

Original article

Building a world-class international education hub: Hong Kong's trajectory, tensions, and theoretical frontiers

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Abstract:

Hong Kong's strategic ambition as a Special Administrative Region of China to evolve into a world-leading international education hub sits at the intersection of global higher education trends, urban competitiveness agendas, and complex regional dynamics. This article examines the current conditions, governance challenges, and theoretical implications of this transformation. Moving beyond enrollment metrics and ranking discourses, we conceptualize hub-building as a multi-scalar governance project that requires coherent policy mixes, sustained legitimacy, and robust academic labor foundations. Drawing on theories of policy design, global cities, and organizational justice, the paper outlines a conceptual framework for analyzing Hong Kong's hub trajectory across five dimensions: global positioning, policy instruments, social legitimacy, human resources, and digital transitions. It further introduces four anchor studies that explore critical tensions in exam mobility fairness, international student policy coherence, multi-actor governance narratives, and academic talent retention. The article concludes by proposing a research agenda that prioritizes comparative, mechanism-oriented scholarship to inform how Hong Kong—and similar hubs—can pursue credible, equitable, and sustainable pathways in an era of geopolitical shifts and digital transformation.

1. Introduction: Building Hong Kong as an international education hub

Internationalisation of higher education has become a central policy strategy through which states and cities seek to reposition themselves within global knowledge economies, diversify revenue, cultivate talent, and project soft power (Altbach, 2004; Marginson, 2010). In this policy field, the notion of the international education hub has moved from a promotional label to an analytical category that captures purposeful efforts to concentrate education and research activities, attract mobile students and staff, and embed universities within wider innovation and city branding agendas (Knight, 2011; Knight, 2013). Education hubs are therefore best approached as multi sector policy assemblages rather than as single institutional programmes, because they depend on coordinated instruments spanning education, immigration,

labour markets, housing, innovation, and urban governance (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2009; Wu et al., 2015).

Hong Kong is a particularly revealing case for education hub research because it combines a dense concentration of globally visible universities with a strategic intermediary position between mainland China and the wider world (Cheng et al., 2011; Mok & Chan, 2020). Comparative research on higher education restructuring in East Asia shows that Hong Kong has long pursued internationalisation and excellence objectives while negotiating distinctive governance arrangements and public expectations about equity, autonomy, and public value (Mok & Chan, 2020). At the same time, global city scholarship emphasises that urban competitiveness increasingly rests on the capacity to attract and retain highly skilled people and to sustain dense knowledge networks in which universities serve as core institutions (Florida, 2005; Sassen, 2001). This framing aligns with discussions of competitive talent regimes

in global cities, where governments use a mix of regulatory and developmental tools to attract, select, and retain human capital (Mok & Chan, 2020; Shachar, 2006).

The present call responds to a practical and scholarly problem: Hong Kong policy discourse increasingly describes the city as an international education hub and a site for future talent cultivation, yet the concept of world leading hub status remains under specified in theory and contested in practice (Mok & Chan, 2020; Marginson, 2016). In the international literature, hub projects often face tensions between market logics and public missions, between global competitiveness and local legitimacy, and between short term recruitment gains and long term institutional sustainability (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Harvey & Green, 1993; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). These tensions can become particularly visible when hub strategies intersect with migration and citizenship regimes, because access to subsidised education and work rights can generate distributive and procedural justice disputes (Castles et al., 2014; Colquitt, 2001). They also surface in academic labour markets, where excellence and internationalisation policies can intensify performance pressures and reshape professional cultures, with implications for recruitment, retention, and academic freedom (Musselin, 2004; Shin & Kehm, 2013).

Building on these debates, this special issue aims to create a focused forum for rigorous scholarship on Hong Kong's education hub ambitions that moves beyond surface indicators such as rankings or enrolment counts. The issue is motivated by the view that hub building is a long term governance project in which policy design, stakeholder legitimacy, institutional capacity, and human resource foundations co evolve (Piereson, 1993; Wu et al., 2015). We therefore invite contributions that address not only what Hong Kong has done to expand international education activity, but also how and why specific policy instruments and governance arrangements generate intended and unintended consequences across students, families, institutions, and the wider city (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Mettler & Soss, 2004). In doing so, the special issue also seeks to contribute to comparative theorising about education hubs in Asia, the Gulf, Europe, and other regions by clarifying concepts, mechanisms, and evaluative criteria that are portable across contexts (Knight, 2011; Mok & Chan, 2020).

