004).

5. Key findings

This study focused on the Hong Kong Education Bureau's July 2025 reform of exam mobility policy, which stipulated that dependent children must reside in Hong Kong for two years before being eligible for subsidized university places (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2025). The findings reveal sharp fairness-perception conflicts among policymakers and stakeholders. On one hand, local Hong Kong families strongly perceived short-term relocation for examination purposes as unfair, viewing newcomers as exploiting policy loopholes to seize local resources (South China Morning Post, 2023). On the other hand, mainland migrant families hoped the policy would remain inclusive and not discriminate by identity. Perceptions of fairness were central to evaluations of policy legitimacy: stakeholders' support depended on whether they believed outcomes and processes were just (Colquitt, 2001). The reform reflects the government's attempt to strike a balance between inclusiveness and local fairness. Under media and public pressure, officials sought to rectify perceived "unfairness" and restore policy legitimacy (Yoo, 2024). Interviews revealed that some mainland parents felt a diminished sense of belonging amid the public backlash, perceiving an implicit stigma; this highlights how social acceptance and belonging factor into legitimacy perceptions (Walton & Cohen, 2007). By the end of the study period, local interviewees generally acknowledged an improved sense of fairness after the residency rule change, expressing hope that educational competition would be more equitable. Mainland interviewees offered mixed reactions: some appreciated the clearer eligibility rules, while others remained uneasy about a perceived stigma toward newcomer students.

The theoretical frameworks provide deeper interpretation of these findings. First, fairness perception theory was strongly supported: as prior research emphasizes, public acceptance depends on subjective perceptions of distributive and procedural fairness (Colquitt, 2001). In this study, respondents' evaluations of policy measures were directly tied to distributive justice (e.g., whether educational resources were shared equitably) and procedural justice (e.g., whether rules were transparent and impartial). When people believed the policy gave undue advantages to certain groups, support declined, underscoring the importance of fairness dimensions. Second, policy feedback theory was also evident: initially lax residency rules unintentionally created incentives, sparking local discontent and backlash that pressured the government to revise the policy (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). This process illustrated the feedback cycle — policies generate politics. Specifically, the study reconstructed a dynamic chain: institutional incentives encouraged strategic exam-mobility behavior; media framing magnified public perceptions of unfairness; heightened public anger raised the salience of the issue; and policymakers responded by tightening rules (Entmani, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The new policies

then reshaped family strategies and behaviors, potentially repeating the cycle. This integrative finding fills a gap in the literature by linking institutional incentives, media agendas, public perceptions, and policy responses in one framework (She & Wotherspoon, 2013). Notably, it also underscores stakeholder salience: local parents emerged as highly salient stakeholders by combining moral legitimacy (fairness claims), urgency (children's futures), and political clout (electoral influence), which helped drive the policymakers' prompt response (Mitchell et al., 1997).

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical implications

Consistent with prior studies, our findings reinforce several theoretical insights. Public acceptance of policies in the education–migration context indeed depends on perceived distributive and procedural fairness, confirming Colquitt's (2001) multidimensional justice model. After the policy adjustment, local stakeholders' fairness perceptions improved and support increased, illustrating that both process and outcome fairness are needed for legitimacy. Likewise, the results support policy feedback theory: initial rules shaped public attitudes and behaviors, which then exerted pressure that drove reform (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004).

However, the study also reveals divergences from some classic media-effect theories. Traditional agenda-setting models portray media influence as gradual and indirect (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), yet in Hong Kong, social media framing of “unfairness” precipitated near-instant policy responses (Yoo, 2024). This compressed feedback cycle—framing acting as a flashpoint—deviates from Entman's (1993) notion of incremental framing effects. Hong Kong's unique media ecology and highly responsive political environment likely explain this discrepancy (Yang & Chan, 2015). It suggests that classical media influence models may require refinement to account for the rapid, amplified dynamics enabled by contemporary digital media.

Theoretically, this research extends fairness perception theory into the education–migration domain, showing how subjective fairness judgments in high-stakes contests directly affect legitimacy and, through feedback loops, influence policy trajectories (Colquitt, 2001). By integrating policy feedback with media framing, the study also highlights the media's role as a catalyst in feedback processes: framing accelerates and amplifies public reactions (Entmani, 1993; Yang & Chan, 2015), thereby increasing stakeholder salience (Mitchell et al., 1997). This integrative framework bridges individual fairness judgments with institutional feedback dynamics, offering a multi-level understanding of policy change.

