

Original article

Hong Kong's international student policy (1997–Present): Changing logic, institutional characteristics and development trend from the perspective of policy tools

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Abstract:

In the context of globalisation and intensifying competition for talent, Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region of China, has adjusted its international student policies to establish itself as a “global post-secondary education hub.” This study addresses the lack of multi-dimensional policy instrument analysis by applying an integrated framework that combines policy instrument and policy capacity theories. Through the analysis of policy documents and existing literature, it examines the evolution of Hong Kong's international student policies since 1997 and identifies three key institutional characteristics: balancing expansion with quality assurance, friction within the admission-employment-settlement chain, and the dilemma of cross-border standardisation. The study proposes five directions for institutional reform. These findings contribute theoretical insights to policy instrument research in non-Western contexts and offer practical implications for Hong Kong's development as a high-quality international education hub.

1. Introduction

As globalisation deepens, internationalisation has shifted from a secondary concern to an indicator of a country's strength, culture, creativity, and soft power. The flow of international students between nations has become the most prominent representation of how higher education is being internationalised. Talent maps are being drawn worldwide, intensifying the competition for skilled individuals (Knight, 2004; De Wit et al., 2015).

Hong Kong benefits from its unique “one country, two systems” framework. This arrangement positions it as a bridge between East and West, recognizes a common law system, and supports an English-medium instruction environment. Hong Kong has long played a crucial role in the international education market in Asia and beyond. As noted by Cheng et al. (2011), Hong Kong has emerged as a significant higher

education hub within the Asian region, attracting students from around the globe.

Since Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, its policies regarding international students have evolved significantly rather than following a straightforward path (Burns, 2020). By the 2020/21 academic year, the eight University Grants Committee (UGC) funded institutions had a 20% cap on non-local student admissions. Students from Chinese mainland and countries along the Belt and Road represented a substantial share of this population (University Grants Committee, 2021). These figures reflect the government's gradual shift from cautious control of enrollment numbers to a more proactive strategy aimed at attracting global talent.

In recent years, the government has faced various challenges, such as global geopolitical influences, the reconfiguration of international talent mobility in the post-pandemic

era, and the rise of regional competitors (Jung et al., 2021). Consequently, the government has set the goal of establishing an “international post-secondary education hub.” Starting in the 2024/25 academic year, the strategy will raise the cap on non-local student admissions from 20% to 40%, accompanied by a series of optimisations in visa and scholarship policies (University Grants Committee, 2024).

However, the implementation of Hong Kong’s international student policies reveals a complex situation (Vuong et al., 2021). On one hand, the government seeks to expand to enhance Hong Kong’s international profile, optimise the local talent structure, and increase institutional revenues. On the other hand, it must ensure that educational quality does not decline amid rapid expansion while addressing public concerns about limited student housing and resources for local students.

Meanwhile, the policy goal centers on retention. Graduates from Hong Kong’s higher education system can contribute significantly to the city’s socio-economic development. The crux of Hong Kong’s policy evolution lies in balancing the tensions among expansion, quality enhancement, and retention. Examining this transformation is crucial for understanding Hong Kong’s positioning and future direction within the global higher education landscape. It also offers valuable insights for other regions facing similar challenges.

However, existing studies typically focus on either the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates (IANG) visa or scholarships, or on the experiences of international students. An analytical framework is needed to examine Hong Kong’s policy instruments across multiple dimensions: authority, finance, organisation, and information.

Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap. It adopts an integrated framework that combines policy instrument theory and policy capacity theory (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Eliadis et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2015) to present the evolution of Hong Kong’s international student policies since the Handover (1997–present). Specifically, the study will first develop a four-layer framework encompassing policy instruments, policy mix, policy capacity, and sectoral paradigm. Second, it will use this framework to analyse in depth the application and evolution of Hong Kong’s policy instruments. Third, based on this instrument-level analysis, it will summarise three deep-rooted institutional features of Hong Kong’s current international student system. Finally, drawing on these analyses, it will propose targeted institutional reforms aimed at achieving a higher-level balanced development among expansion, quality enhancement, and retention.

To guide this investigation, the study addresses the following research questions: 1) How have the policy instruments (information, authority, fiscal, organisational) of Hong Kong’s international student policy evolved since 1997? 2) What are the institutional characteristics of Hong Kong’s international student policy in practice? 3) What targeted reform directions can promote balanced development of Hong Kong’s international education hub?

The study aims to describe policy phenomena while elucidating the governance logic and contradictions underlying them. It will provide both theoretical insights and practical pathways for establishing a high-quality, sustainable interna-

tional education hub in Hong Kong.

2. Literature review

With the promotion of globalisation and the knowledge economy, international student mobility has become a key indicator of a nation’s or region’s comprehensive competitiveness. Under the unique “One Country, Two Systems” framework, Hong Kong’s strategic positioning as a global talent hub is significantly influenced. To analyse the evolutionary aspects, tool selection, and institutional characteristics of Hong Kong’s international student policies, this study systematically reviews three areas of literature: first, research on the macro trends and micro decision-making mechanisms of international student mobility; second, theories of public policy tools used to analyse government intervention; and third, strategic and comparative studies on the construction of a global education hub.

