

## Original article

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

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### Abstract:

This study examines the policy evolution and governance dynamics underpinning China's Hong Kong's development into an International Education Hub from 2000 to 2025. Drawing on a longitudinal qualitative analysis of 25 years of official policy documents, the study identifies four distinct developmental phases: local supply expansion, hub institutionalisation, research-driven integration, and infrastructural consolidation. The findings reveal a pattern of incremental policy layering in which successive governance actors built upon. The Education Bureau, the University Grants Committee, and the Legislative Council assumed differentiated yet interdependent roles, generating a hybrid governance configuration marked by both policy synergy and institutional tension. Theoretically, the study extends Knight's education hub typology by foregrounding governance over functional categorisation, showing that hub development is shaped by multi-actor coordination, path dependency, and competing policy logics. Empirically, the study offers a granular policy genealogy of China's Hong Kong's education hub trajectory, demonstrating how a non-Western regional economy has navigated the tensions between global education hub ambitions and local institutional constraints over a quarter century.

## 1. Introduction

With the advancement of internationalisation in higher education, multiple countries and regions have incorporated educational policies into competitive strategies to attract international students, talent, and investment (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight & Morshidi, 2011). Education hubs are typically conceived as planned concentrations of domestic and foreign stakeholders who collectively advance cross-boundary learning, human capital development, knowledge creation, and innovation (Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Knight, 2024). In East Asia, such strategies are evident in Singapore and Malaysia, where they have played a significant role in advancing national branding, regional economic transformation, and technological capacity (Olds, 2007). At the policy level, education hubs—as instruments of soft power governance—have evolved from discrete educational projects into more structural, country- and

city-level governance arrangements (Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Lo & Li, 2023). Within global higher education governance, the education hub model has emerged as a critical mechanism through which nations advance educational globalisation via multi-stakeholder coordination (Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Chou et al., 2017). Different actors assume functions such as governance, oversight, resource coordination, and cross-border collaboration, forming a governance network primarily directed by policy with supplementary multilateral cooperation (Knight, 2024; Fumasoli & Shen, 2025).

Hong Kong has long possessed the foundational conditions for developing into an international higher education hub. Its academic environment, shaped by both Chinese and Western intellectual traditions, provides institutional advantages for the internationalisation of higher education (Mok & Yu, 2011). Universities in Hong Kong generally adopt international evaluation standards, curriculum designs, and bilingual teaching

models, significantly enhancing their appeal to international academic talent (Postiglione, 2011). The Greater Bay Area (GBA) initiative, as a national strategic policy, further strengthens Hong Kong's role in regional educational collaboration (Lo et al., 2022). Under policies promoting multi-stakeholder coordination, Hong Kong exhibits both institutional openness and regional embeddedness, enabling it to connect with global higher education networks while participating in the governance of higher education on the Mainland (Fumasoli & Shen, 2025). At the institutional level, cross-boundary cooperation arrangements, such as Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools, demonstrate how Hong Kong-linked universities navigate the tension between institutional autonomy and compliance with Mainland regulatory requirements through loose coupling mechanisms (Zhang et al., 2024). This dual identity positions Hong Kong as a revealing case study for understanding the intersection of educational globalisation and regional cooperation mechanisms.

Existing academic work on Hong Kong's higher education internationalisation has concentrated predominantly on questions of policy effectiveness and institutional performance (Mok & Neubauer, 2016). Despite repeated emphasis on the "education hub" strategy across multiple policy addresses, there is a notable absence of diachronic analysis examining how policy content has evolved over time. Policy addresses, as authoritative textual records of governmental intent, have not been fully exploited as research materials for tracing adjustments in educational strategy and shifts in phased objectives. Furthermore, Hong Kong's education governance involves multiple institutions: the Education Bureau (EDB) leads policy formulation, the University Grants Committee (UGC) controls resource allocation, while the Legislative Council (LegCo) plays roles in oversight and the protection of institutional autonomy (Lo, 2018). No comprehensive analytical framework currently exists within the literature for examining these actors' coordinated roles under the concept of an education hub (Tang et al., 2025; Zhang & He, 2022).