2. Study aims and conceptual scope

The special issue aims to advance scholarship and inform policy debate in three interconnected domains. First, it seeks to refine conceptualisations of international education hubs by integrating higher education internationalisation research with global city theory, migration and mobility studies, and policy design scholarship (Altbach, 2004; Knight, 2011; Sassen, 2001; Howlett, 2011). Second, it aims to generate empirically grounded analyses of Hong Kong's hub related policies and practices across higher education, post secondary pathways, and talent governance, with attention to both system level design and institutional implementation (Mok & Chan, 2020; Cheng et al., 2011). Third, it intends to offer forward looking, evidence informed reflections on how Hong Kong might pursue hub ambitions in ways that are globally

credible, socially legitimate, and institutionally sustainable (Mok & Chan, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

The scope of the special issue is intentionally multi scalar, because education hubs operate simultaneously as nodes in global mobility networks, as instruments of state and regional development strategy, and as lived urban and campus environments (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Knight, 2011). We welcome studies that focus on Hong Kong as a case in its own right, as well as comparative work that uses Hong Kong to illuminate broader patterns across hubs such as Singapore, Malaysia, Dubai, Doha, London, Boston, or major Chinese mainland cities (Knight, 2011; Knight, 2013). We also welcome research that treats Hong Kong not only as a destination for international students but as a complex ecosystem in which local students, migrant families, academic staff, administrators, and external partners negotiate opportunity, belonging, and professional identity (Castles et al., 2014; Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018). Contributions may address higher education and research policy, international student recruitment and support, cross border quality assurance, transnational education provision, talent admission and retention pathways, and teacher and academic workforce strategies. We encourage submissions that explicitly connect descriptive analysis to theoretical contribution by identifying mechanisms, boundary conditions, and evaluative implications, rather than treating hub building as a purely technical policy challenge (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Marginson, 2016). While the special issue foregrounds Hong Kong, it is designed to speak to an international readership concerned with the governance of higher education and mobility under changing geopolitical, economic, and technological conditions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Castles et al., 2014).

Complementing this curated structure is a deliberate editorial commitment to platform emerging scholarly voices. This special issue features contributions primarily from doctoral researchers at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. This choice reflects a conviction that the next generation of scholars—who are not merely observers but active participants and future stewards of the higher education ecosystem—offer indispensable insights. As individuals navigating the very system under examination, these authors provide grounded, firsthand perspectives on the realities of hub building, from the pressures of academic labour markets to the lived experience of institutional internationalisation. While their analytical frameworks may reflect the evolving maturity of early-stage research, their immediate, situated knowledge constitutes a vital layer of understanding. We present this collection not as a definitive account, but as an engaged dialogue with the future shapers of Hong Kong's academic landscape, whose voices are crucial for a holistic and forward-looking assessment of its hub ambitions.

3. Theoretical framework and analytical lens

This special issue adopts a working definition of an international education hub as a city or jurisdiction that pursues a deliberate strategy to concentrate and connect education, training, and research functions in order to attract mobile students, academics, and institutions, while generating wider economic, social, and symbolic benefits (Knight, 2011; Knight, 2013).

This definition emphasises intentionality, spatial concentration, and cross sector coordination, which distinguish hub strategies from generic internationalisation activities that may be fragmented or institutionally isolated (Knight, 2011). It also the evaluative question of what counts as success, because hub projects can be assessed not only by volume indicators but also by quality, equity, sustainability, and legitimacy outcomes (Harvey & Green, 1993; UNESCO, 2021).

To analyse hub building, we encourage contributors to engage with three complementary literatures. The first is the internationalisation and global higher education literature, which documents how universities and systems navigate cross border mobility, rankings, transnational education, and the changing political economy of knowledge (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The second is global city and talent regime scholarship, which highlights how cities compete through human capital strategies, institutional density, and symbolic power, and how these strategies are shaped by governance capacity and historical path dependence (Florida, 2005; Sassen, 2001; Mok & Chan, 2020). The third is policy design and instrument research, which provides tools for specifying how informational, authority, fiscal, and organisational instruments are combined into policy mixes, and how implementation depends on policy capacity and coordination (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2009; Wu et al., 2015).