The discussion surrounding international student mobility serves as the foundation of this study. Classical Push-Pull Theory provides the analytical framework. Nikou & Luukkonen (2024) describe a push-pull model that motivates students to seek overseas education. This theory posits that cross-border student mobility results from the combined effects of “push” forces from the source country and “pull” forces from the destination country (Na et al., 2025). Among the most significant push factors for Chinese students are the desire to learn, experience novelty, and face challenges (Wu et al., 2021). Another push factor is self-awareness, which holds moderate importance (Wu et al., 2021). Pull factors originate from the destination country and include recognition of qualifications, learning environment, advanced facilities, and even religious tolerance for students from Gulf countries (Hailat et al., 2022). Visa convenience and post-graduation employment prospects are also significant (Hailat et al., 2022). Within this macro framework, government policy interventions are viewed as key variables shaping the pull factors. For example, generous scholarship policies, simplified visa procedures, and open graduate work visas can substantially boost a country or region’s appeal to international students (Feeney et al., 2023). However, it is challenging to detail the specific decision-making processes of individuals faced with multiple similar options.

Recent research has increasingly focused on decision-making mechanisms, examining the impact of specific policy tools on student choices. For instance, the study by Tian & Zhang (2024) on mainland students choosing Hong Kong provides a compelling example. Their research found that, in addition to traditional factors such as geographical proximity and cultural similarity, the Hong Kong SAR government’s “Individual Graduates Staying in Hong Kong/ Returning to Hong Kong Employment Arrangement” (IANG visa) became a decisive pull factor. This policy offers graduates a clear path to transition from student to professional, greatly satisfying their expectations for career development and status enhancement (Tian & Zhang, 2024). Policy is not merely a vague pull factor but a tool designed to achieve stated policy objectives (Howlett, 2022). For example, students can easily perceive and

incorporate these policies into their long-term life plans. This shift shifts the focus of research from general attractiveness to specific policy design and its influence on individual expectations. However, this type of research has limitations. Most studies primarily focus on initial attractiveness, such as how policies influence students' college choices (Ke et al., 2022). They often lack long-term tracking and in-depth analysis of the following aspects. In other words, existing research answers the question, "Why are policies attractive?" but leaves a gap regarding "How do the effects of policies last?" and "How do policies function throughout the entire chain from enrollment to employment?"

To examine which tools governments use, and how these tools are organised and implemented, attention must be directed to public policy theory. In the field of policy tool research, Christopher Hood's NATO framework categorises the resources governments use to exert influence into four core types: Nodality, Authority, Treasure, and Organisation (Page & McLean, 2025). In the context of the internationalisation of higher education, these four types of tools are especially evident. Governments disseminate information through education fairs and national branding websites; exercise authority by enacting visa regulations and setting enrolment quotas; utilise financial resources by awarding scholarships and providing research funding; and organise and manage through dedicated entities such as international student service centres and quality assurance agencies. This framework has been widely used by scholars to analyse the education policies of various countries (Zha & Lin, 2014; Kravets et al., 2025). However, while the NATO framework effectively describes the tools available to governments, it does not explain how these tools interact with one another.

To overcome the limitations of single-tool analysis, the field of policy research has developed the perspective of policy mix or policy toolbox. Scholars such as Cejudo & Michel (2021) argue that to effectively address complex problems, different policy instruments must be integrated into coherent policy mixes. The application of diverse policy instruments may lead to suboptimal responses, meaning that the instruments should be complementary and mutually reinforcing when combined in a policy mix (Maor & Howlett, 2022). For example, if a country invests significant sums in scholarships (a fiscal tool) to attract top doctoral students, but simultaneously implements extremely strict postdoctoral work visa policies (an authoritative tool), this inherent conflict can seriously undermine the effectiveness of the scholarship policy. Therefore, it is essential to examine Hong Kong's international student policy to determine whether the relationships between these policies are well-coordinated.

To explain the gap between policy intent and implementation, policy capacity theory is systematically proposed and discussed (Brenton et al., 2023; Painter & Pierre, 2005). This theory posits that policy capacity is the government's ability to effectively perform policy functions to achieve public goals, decomposing this capacity into three dimensions (Brenton et al., 2023). The introduction of policy capacity theory offers insight into why similar policies can yield vastly different effects in different countries or regions (Migone &

Howlett, 2023). This underscores that analysing Hong Kong's international student policies requires not only a review of policy texts but also an assessment of whether the SAR government and its related institutions possess the capacity to implement these policies effectively. Weng's (2025) analysis of the Singapore model provides an excellent empirical case study for understanding policy capacity theory. The Singapore government's capacity to coordinate policies effectively across multiple departments is a clear demonstration of its strong analytical, operational, and political capabilities. This forms a foundational theoretical basis for discussing the institutional characteristics underlying Hong Kong's policy evolution.

Finally, some studies comparing global education hubs provide important insights for this research. Knight (2011) defines an education hub as a strategic plan in which a country or region concentrates resources to develop higher education, attract international students, and promote academic collaboration. This approach aims not only to increase student numbers but also to create a cycle that integrates education, research, innovation, and talent services to achieve talent attraction, development and retention (Knight, 2013). As Weng (2025) points out, Singapore's success stems from a highly coordinated and integrated approach under strong government leadership, combining education, technological innovation, industrial development, and immigration policies. In Malaysia, strong government support connects the country to the global education hub (Lertpusit, 2022). The Malaysian government persuades students through a combination of state policies, active agents, and the universities' efforts to meet students' personal needs for human capital development (Lertpusit, 2022). Dubai has also emerged as an international education hub, with its government mobilizing designated infrastructure and policies to attract numerous foreign universities to establish offshore campuses and offer their programs and degrees (Rottleb, 2025). These different models provide valuable comparative insights for examining Hong Kong. Building an education hub requires effective policy tools, clear strategic positioning, and robust cross-sectoral policy coordination capabilities.