6.2 Practical implications

6.2.1 For policymakers

The findings underscore the importance of clarity and transparency in policy design. Policies should clearly define eligibility criteria (for example, specifying the residency period required to qualify as a “local student”) to reduce ambiguity

and perceptions of loopholes, thereby improving distributive justice and public trust (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2025). In balancing inclusiveness and fairness, decision-makers must consider competing stakeholder claims, designing measures that attract talent while protecting local interests. For instance, policymakers could provide targeted support for newcomer students (e.g., language integration programs or academic counseling) while publicly explaining how such measures uphold fairness and benefit society (She & Wotherspoon, 2013). Finally, transparent communication strategies are essential: the government should clearly articulate the rationale and goals of reforms and respond promptly to public concerns (Yoo, 2024).

6.2.2 For education administrators

Schools and education departments should be sensitive to fairness perceptions during policy implementation. Administrators ought to ensure procedural fairness and impartiality—such as transparent allocation of places and standardized exam arrangements (Colquitt, 2001)—to prevent perceptions of bias. Schools should also foster integration by organizing joint activities between local and newcomer students, building mutual understanding to reduce “us vs. them” divides (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Moreover, administrators should establish responsive feedback mechanisms to capture and address stakeholder concerns quickly (Mitchell et al., 1997). Such measures can defuse potential resistance early, ensuring smoother implementation and greater effectiveness.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Synthesis of core contributions

Using Hong Kong's “exam mobility” policy reform as an example, this study reveals the dynamic relationships between policy change, media framing, and public response (Mettler & Soss, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). We found that when media highlight narratives of “injustice,” public perceptions of unfairness intensify, accelerating government responses and policy adjustments (Entmani, 1993; Yang & Chan, 2015). By integrating policy feedback theory with a fairness perception framework, this study expands the analytical perspective on education policy reform and deepens our understanding of the mechanisms of policy change (Pierson, 1993).

7.2 Contribution to the big picture

The findings offer valuable insights for global contexts facing similar education reform challenges. The Hong Kong case provides lessons for societies navigating interregional mobility and disputes over equity (She & Wotherspoon, 2013). The long-standing phenomenon of “student migration” in mainland China, for example, has raised questions about fairness and policy loopholes, closely resembling Hong Kong's situation. Our research suggests that policymakers must balance attracting external talent with protecting local students' rights. Striking the right balance between equity and inclusion is a common challenge worldwide, and Hong Kong's experience provides empirical evidence of this tension. Current debates in various countries about international student quotas and

protecting local students reflect similar tensions, underscoring the universality of this challenge (She & Wotherspoon, 2013).

7.3 Closing the loop & reflection

This research addressed the central questions raised in the introduction and brought them full circle, from problem identification to conclusive findings. Methodological challenges (such as limited data availability) were overcome through multi-source data collection and triangulation, ensuring the reliability and validity of results. Nonetheless, the study has limitations. The interview sample size, while diverse, may not capture every perspective, and survey responses could involve self-selection bias. Moreover, focusing on a single case (Hong Kong) may limit generalizability. Future research can address these limitations by examining additional contexts and employing longitudinal designs.

Importantly, the study innovatively integrated policy feedback theory, media agenda-setting and framing theory, and fairness perception theory into a coherent analytical framework (Entman, 1993; Pierson, 1993). This integrative approach broadened the scope of existing theories and enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity inherent in the exam mobility reform. The research demonstrates the advantages of interdisciplinary strategies in tackling complex education policy issues (Mettler & Soss, 2004).

7.4 Final visionary note

Looking forward, research should prioritize cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal evaluations of reform outcomes so that claims about mechanisms can be tested with greater confidence (She & Wotherspoon, 2013). Comparative work examining similar eligibility and exam access reforms across different institutional settings—paired with multi-year tracking of perceptions and implementation—will allow stronger tests of policy feedback dynamics (Pierson, 1993).

Network-based agenda-setting perspectives could deepen this research agenda by tracing how media outlets, political elites, schools, and parents interact to shape issue salience and legitimacy across time and venues (Lin, 2024). Future studies can map information flows, identify central actors, and relate shifts in frame intensity to subsequent administrative decisions and enforcement actions.

Ultimately, education systems that seek both excellence and equity must attend to perceptions of fairness. Policies need to be not only technically sound but also transparent and responsive to stakeholders. By committing to clear communication, transparency, and fair procedures, reforms are more likely to achieve their intended outcomes and sustain public trust.

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Data availability statement

Access to the data is restricted to protect participant confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Ethical Statement

This study complies with the ethical standards set by the Research Grants Council (Hong Kong) (RGC) and obtained ethical approval in accordance with the requirements of the Graduate School of Lingnan University. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. All procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines and the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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