Across these literatures, two analytic commitments are particularly important for the Hong Kong case. First, a glonacal approach encourages attention to the interactions among global, national, and local levels, and to the ways institutions and actors exercise agency within these overlapping spaces (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Second, a legitimacy oriented approach highlights that hub strategies are politically and socially contested, especially when they redistribute public resources or reshape opportunity structures, and therefore require careful attention to fairness perceptions, stakeholder expectations, and trust (Colquitt, 2001; Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 2006).

4. Anchor studies: Structuring the special issue

A distinctive feature of this special issue is that it is anchored in four substantial manuscripts that together provide complementary vantage points on Hong Kong's education hub project. These manuscripts are not presented as templates to be replicated, but as analytic anchors that help specify key mechanisms and research agendas for the wider call, including fairness disputes in education linked migration, the design and coherence of international student policy instruments, the evolution of policy discourse and multi actor governance scripts, and the labour foundations of hub sustainability in a period of institutional transformation (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Colquitt, 2001; Knight, 2011; Musselin, 2004). Together, they highlight why a world leading hub must be analysed as a socio political project that operates through policy mixes and public legitimacy, rather than as a narrow recruitment platform (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Suchman, 1995). These manuscripts include Lu et al. (2025) and three companion

manuscripts currently in preparation or under review ("Hong Kong's International Student Policy," 2025; "Hong Kong's International Higher Education Hub Ambitions," 2025; "Research on Talent Mobility," 2025).

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

Reforming Exam Mobility: Stakeholder Preferences and the Problem of Perceived Fairness in Hong Kong's Inclusive Temporary Immigrant Education Policy examines a governance dilemma in a highly competitive education system: the emergence of exam oriented mobility strategies in which families relocate or reconfigure residence arrangements in order to access locally subsidised examinations and publicly funded university places (Lu et al., 2025; Castles et al., 2014). The manuscript situates this phenomenon within a broader pattern in which education opportunity becomes a driver of family migration and a politically salient element of skilled immigration strategies (Castles et al., 2014; Hawthorne, 2010). Empirically, the study focuses on a policy adjustment that introduces a two year residence requirement for certain dependent children to qualify for local student status in subsidised higher education admissions, and it interprets this adjustment as an attempt to recalibrate inclusion and equity objectives while maintaining the city's hub narrative (Lu et al., 2025; Mok & Chan, 2020). Methodologically, it combines policy and media text analysis with semi structured interviews, and it uses a stakeholder mapping strategy based on a power, legitimacy, and urgency framework to specify which actors are able to push concerns onto the policy agenda and shape the framing of solutions (Lu et al., 2025; Mitchell et al., 1997; Suchman, 1995). The core theoretical contribution lies in integrating organisational justice scholarship on distributive and procedural fairness with policy feedback and agenda setting theories to model how institutional incentives, public narratives, and legitimacy judgments interact over time (Colquitt, 2001; Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Pierson, 1993). In doing so, the manuscript reframes education hub governance as a contest over normative boundaries: who counts as an eligible beneficiary of public goods, which rules are perceived as transparent and auditable, and how communication strategies can reduce mistrust while preserving the moral credibility of inclusion commitments (Tyler, 2006; Mettler & Soss, 2004). For the special issue, this manuscript anchors a research agenda on legitimacy and social contract politics in hub building, inviting comparative studies of high stakes assessment linked mobility, analyses of fairness narratives in scholarship and housing allocation, and evaluations of how instrument calibration can reduce unintended strategic behaviour without producing exclusionary over correction (Campbell, 1979; Castles et al., 2014).