The existing scholarship on international student mobility, policy instruments, and global education hubs offers significant insights; however, it remains structurally fragmented across conceptual layers. Push-pull theory explains broad motivational patterns but does not clarify how specific policy instruments shape students' expectations throughout the admission-employment-settlement chain. Similarly, the NATO and policy mix frameworks provide useful categorisations of governmental tools but rarely examine the internal coherence and interactive dynamics of these tools within the higher education sector. Comparative studies of international education hubs tend to focus on macro-level strategies, often overlooking micro-level governance tensions arising from rapid expansion, quality assurance requirements, and cross-border coordination challenges. Taken together, these limitations highlight the need for an integrated analytical framework capable of linking (1) governmental tool selection, (2) instrument interactions, (3) policy capacity, and (4) sector-specific quality paradigms. This study, therefore, develops a four-layer analytical framework

that systematically connects these dimensions to better understand the evolution of Hong Kong's international student policies.

3. Analysis framework

The study aims to study Hong Kong's governance practice under the those of goals, including expansion, quality enhancement and retention. The study covers across four dimensions: instrument choice, mix design, capacity support, and value assessment. This framework will answer what the government has done. Its core aims are to explain how it is done, why it is done and what effect is. Thereby it offers a theoretical basement for future policy optimisation.

Layer One: The policy instruments —based on the NATO framework

The logical point of study is to identify and categorise the basic means by which government intervenes in society and steers behaviour. This study adopts the highly influential NATO typology of policy instruments from public administration. Capano & Howlett (2020) note that this theory was proposed by Hood and collaborators, while the government's governing tool was generalised into four core types. Its value lies in providing a concise and comprehensive classification that organises seemingly disparate measures into clear categories. It also helps understand how different instruments influence target groups (universities, international students, employers, etc.) through distinct mechanisms of action (information, authority, finance, and organisation).

First one is information instruments. These derive from government's unique position as the central node in social information networks. By gathering, processing, and selectively releasing information, government shapes public perceptions and expectations. In Hong Kong's international student policy domain, the official website coordinated the UGC serves as an authoritative channel to present Hong Kong's higher education advantages and application processes to prospective students worldwide (Burns, 2020). And the Hong Kong government and related agencies actively participate in top global education fairs such as NAFSA and EAIE to advise and recruit. Press releases and policy documents are regarded as a tool to send a clear signal that Hong Kong welcomes international talent. The core function of information tools is to reduce costs for prospective students and strengthen Hong Kong's positive brand as an international education hub. Thereby it would gain advantage in the global competition for students.

The second one is authority instruments. These refer to the government's use of its legal and legitimate power to set rules, define boundaries, and regulate. This is the most traditional and direct mode of intervention. In Hong Kong, authority tools constitute the institutional framework that covers international students from application and study through post-graduation development. For examples the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates (IANG) introduced in 2008, the students are permitted stay extended from 12 to 24 months. With flexible renewal provisions, students could offer a clear choice from study to work.

The third is fiscal instruments. In the competition to attract

international students, fiscal tools are essential. Hong Kong's fiscal means includes Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (Hong Kong PFS) administered by the Research Grants Council (RGC), the Government Scholarship Fund (GSF) and the Belt and Road Scholarship. Fiscal instruments enhance the attractiveness of Hong Kong as an educational destination and provide clear signals of increased affordability.

The last is organisation instruments which entail the government's direct provision of services, creation of agencies, or deployment of organisational networks to achieve policy goals. In Hong Kong, organisational tools underpin the quality assurance and support service architecture for international students. Its core elements include the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) under the UGC and Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (Hong Kong CAAVQ). Those organisations provide overall support from transition to employment. Organisational tools are the institutional foundation for a high-quality onshore student experience.

Layer Two: Policy mixes and design logic

Identifying individual tools is only the first step. In practice, instruments rarely operate in isolation. Their ultimate effects hinge on how they are combined. As Howlett (2009) emphasises, the core of policy design lies in calibrating and tuning instruments to achieve consistency, coherence, and complementarity. Therefore, this layer shifts focus from a tool list to the tool mix. It aims to probe whether Hong Kong's instruments form effective synergy. However, an ideal mix would be synergistic: authority tools (IANG) provide legal assurance for graduates to stay. Then fiscal tools (scholarships) attract excellent students. Finally, and organisational tools (university career services) translate their learning into employability. The three link up to serve the goal of talent retention.

Nevertheless, misalignments are evident in practice. The expansion of enrolment (authority) must be synchronised with the organisational capacity (organisation) for internships, housing, and support services. High-value scholarships (treasures) without integration with employer incentives or visa pathways may undermine retention goals. Excessive pressure for process compliance may inhibit program differentiation (Capano & Lippi, 2017; Howlett, 2014). In other words, it is needed to ask not only 'what to use', but also 'how to allocate, how much to allocate, and when to expand and contract.'

By mapping these synergies, this layer reveals intrinsic design contradictions in Hong Kong's international student policy and helps explain why some measures underperform in practice.

Layer Three: Policy capacity

The execution and management capacity should be contained for every policy. This layer introduces policy capacity theory to ask whether the government and related organisations can operate a complex instrument mix effectively. Following Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett's (2015) three-dimensional model, capacity could be divided into analytical, operational, and political capacities. It examines at the system, organisational, and individual levels.

Analytical capacity means the ability to acquire, analyse, and use evidence in policy design and evaluation. In Hong

Kong, this requires the Education Bureau, UGC, Immigration Department, and others could build a database, which can track international students from admission, graduation, first employment, and visa renewals through to settlement. Without strong analytical capacity, adjustments default to intuition or metrics, impeding precision policy.

Operational capacity refers to the ability to coordinate cross-departmental implementation and deliver high-quality frontline services. The issue of international student affairs is typical, which requires process integration and information sharing among the Education Bureau (macro policy), Immigration (visas), and Labour Department (employment rules). Operational capacity determines whether intent translates into execution.

Political capacity refers to the ability to build consensus, manage conflict, mobilise support, and sustain legitimacy. A substantial increase in the non-local will increase public concerns over resource and fairness. A government with high political capacity uses transparent data, public communication, and effective safeguards for local students. It could provide a favourable political and opinion climate for implementation. International talent also benefits Hong Kong overall.

Layer Four: A sector-specific insight for higher education

The final layer introduces a special perspective to provide a more targeted standard for evaluating Hong Kong's international student policies. First, the multi-motive structure of internationalisation would be mentioned. As Knight (2004) and De Wit et al. (2015) argue that internationalisation is driven by complex rationales, not just economic, academic, social-cultural, and geopolitical rationale. It means whether policies enhance academic reputation and research capacity. Campus diversity and students' intercultural competence are also needed to enrich. This calls for a comprehensive standard of success.

Second, in higher education, quality is a complicated conception. Harvey and Green's (1993) study explains it into five dimensions: exceptional, consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformative. This model offers a powerful tool for examining quality under expansion.

In conclusion, this four-layer analytical framework forms a complete chain from methods to process to outcomes and values. It will guide the study's systematic presentation of Hong Kong's international student policy evolution and identify the problems between tools and execution. Then it will propose theoretically informed and practically feasible reform pathways for the higher education development.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative policy content analysis approach to systematically examine the evolution and implementation of Hong Kong's international student policies from 1997 to the present. The research design is grounded in the analysis of publicly available policy documents and existing scholarly literature, allowing for a comprehensive tracing of policy changes and the identification of underlying institutional characteristics.

Data collection relies on two primary sources. Primary data include official policy documents, such as University Grants Committee (UGC) circulars (e.g., 2008, 2021, 2024), the Education Bureau's (EDB) scholarship scheme descriptions (e.g., the Belt and Road Scholarship), and regulations from the Hong Kong Immigration Department (e.g., the Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates, IANG). Secondary data encompass peer-reviewed academic studies that provide analysis and context on Hong Kong's international education landscape (e.g., Burns, 2020).

The analytic strategy employs a structured, theory-informed framework. First, policy instruments within the collected data are coded and categorised according to the NATO typology (Hood & Margetts, 2007) into four core types: information, authority, fiscal, and organisational tools. Subsequently, the interactions between these instruments are analysed to assess the synergy and misalignment within the overall policy mix. This analysis is further contextualised through the lens of policy capacity (Wu et al., 2015), evaluating the analytical, operational, and political capabilities required for effective implementation.

To ensure transparency and methodological rigour, the analysis incorporated a structured coding process, as outlined below. The analysis followed a structured coding strategy that combined deductive and inductive approaches. First, all policy documents were coded using the NATO framework to identify the government's use of informational, authority-based, fiscal, and organisational tools. This provided a consistent foundation for comparison. A second round of inductive coding was then conducted to capture patterns not fully explained by the NATO categories, such as implementation bottlenecks or institutional tensions. NVivo was used to organise and track coding activities. To strengthen reliability, a second researcher double-coded a subset of documents, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Triangulation with official statistics and peer-reviewed studies further enhanced the robustness and credibility of the findings.

To ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings, the study employs triangulation. This is achieved by cross-validating evidence from multiple sources, including policy texts, official statistics (e.g., UGC reports on non-local student quotas), and the existing body of academic research, thereby mitigating the limitations associated with reliance on any single data source.

5. Findings

5.1 Mechanism traceability: The deep logic of policy change

To learn more about Hong Kong's educational policies for the international students in this study. It relies on a layering of drawing from NATO tools/policy mix/policy capabilities. According to this frame, it checks the policies after handing over. With four analyses tools: Information Tools, authority tools, Financial Tools, Organisation Tools This is not just a timeline, but a set of tools and it's tense and dealing with it and then it becomes something that's going to be the template for what you're describing about the part of