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

Hong Kong's International Student Policy (1997 to Present): Changing Logic, Institutional Characteristics and Development Trend from the Perspective of Policy Tools provides a system level account of how Hong Kong has governed international student recruitment, support, and post study transitions since the handover period through evolving combinations of informational, authority, fiscal, and organisational instruments (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2009). The manuscript is motivated by the observation that policy debates often focus on single instruments, such as admission caps, scholarships, or post graduation visas, even though real world outcomes depend on how instruments interact across the full student lifecycle from attraction and admission to employment and longer term settlement (Capano & Howlett, 2020). Using qualitative content analysis of publicly available policy documents and scholarly literature, the study develops a four layer framework linking instrument choice, policy mix coherence, policy capacity, and a sector specific quality paradigm, thereby providing a structured way to diagnose where tensions arise and why similar instruments can have different effects across jurisdictions (Wu et al., 2015; Harvey & Green, 1993). The manuscript identifies a shift from early caution and scale control toward selective expansion intended to strengthen global competitiveness, and then toward an explicit balancing project among expansion, quality enhancement, and talent retention, a triad that features prominently in contemporary hub strategies worldwide (Knight, 2011). It also highlights three institutional characteristics with broader theoretical relevance. First, it argues that rapid expansion can outpace quality governance when assurance systems emphasise documentary compliance rather than student learning, experience, and value added transformation, echoing critiques of audit cultures in higher education (Harvey & Green, 1993; Power, 1997). Second, it conceptualises the system as an admission, employment, and settlement chain in which information, capability, and institutional frictions reduce conversion of recruitment into retained talent, which resonates with research on international students as potential migrants and on policy gaps between immigration and labour markets (Hawthorne, 2010). Third, it foregrounds a cross border interoperability dilemma, especially salient in regional integration contexts, where divergent quality criteria and recognition mechanisms increase transaction costs for institutions and students (Knight, 2011). For this special issue, the manuscript anchors instrument focused and governance capacity research that can be extended through comparative analysis of policy mixes in hubs, as well as through empirical work that links policy design to student outcomes, labour market integration, and institutional strategy (Knight, 2011; Wu et al., 2015).

4.3 Academic talent mobility in the building of an international education hub: A case study of faculty retention and attrition during institutional transformation in a Hong Kong university

Academic Talent Mobility in the Building of an International Education Hub: A Case Study of Faculty Retention and Attrition during Institutional Transformation in a Hong Kong University shifts the analytic lens from student recruitment and macro policy to the academic labour foundations of hub viability, arguing that a world leading education hub depends on the ability to attract, support, and retain high quality faculty under conditions of organisational change (Musselin, 2004; Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018). The manuscript examines faculty mobility within a Hong Kong university undertaking a dual transformation, namely a shift toward a research oriented liberal arts model and an intensified emphasis on interdisciplinary curriculum innovation, which together reshape workload, evaluation criteria, and perceptions of professional identity (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Using qualitative interviews with twenty four incoming and outgoing faculty members, the study applies push pull migration theory to specify how perceived opportunities and constraints operate at multiple levels, including administrative support, resource allocation, collaboration possibilities, compensation norms, and campus culture (Bauder, 2015). The findings highlight that weak administrative support and perceived inequity in compensation can operate as strong push factors during reform periods, particularly when combined with intensified teaching and research demands and ambiguous evaluation rules, a pattern consistent with organisational justice and workplace climate research (Adams, 1965; Colquitt, 2001; Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018). At the same time, the study identifies pull factors such as research infrastructure, interdisciplinary collaboration, and supportive professional cultures that shape retention decisions beyond salary, echoing comparative evidence that career development and relational resources are decisive for academic satisfaction and mobility (Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018; Shin & Kehm, 2013). A particularly important insight is a threshold effect of fairness: compensation below a perceived just level drives exit, while beyond that threshold additional pay becomes a necessary entry condition rather than a sustained motivator, placing analytic emphasis on the broader work ecosystem (Adams, 1965; Tyler, 2006). The manuscript also documents disciplinary differences in how reform is experienced, with humanities faculty concerned about metric driven marginalisation of interpretive traditions and STEM faculty emphasising infrastructure competitiveness and agile institutional support, a pattern that aligns with scholarship on disciplinary cultures and differentiated academic work (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Musselin, 2004). For this special issue, the manuscript anchors contributions that link hub strategies to academic labour markets and institutional reform, including studies of talent policy design across ranks and disciplines, analyses of excellence initiatives and performance funding, and comparative work on academic mobility between Hong

Table 1. Conceptual map for analysing Hong Kong as an international education hub.

Dimension	Core questions	Theoretical anchors	Indicative data and methods
Global and regional positioning	How is Hong Kong positioned in student and talent flows and in relations with other hubs	Education hub theory and global higher education political economy (Knight, 2011; Marginson, 2010)	Mobility statistics, partnership networks, bibliometrics, comparative case studies (Altbach, 2004; Knight, 2011)
Policy instruments and capacity	Which tools are used and how coherent are the mixes across agencies and time	Policy instruments, policy mixes, policy capacity (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Wu et al., 2015)	Policy text coding, process tracing, implementation analysis, interviews (Howlett, 2011; Wu et al., 2015)
Social legitimacy and equity	How do policies shape fairness perceptions, inclusion, and social contract narratives	Organisational justice, legitimacy, policy feedback (Colquitt, 2001; Suchman, 1995; Pierson, 1993)	Media framing analysis, surveys, stakeholder mapping, qualitative interviews (Entman, 1993; Mitchell et al., 1997)
Human resources and academic work	How are academic staff and teachers recruited, supported, and retained under reform	Academic labour markets and professions (Musselin, 2004; Shin & Kehm, 2013)	Workforce data, career tracking, institutional case studies, ethnography (Mami-seishvili & Lee, 2018; Yin, 2018)

Kong China, mainland China, and other regions (Altbach et al., 2009; Teichler, 2004).

4.4 Hong Kong's international higher education hub ambitions: Policy address evolution (2000 to 2025) and multi actor governance synergy

Hong Kong's International Higher Education Hub Ambitions: Policy Address Evolution (2000 to 2025) and Multi Actor Governance Synergy treats official policy addresses and associated institutional documents as evolving governance scripts that narrate what the hub is, why it matters, and how it should be built over time (Entman, 1993; Schmidt, 2008). Rather than reading speeches as symbolic statements detached from implementation, the manuscript uses a longitudinal policy text approach that traces shifts in key terms, targets, and instrument references across the period from 2000 to 2025, thereby revealing how the hub ambition has been articulated, reframed, and institutionalised in response to changing domestic priorities and global conditions (Mok & Chan, 2020; Jung et al., 2021). The analysis proposes a phased trajectory, beginning with a period of local capacity expansion and early internationalisation signals, followed by explicit naming of the hub concept and institution building, then by stronger emphasis on research driven development and regional collaboration, and finally by a phase of accelerated infrastructure and institutional landing in which higher education is positioned alongside innovation policy, talent strategy, and urban development planning (Sassen, 2001; Florida, 2005). A central contribution is the specification of multi actor governance dynamics. The manuscript foregrounds the roles of bodies such as the University Grants Committee, the Education Bureau, and the Legislative Council, and it analyses how their mandates and instruments can produce both synergy and tension when hub ambitions require alignment across funding, regulation, quality assurance, student admissions, and immigration policy (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Wu et al., 2015). This governance focus aligns with comparative work that emphasises coordination and policy capacity as critical differentiators among hub strategies, including cases where cross department integration supports coherent imple-

mentation and cases where fragmentation produces policy drift (Painter & Pierre, 2005; Wu et al., 2015). For the special issue, this manuscript anchors contributions that connect discourse, agenda setting, and institutional change, including studies that examine how policy narratives shape university strategy, how symbolic commitments translate into resource allocations, and how political and legal contexts influence credibility signals that matter for international partnerships and academic work (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Shin & Kehm, 2013).

5. Thematic priorities and guiding questions for submission

Submissions to the special issue should engage substantively with the theme of building Hong Kong as a future world leading international education hub and should make a clear contribution to international scholarship. We invite papers that extend one or more of the analytic dimensions identified in Table 1, and we encourage authors to link empirical analysis to conceptual clarification by specifying mechanisms, trade offs, and evaluative criteria (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Knight, 2011). Because hub building is a complex governance project, contributors are encouraged to attend to interactions among policies, institutions, and actors, rather than assuming that single interventions operate in isolation (Capano & Howlett, 2020; Wu et al., 2015).

The themes below are intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, and authors may propose additional topics that fit the special issue focus. We particularly welcome manuscripts that connect Hong Kong to comparative cases or to wider theoretical debates on internationalisation, talent regimes, public value, and institutional change (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Mok & Chan, 2020). To support prospective authors, Table 2 provides a set of suggested topics and methods that illustrate the kinds of questions the special issue aims to advance (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Plano, 2018).

5.1 Defining and evaluating world leading hub status

A first set of contributions may address the definitional and evaluative problem embedded in the phrase world leading

Table 2. Suggested topics and methods for submissions.