Figure 1. Diagram of the evolution of policy tools

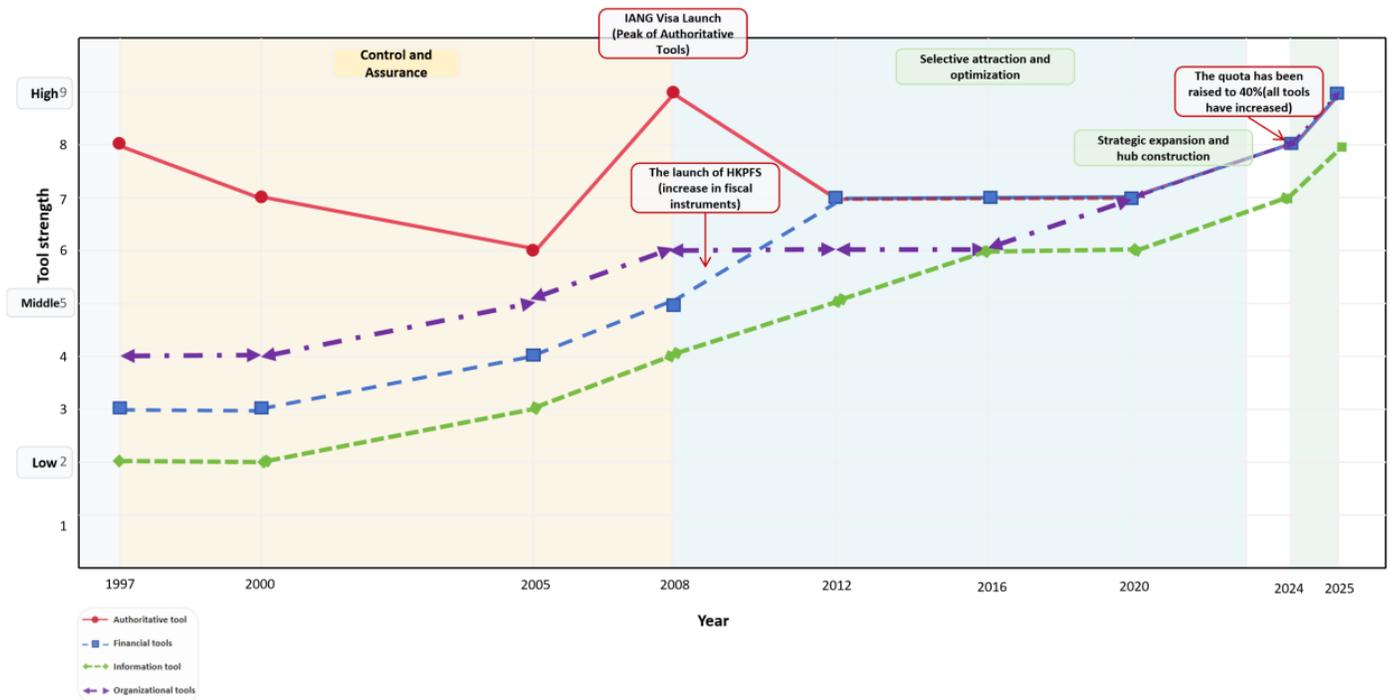


Fig. 1. Diagram of the evolution of policy tools.

the system and the feature. The evolution of Hong Kong's international student policies reflects a deeper governance logic that has gradually shifted from the early protection of local student access toward selective expansion aimed at enhancing global competitiveness, and more recently toward balancing financial sustainability, quality assurance pressures, and long-term talent retention. These shifts are shaped not only by changes in demographic dynamics and labour market demands but also by Hong Kong's repositioning within a region increasingly characterised by intensifying competition for international talent. Understanding this logic is essential for interpreting the tensions embedded in contemporary policy reforms.

To make this governance trajectory more concrete, Fig. 1 summarises the evolution of key policy milestones and their associated instrument types since 1997. The timeline shows how an early phase dominated by restrictive authority tools gradually gave way to a more diversified mix of fiscal, informational and organisational instruments. This visualisation reinforces the argument that Hong Kong's international student policy has shifted from protecting local access, to selectively attracting high-value talent, and ultimately to constructing a more strategically positioned education hub in the region.

5.1.1 Information tools: Brand building and persistent information friction

Information instruments have played an increasingly visible role in shaping Hong Kong's international profile. Government-endorsed portals and participation in major global education fairs (e.g., NAFSA, EAIE) have strengthened Hong

Kong's brand as a credible study destination. These efforts reduce information costs for prospective students and signal institutional reliability.

However, information tools also generate persistent frictions. Empirical studies (Cheung & Xu, 2015) show that many prospective students rely heavily on private agencies whose information often diverges from official sources. Inconsistent guidance on issues such as visa procedures, housing availability, and part-time work creates uncertainty and weakens the credibility of Hong Kong's education system. While policy rhetoric has shifted from "recruitment" to "retention," the absence of a coherent and coordinated information system limits policy effectiveness. As Howlett (2009) notes, the value of instruments depends not on their number but on their alignment within a broader system—an alignment Hong Kong has yet to fully achieve.

5.1.2 Authoritative tools: From restriction to calibrated expansion

The Hong Kong Government enacted severe policies towards non - locals after the handover by legislation and funding and UGC also had a big policy back in 2008, the number of non - locals at UGC institutions cannot surpass 20% of student quotas for locals (University Grants Committee, 2021). As an entry limitation, it is used to ensure local students get an education to maintain equality.

But Hong Kong is also becoming a more competitive world for attracting talent - so Hong Kong is trying to grow 'selectively.' The University Grants Committee (UGC) said in Sept 2024, UGC will increase the cap of overseas recruitment

from 38% to 40

Yet expansion alone does not guarantee policy success. Without parallel growth in housing, internship placements, and student services, expansion risks generating social resistance and perceptions of unfair resource competition. The challenge, therefore, is not merely “how much to expand,” but how to calibrate expansion in line with labour-market needs and institutional capacity. A calibrated approach—one that expands selectively in shortage disciplines while maintaining tight quality safeguards—better aligns with principles of policy coherence and public legitimacy.

5.1.3 Fiscal instruments: Clear incentives but path-dependent constraints

And when it's about attracting overseas students to somewhere, the financial instrument that pops up is the Hong Kong PFS which started in 2009, giving out huge money grants and conference subsidies to all recipients, taking a good deal of effort to attract the best PhD applicants from all over the planet (University Grants Committee, 2024). Under government scholarship fund (GSF) and the belt and road scholarship, the target scholarship for undergraduates and postgraduates aiming at different students (Education Bureau, 2025).