Theme	Illustrative research questions	Possible methods and data	Selected literature
Hub models and comparison	What hub models exist and what differentiates Hong Kong from other hubs	Comparative case studies, policy comparison, partnership mapping, network analysis	Knight, 2011; Mok & Chan, 2020; Knight, 2013
Policy instruments and mixes	Which instruments shape recruitment, support, work rights, and retention and how do they interact	Policy text coding, process tracing, administrative data analysis, implementation interviews	Hood & Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2011; Capano & Howlett, 2020
Fairness and legitimacy	How are eligibility rules and resource allocations perceived and contested by stakeholders	Media framing analysis, surveys, experiments, qualitative interviews	Colquitt, 2001; Entman, 1993; Suchman, 1995; Tyler, 2006
Academic labour and talent governance	How do reform pressures shape faculty recruitment, retention, and professional culture	Workforce analytics, interviews, ethnography, career tracking	Musselin, 2004; Shin & Kehm, 2013; Bauder, 2015

international education hub. In international higher education debates, world leading status is often proxied through rankings, research output, and international student shares, yet these indicators are contested for their methodological limits and for their tendency to privilege particular institutional forms (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2016). We therefore encourage manuscripts that propose richer evaluative frameworks that incorporate quality, equity, sustainability, and civic contribution alongside reputation, and that clarify the normative assumptions embedded in different evaluative choices (Harvey & Green, 1993; UNESCO, 2021). Such work can draw on public value theory, sociology of evaluation, or critical policy analysis to specify what kind of hub Hong Kong can and should become, and how such a hub might align with both global credibility and local social contracts (Moore, 1995; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

5.2 Policy design, instruments, and multi actor governance

A second cluster of papers may focus on the policy design architecture of hub building, with attention to instrument choice, policy mixes, and coordination across actors. Instrument scholarship highlights that governments act through a repertoire of tools that shape behaviour through information, authority, finance, and organisation, and that the effectiveness of tools depends on complementarity and implementation capacity (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2011; Wu et al., 2015). In hub contexts, this perspective encourages analysis of how branding campaigns, scholarship schemes, quota settings, quality assurance mechanisms, and post study work pathways interact, and how misalignment can produce bottlenecks or legitimacy shocks (Capano & Howlett, 2020). We welcome work that maps multi actor governance arrangements in Hong Kong across bodies such as funding councils, education authorities, immigration agencies, and universities, and that examines coordination mechanisms, accountability structures, and policy capacity at different levels (Painter & Pierre, 2005; Mok & Chan, 2020).

5.3 Mobility, inclusion, and perceived fairness

A third theme concerns the intersection of hub strategies with migration, citizenship, and fairness politics. International student mobility increasingly operates within policy regimes that treat students as potential skilled migrants, which makes the boundary between education and immigration policy analytically and politically salient (Hawthorne, 2010). As a result, eligibility rules for subsidised education, financial aid, housing, and work rights become sites of contestation in which different groups advance competing claims about deservedness, contribution, and belonging (Castles et al., 2014; Suchman, 1995; Tian & Zhang, 2024). Organisational justice research provides tools to analyse how distributive and procedural fairness perceptions shape acceptance of policies, while policy feedback theory explains how programme design generates political responses and path dependent adjustments (Colquitt, 2001; Pierson, 1993; Mettler & Soss, 2004). We therefore invite papers that examine fairness dynamics in Hong Kong and in comparative settings, including research on exam mobility, admissions rules, scholarship distribution, residential arrangements, and public discourse, using methods such as media framing analysis, surveys, experiments, and interviews (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Campbell, 1979).

5.4 Academic labour, teacher policy, and talent retention

A fourth theme foregrounds the workforce foundations of education hubs, including academic staff in universities and teachers in schooling systems that shape long term talent formation. Research on academic professions shows that mobility decisions are structured by labour market opportunities, institutional governance, evaluation regimes, and disciplinary cultures, and that internationalisation policies can reshape these conditions in uneven ways (Musselin, 2004; Shin & Kehm, 2013; Becher & Trowler, 2001). At the same time, education systems face widespread teacher shortages and retention challenges, which means that hub ambitions must be linked to sustainable strategies for teacher development and allocation across levels of education (UNESCO, 2021; Ingersoll, 2001). We welcome contributions that connect hub

strategies to academic labour and teacher policy, including studies of recruitment and retention incentives, workload and wellbeing, performance based funding, career pathways, and cross border academic mobility between Hong Kong China, mainland China, and other regions (Bauder, 2015; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). Papers that draw lessons from long term policy experiences in teacher allocation and balanced development, and that translate these insights to the governance of human resources in hub contexts, are also encouraged (Ingersoll, 2001; Zhang et al., 2025).