And that is a very clear ‘price signal’ to these international students as well. Also, Foskett & Maringe (2010) commented that the financial compensation can be a huge incentive for a lot of the students that wish to study in another country. And there's two types of path dependency for this fiscal policy – first one is that they only grant money to people who got doctorate degree, but there plenty of qualified people at undergrad or master's level. And the second type is like the recipients of the money seems to be primarily from Chinese mainland and some of these ‘Belt and Road’ country, so the chance of having too many of the same demographic might be high. Cheng et al., 2011 also added that too much dependency would made it dull in the classroom. Relying on international experience too much would lower the quality of experience.

So, it needs a financial tool for the first step which is to go from attraction to result, right? Scholars will earn awards based on the status of the students, as well as long-term performance such as stay time in Hong Kong, job satisfaction, and contributions to society, so no one can take the money just for leaving.

5.1.4 Organisational tools: hard constraints and institutional tension in quality assurance

Quality assurance was a cornerstone of the Hong Kong policy for international students. Since 2008, the QAC under UGC introduced institutional audits with periodic reviews on students' learning outcomes, students' experience and support services: At the same time, Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic/ Vocational Qualifications (Hong Kong CAAVQ) certify programs from other region, ensuring programs are the same standards in Hong Kong as in the border (Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications, 2023).

The strength of this system lies in two aspects: First, prevent universities from sacrificing quality for the sake of

student numbers, 1 Students will have a sense of where to come from on their border crossings, and there's an organisation of tools. There would be ‘audit compliance, ‘from audits and accreditations—documentary, procedural, not doing (Cheng & Mao, 2009) 1. Risk of uni-formed quality resulting in curriculum homogenisation and lowering of institutional differentiation and innovative capacity. And lastly, Bodycott & Lai (2012) mentioned, after it got expanded, the hidden resources for students like Student Support Centre, Counselling Centre and Academic Writing Centre do not expand at the same rate.

The big problem we have in making organisational tools is the move from having the evidence to working. Future quality review must inspect the process and need to act as pointers of ‘worth added learning and assistive services’ (Harvey & Green, 1993) to assess the international scholar raising procedures.

5.2 Institutional characteristics: Three interpretations of policy evolution

In this study I'll examine the Hong Kong's international education student policy by using four different policy dimension like Authority Dimension, Organizing Dimension, Financial Dimension and Information System Dimension. shows problems with tool combinations; even though focusing on only one tool like we do in the previous parts, there are three institutional characteristics listed here that support rationality and are theory for future reforms to follow.

5.2.1 The balance between capacity expansion and quality improvement

The first basic character is ‘Edge of the Blade’ and maintaining an edge on both expansion and improvement. UGC 2008 sets a 20% quota cap on non-local undergraduate (University Grants Committee, 2021), which suggests a cautious logic of ‘limiting growth.’ However, due to a special administrative region, Hong Kong proposing a ‘Global Education Centre’ for that academic year, the increase of quota to 40% of the 2024-2025 academic in 2024 (University Grants Committee, 2024) has added to growth in policy priorities.

As for the benefits, more is for the better as with the expansion would come greater good results and helped to promote the development of the international academics thus also boosting the ranking of the universities at home and abroad and increase the fiscal income as well as improve the local talent composition, (Mok & Han, 2016) more is for the worse as Harvey & Green (1993) have explained that it is a multidimensional term representing the quality of something. If there was more the institution can't handle, that's overcrowding the course. It would cause the institution to have too many students for staff. There wouldn't be enough dorm rooms and students would be affected.

Based on empirical study: Cheng & Mao (2009) found out the compliance-oriented pattern at Hong Kong universities, as they were growing their enrollments while the institutions were concentrating on the audits of formal quality instead of actual teaching improvement. It shows how policy-led additions in

capacity are pushing out actual educational improvement. On the other hand, Singapore focuses attention on value added assessments that assess extended limits of learning for the student (Foskett & Maringe, 2010). They can help make changes to education reforms in Hong Kong.

So far as Hong Kong's systems of institutions are concerned, and we're looking at what are the worst extreme things we can do in terms of balance, we need to have some quality on that, we need something about population growth, so when that expands past our quality free frontier, when the point where quality starts getting hit. That thing falls apart. In these organisations are designed so politicians will see that it's not true when some people say population growth is good, all by itself. Instead, it should include elements like additional learning benefits provided, level of support services provided, incidence rate of academic misconduct incidents, etc., to dynamically control the growth of the population.

5.2.2 The closed-loop and friction points of admission, employment and settlement

Second is that Hong Kong is also a closed loop from enrolment-employment- residence, there's friction at each loop. For 2008 IANG the scheme introduced in Hong Kong which allows students to be outside to stay for 12months (furtherdown to 24months) in Hong Kong to find a job and can be renewed with the 3+3 model. For 2025 the students should be able to have an internship or a job with education bureau, for 2024. providing structure to establish the institution link between education and employ so Hong Kong would be more attractive to draw and retain people than the UK or retaining talent.

But it is on a chain but has plenty of obstacles. First, information friction: Cheung & Xu (2015) point out a good number of students have no idea what the local industries are looking for when students search for jobs, especially on qualifications/certification and languages. Second, capability friction: Employers would rather hire those who can speak Cantonese and already know the place in Hong Kong. Internationals would not work well for such job (Bodycott & Lai, 2012). Third, institutional friction: Its IANGs need to meet a low renews standard, but there are no employment quality standards. Some wanted some of the bottom jobs and wanted to extend it on their visa, it was like some of the best students wanted them to stay.