6. Implications for theory, policy, and practice

6.1 Theoretical implications

The special issue is designed to contribute to theory in at least three ways. First, by placing Hong Kong at the centre of analysis, it invites refinement of education hub theory through a case that combines intense internationalisation with complex governance arrangements and regional integration dynamics, thereby testing how hub concepts travel across political and institutional contexts (Knight, 2011; Mok & Chan, 2020; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Second, by foregrounding policy instruments, fairness, and academic labour, it encourages more mechanism oriented accounts of hub building that specify how policy mixes generate behavioural incentives, legitimacy judgments, and workforce outcomes (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Colquitt, 2001; Musselin, 2004). Third, by foregrounding longer-term institutional sustainability and public legitimacy, it prompts reconsideration of hub models as enduring governance projects rather than short-term recruitment platforms.

Across these contributions, we expect papers to clarify and compare evaluative frameworks for what counts as success in hub building, including the trade offs among competitiveness, public value, equity, and sustainability (Moore, 1995; Harvey & Green, 1993; UNESCO, 2021). We also expect the issue to advance the study of policy capacity in higher education governance by specifying which capabilities matter for coherent hub implementation, such as cross agency coordination, data infrastructure, and the ability to manage legitimacy risks through transparent procedures (Wu et al., 2015; Painter & Pierre, 2005). Finally, the issue aims to stimulate comparative scholarship that recognises both convergence and diversity across hubs, moving beyond simple policy borrowing narratives by attending to institutional histories and political economies (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Pierson, 2004).

6.2 Policy implications

From a policy perspective, the special issue invites evidence informed reflection on how Hong Kong might pursue hub ambitions while maintaining social legitimacy and institutional quality. International experience suggests that successful hub strategies require more than expanded recruitment quotas, because the credibility of a hub depends on student experience, labour market integration, and the reliability of quality and recognition systems (Knight, 2011). Policy instrument research implies that coherence across information, authority, fiscal, and organisational tools is essential, and that governments should monitor unintended incentives such as strategic mobility or

superficial compliance responses (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Howlett, 2011). Fairness research further suggests that eligibility rules and allocation mechanisms should be designed for transparency and procedural justice, since perceived unfairness can erode support for internationalisation initiatives even when they generate economic benefits (Colquitt, 2001; Tyler, 2006).

We therefore anticipate that policy oriented papers in the issue will generate actionable insights on topics such as dynamic quota design linked to support capacity, scholarship strategies that balance attraction with equity, post study work and settlement pathways aligned with labour market needs, and cross border quality assurance frameworks that reduce transaction costs while safeguarding standards (Capano & Howlett, 2020). We also encourage contributions that assess policy narratives and communication strategies, because legitimacy depends not only on what governments do but on how they explain goals, trade offs, and safeguards to multiple audiences (Entman, 1993; Suchman, 1995). Where feasible, authors may propose policy evaluation designs and indicators that track outcomes over time, including retention, wellbeing, learning, and distributive effects, rather than relying solely on enrolment or ranking metrics (Harvey & Green, 1993; UNESCO, 2021).

6.3 Implications for institutional practice

For institutional leaders and practitioners, the special issue highlights that hub aspirations must be translated into everyday governance of teaching, student support, research collaboration, and academic work. Research on internationalisation emphasises that student experience and belonging are shaped by institutional cultures and support structures, including advising, housing, mental health services, language support, and opportunities for meaningful intercultural engagement (Leask, 2015). Academic labour scholarship indicates that the sustainability of excellence depends on fair workload allocation, transparent evaluation, supportive leadership, and discipline sensitive resource strategies, especially during periods of reform and organisational change (Musselin, 2004; Becher & Trowler, 2001). We therefore welcome practice oriented submissions that examine institutional strategies for integrating international students into learning communities, and building supportive academic work ecosystems that reduce unnecessary turnover (Mamiseishvili & Lee, 2018). We also expect the issue to encourage institutional experimentation in cross border collaboration that moves beyond recruitment toward joint knowledge production and reciprocal learning, consistent with calls to shift from transactional to transformative internationalisation (Leask, 2015; Altbach & Knight, 2007). For example, papers may examine joint programmes, co supervised research training, and collaborative online international learning models that connect Hong Kong to the region and the wider world while maintaining quality and student support (O'Dowd, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). In all cases, we encourage authors to articulate implications that are sensitive to institutional diversity and that avoid one size fits all prescriptions, reflecting the varied missions and constraints of different universities and post secondary providers (Marginson, 2016; Shin & Kehm, 2013).