Friction here is if the chain – system was done well the results should've been different because of it and all else supporting it. Knight (2004), in her view, how well an international area does is not an institutional design, but how they build students and fit students to social environments. So it's got to be Hong Kong at the end of the chain; these are industry matched establishing courses, cross-language training; some quality is required here.

This institutional feature indicates that Hong Kong's international student policy has a chain, but there are two sides, on the one hand it is complete, on the other hand due to the existence of friction points, the chain is reduced. If these friction points cannot be removed, then Hong Kong will not be able to convert 'admittance' to 'attraction'.

5.2.3 The standardisation dilemma of cross-border interoperability

Third, the Hong Kong standardisation problem in cross-border school cooperation problems. Cross-border programme collaboration in the Greater Bay Area has expanded steadily, with joint programmes and credit-bearing courses between Hong Kong and Mainland institutions becoming increasingly common (Lo et al., 2017). Although such developments should, in principle, enhance the permeability and regional relevance of Hong Kong's higher education system, they have instead revealed a persistent standardisation dilemma that undermines institutional coherence and weakens Hong Kong's appeal as an education hub.

The core problem lies in the absence of mutually recognised quality and credit standards. As Harvey & Green (1993) argue, quality systems require shared agreement on fundamental criteria; when such agreement is lacking, accreditation becomes fragmented and certificates lose credibility. Empirical evidence from Lo et al. (2017) demonstrates this clearly: despite Hong Kong's comparatively stringent quality assurance regime, cross-border programmes often face "double standards", with Mainland and Hong Kong authorities applying different certification requirements. Credits and qualifications are not automatically recognised, forcing programmes to comply with two sets of expectations and imposing significant transaction costs on institutions.

International comparison highlights the systemic risks of this fragmentation. The United Kingdom's TNE model, supported by the QAA, provides unified cross-border standards that enable global recognition of qualifications (De Wit et al., 2015). In contrast, Hong Kong lacks an equivalent mechanism, leaving cross-border initiatives structurally vulnerable and limiting their credibility. Without interoperable standards, Hong Kong cannot leverage its geographical and institutional advantages within the Greater Bay Area, resulting in weaker differentiation vis-à-vis competitors such as Singapore and the UK.

Consequently, the standardisation dilemma is not a peripheral issue but a structural constraint within Hong Kong's international student ecosystem. It reduces institutional reliability, constrains cross-border mobility, and diminishes the city's attractiveness to prospective students who increasingly value clear pathways and recognised qualifications. This institutional feature reinforces the broader finding of this study: although Hong Kong maintains strong formal quality assurance, its system struggles to ensure coherence across jurisdictions—an essential condition for sustaining competitiveness as an international education hub.

5.3 Development trend: Five directions of institutional reform

Hong Kong starts to re-calibrate its view on international students - from getting more students at any cost in any location, to expanding first then get bigger, to holding on to a safe balance between how many students there are, how good the students are and how we keep them here. So now is going into five, more than five institution level.

5.3.1 The quota should be ‘dynamic’, rather than ‘one size fits all’

Hong Kong has just now given signs they’re wanting to increase its enrolment capping, rising from 20% - 40% of the most in a university (University Grants Committee, 2024) but for every there’s a different capacity. There are many nurse and education related positions that cost a lot of capital, they cannot hold into the quality of education when internships and places to stay don’t exist, but there are data science, engineering and finance positions that can benefit from a large space when lacking talent. The best situation is for quotas to line up with the labour market using varied tweaking, allowing policies to become correct and local’s concern of locals being pushed over by non-locals would also be addressed through this varied tweaking. In fundamental terms, if we are too short term oriented then we need the fundamental subjects for long term competition, the government should know that and not make splits with their citizens through this.

5.3.2 Part-time work is normal, but there must be ‘guardrails’

HONG KONG removes restrictions on working for overseas students, will enable students to get more local experience and improve their employment situation. Maybe there will be no institution willing to step forward to help it, some unforeseen trouble; maybe academic affairs, which can be quite troublesome; maybe competition with domestic low-skilled labour markets; or even employment. Smarter would allow setting of times, job whitelist, more work practice or making side hustle into learning activities. We will only do a truly complete integration of academic tasks in work when part-time jobs serve to a good job rather than a brand-new risk.

5.3.3 IANG should shift from ‘number of applications’ to ‘retention rate’

The most eye-catching of talent policies in Hong Kong was ‘IANG: non-Hong Kong’s stay employment arrangement,’ which only cares about how many people want to apply for the systematic tracking arrangement, without following them up through what they do after graduating, whether their stay permission is renewed, and whether they become a permanent resident. The next thing is setting a database for longitudinal studies, from the day someone gets out of college and gets a job, until they get settled. And this would be people focusing on how much gets planted rather than how many show up for an application. This is a conversion rate strategy; the government will focus on the quality of employment over numbers. But maybe we can create data driven incentives like ‘data manipulation steering students’ quantity and quality with lesser money. So, IANG need to focus on quantity and quality so that they can stay.