7. Conclusion and call for contributions

The special issue is premised on the view that Hong Kong's aspiration to become a world leading international education hub is not only a question of scale but a question of governance quality. A hub strategy that is credible to international partners and legitimate to local stakeholders must coordinate multiple policy instruments, balance competitiveness with public value, and invest in the institutional and human foundations that make internationalisation sustainable (Knight, 2011; Moore, 1995; Wu et al., 2015). The anchor manuscripts outlined in Section 4 illustrate how apparently technical policy adjustments can generate complex feedback effects through fairness perceptions, organisational incentives, and public narratives, and how hub ambitions are shaped by the lived realities of universities and their academic workforces (Colquitt, 2001; Pierson, 1993; Musselin, 2004). We encourage prospective authors to treat these manuscripts as entry points for extending theory and evidence, whether by replicating designs in other settings, by challenging assumptions with new data, or by integrating additional perspectives such as urban planning, housing policy, language policy, or professional regulation (Sassen, 2001; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). We particularly welcome contributions that make Hong Kong legible within broader comparative debates on education hubs and global knowledge economies. Comparative analysis can be conducted through direct juxtaposition of cases, through conceptual comparison of policy mixes, or through theoretically informed within case analysis that identifies mechanisms with wider portability (Flyvbjerg, 2006; George & Bennett, 2005). For example, authors might compare how different hubs design post study work pathways, how they manage quality assurance and recognition across borders, or how they mitigate legitimacy risks when internationalisation intersects with scarce public goods such as subsidised university places, scholarships, and housing (Hood & Margetts, 2007; Harvey & Green, 1993). Similarly, comparative work on academic labour can examine how institutional reform, performance governance, and disciplinary cultures shape mobility decisions across jurisdictions, and how these dynamics feed back into research capacity and international partnership formation (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Teichler, 2004; Shin & Kehm, 2013). In evaluating submissions, the editorial team will prioritise manuscripts that demonstrate conceptual clarity, methodological rigour, and meaningful contribution to the special issue focus. Conceptual clarity requires explicit definition of key terms, careful positioning within the literature, and clear statements of what new understanding the paper provides beyond description (Knight, 2011; Marginson, 2016). Methodological rigour requires appropriate research design, transparent reporting, and alignment between claims and evidence, including balanced discussion of limitations and rival explanations (Shadish et al., 2002; Yin, 2018). Meaningful contribution may take different forms, including theoretical refinement, novel evidence about policy processes or outcomes, methodological innovation, or practice oriented insights grounded in credible data (Creswell & Plano, 2018; Bowen, 2009). Because hub governance is a politically sensitive domain, we also value ethical reflexivity and careful

attention to how research can be communicated responsibly to diverse audiences (England, 1994; Tyler, 2006).

This special issue represents a conscious scholarly intervention in two respects. Thematically, it seeks to advance a nuanced, governance-centered understanding of international education hub development. Methodologically and socially, it demonstrates the value of intentionally platforming the voices of emerging scholars—particularly doctoral researchers who are embedded within the system they study. Their contributions, grounded in lived experience and early-career analytical rigor, offer a vital complement to established scholarship. They remind us that the future of Hong Kong as an education hub is not only shaped by policy blueprints but also by the daily experiences, critical reflections, and professional aspirations of those who learn and work within its institutions.

Building on this commitment to diverse and grounded perspectives, we extend a strong invitation to both established and early-career scholars to contribute to this collective agenda. Hong Kong's education hub project is unfolding within a changing global context shaped by shifting geopolitics, intensified competition for talent, and evolving expectations about the public value of higher education (Altbach, 2004). These conditions heighten the importance of scholarship that is theoretically grounded yet attentive to local histories, institutional constraints, and stakeholder experiences (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Suchman, 1995). We encourage submissions that engage seriously with questions of fairness, legitimacy, and sustainability, and that propose clear implications for policy and practice. Through this special issue, we aim to advance international understanding of what it means to build an education hub that is not only globally connected but also socially legitimate and institutionally resilient (Mok & Chan, 2020; Knight, 2013). Prospective authors should highlight the Hong Kong case while engaging in dialogue with international theory, evidence, and practice.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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