5.3.4 Scholarships should be levelled and expanded

Scholarship is very helpful for International Student Recruitment, and the Hong Kong PFS Scholarships programme has become a global brand (RGC - 2025) but it is still not

perfect, there are still flaws in the distribution. There are still too many doctorates and a very small group of sourcing regions. It is difficult for us to get good student graduates because of structural path dependency. The best way is to give scholarships to undergraduates and postgraduates. And we can also open the scholarship to other regions like ASEAN, South Asia, and Africa as well, this opens the diversity of our recruiting pool. Scholarships linking to actual work results in Hong Kong, and the percentage staying on board could turn it from just handing out money to growing talent into something more and have a bigger lasting effect.

5.3.5 Quality governance from ‘document compliance’ to ‘results-oriented + cross-border compatibility’

QA systems exist in Hong Kong yet they’re incomplete (they don’t fully conform to QA), since QA are about compliance and documents rather than learning and truthfulness (Lo et al., 2017): And its extension of capacity and cross-border cooperation is getting smaller and then the two ways:

Governance: Cooperatively audit QAC, Hong Kong CAAVQ, and remove redundancy in supervision, by opening assess reports to the public more transparently.

Technology and rules: Cross border data interface and credit mutual recognition: Mutual recognition of cross-border data interface and credit, accelerate the mutual recognition of cross-border data interface and credit, and form regional achievements and maps. To make regional standard and achievement mapping table immediately. Cross border interface and credit speed up promotion.

Only when Hong Kong gets married to its smart monitoring process and proved learning outcomes will it be able to stay competitive simply by growing out of them.

6. Discussion

This study reveals that Hong Kong’s international student policy instruments have evolved from a logic of control to one of strategic expansion. However, this shift has engendered three core institutional tensions: the delicate balance between expansion and quality, friction within the admission-employment-settlement chain, and a standardisation dilemma in cross-border collaboration.

These findings resonate with and extend existing theoretical frameworks. The observed policy ineffectiveness, such as the path dependency of scholarships, substantiates Capano and Howlett’s (2020) policy mix theory, indicating that the challenges stem not from defects in individual tools, but from their misalignment. Furthermore, the tension between rapid expansion and educational quality echoes Harvey and Green’s (1993) multi-dimensional concept of quality, where over-expansion risks undermining ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘transformative’ learning outcomes.

A key mechanism underpinning these challenges, particularly the friction in the policy chain, is weak operational capacity (Wu et al., 2015), manifesting as a lack of coordination and information sharing between key departments like immigration and labour.

The findings contribute to ongoing debates in policy mix

theory. Capano and Howlett argue that policy outcomes depend on how instruments interact rather than on their individual design. The Hong Kong case provides clear empirical support for this claim. Instruments intended to attract or retain students were weakened when complementary organisational or informational tools were underdeveloped. This demonstrates that misalignment can emerge not only across tools at a single policy moment but also across sequential stages of the student lifecycle. Highlighting these temporal dynamics extends the current policy mix literature, which has paid limited attention to how frictions accumulate over time.

The study also refines our understanding of policy capacity. Existing frameworks treat analytical, operational, and political capacities as parallel dimensions, yet the Hong Kong case shows that these capacities do not always develop at the same pace. Strong analytical capacity shaped the design of major schemes, but operational coordination between agencies lagged behind. This mismatch created bottlenecks in students' transition from graduation to employment and settlement. By showing how capacity gaps emerge within specific stages of a policy chain, the analysis adds nuance to current theory and highlights the importance of sequencing in policy implementation.

Comparisons with other education hubs such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Dubai show that Hong Kong's challenges are part of a wider pattern. Many expanding systems struggle to reconcile rapid enrolment growth with quality assurance, student experience, and sustainable labour-market integration. Hong Kong's case therefore offers more than a local illustration; it provides insight into the structural pressures that shape international education governance in competitive regions. Recognising these parallels strengthens the global relevance of the study's findings.

Consequently, this study offers dual implications. Theoretically, it enriches policy instrument research by validating its application in Hong Kong's unique 'one country, two systems' context. Practically, it advises governments to enhance operational capacity through integrated data systems and urges universities to transition their quality assurance regimes from mere 'document compliance' to a focus on 'value-added' student outcomes.

7. Conclusion

From the angle of policy tools, using the framework and theory 'policy mix-policy capacity' for higher education internationalisation, learn the relevant contents of the theory of higher education internationalisation and quality governance, to understand its development and features of Hong Kong's policies regarding international students from the perspective of Hong Kong's policies and regulations regarding international students. change of policy orientation from 'expansion – restriction' to 'expansion – selection'. There are three Challenges at the institution: Challenges of expansion and the challenge of the quality of expansion and the challenge of the recruitment to –employment and the challenge of standardisation with dependant cross-border interoperability. further, reform involves dynamic quotas, part time compliance

and safe as normal, increase the (IANG), rebalancing, change the quantity and source of scholarship, improve the governance level, as long as they're all proper (institution supervised and social trust), Hong Kong can build a long term high quality international education strength, not quantity.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. It relies on secondary data (policy documents and existing literature) without primary empirical data (e.g., interviews with international students or university administrators), which limits the in-depth understanding of policy implementation at the micro level. Additionally, the exclusive focus on Hong Kong constrains the external validity of the findings to other emerging education hubs.

The future research could collect primary data through surveys or interviews to explore the lived experiences and policy perceptions of international students. Furthermore, comparative research between Hong Kong and established hubs such as Singapore and London could be highly fruitful. Such a comparative approach would further identify universal patterns and context-specific nuances in global education hub development, directly aligning with this journal's interest in 'global comparison.'

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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