This paper addresses these gaps by systematically analysing policy documents from 2000 to 2025 through an integrated multi-actor governance framework. Specifically, it aims to: (1) trace the policy objectives, semantic transitions, and evolution of implementation mechanisms of Hong Kong's Education Hub strategy; and (2) identify the interaction patterns and collaborative logic among the EDB, UGC, and LegCo. In doing so, this study extends the application of existing theoretical frameworks and addresses the insufficient attention to policy sequencing in international higher education research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The conceptual foundation and global experience of education hubs

The concept of an "Education Hub" was systematically articulated by Knight & Morshidi (2011), referring to a country or region's strategic use of policies and institutional mechanisms to aggregate international education, training, and research resources in service of national development

and internationalisation goals. Three functional types subsequently emerged based on differing motivations: the Student Hub, the Talent Hub, and the Knowledge or Innovation Hub (Knight, 2014). Knight (2024) further elaborated that education hubs serve multiple functions driven by policy imperatives, the knowledge economy, and innovation imperatives, whether oriented toward student recruitment, talent attraction, or knowledge production. As a significant policy instrument within the global knowledge economy, the education hub concept has been adopted by multiple countries seeking to enhance national competitiveness and international standing (Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Ibnouf et al., 2014). Cities and regions have become important sites of higher education innovation, recognised as strategic nodes within global education networks (Douglass, 2016). Altbach & Knight (2007) similarly observe that globalisation has shifted education policymaking away from exclusively national actors toward more decentralised, city- and region-led initiatives.

Singapore represents one of the earliest practical examples of the education hub strategy. Through its "World-Class University" initiative, the government attracted overseas institutions, promoted twinning programmes, and facilitated local research commercialisation (Sidhu et al., 2011). According to Olds (2007), the core of Singapore's model lies in the balance between government direction, market participation, and regulatory optimisation. Malaysia, under its Vision 2020 plan, aimed to become the "Education Hub of Southeast Asia," with its EduCity project exemplifying the integration of regional collaboration and multilateral governance (Morshidi, 2010). Among English-speaking nations, Australia developed a commercially oriented model primarily focused on higher education exports (Marginson, 2006; Beghin & Park, 2022), while the United Kingdom strengthened university cooperation networks in the Global South through knowledge diplomacy approaches (Hwami & Shakuliyeva, 2026). Focusing specifically on Singapore, Weng (2025) offers an updated account of how government direction and institutional strategies jointly sustain its global education hub ambitions, highlighting that coherent policy alignment between state agencies and universities remains central to hub competitiveness.

Since the early 2000s, Hong Kong has pursued a regional education hub strategy grounded in the economic potential of international higher education. This direction underpinned the government's decision to expand access for non-local students (Tung, 2004) and to designate education as an emerging economic pillar (Tsang, 2009). A key mechanism was the steady enlargement of non-local enrolment quotas: the UGC progressively relaxed admission ceilings (Universities Grants Committee, 2004) and later raised the cap for non-local undergraduates in publicly funded programmes from 10% to 20% (Universities Grants Committee, 2010). The growing attractiveness of Hong Kong as a postgraduate destination for mainland Chinese students reflects a convergence of institutional, policy, and socio-cultural factors—including academic reputation, geographic proximity, and the strategic positioning of Hong Kong within the intra-Asian higher education landscape (Tian & Zhang, 2024). Reflecting its historical role as China's primary interface with the global economy, Hong

Kong's hub strategy has been framed as a means of reinforcing its global-city position within an increasingly competitive regional landscape (Lui, 2014). This trajectory resonates with Zhang & Chen (2025) conceptualisation of hub-building as a multi-scalar governance project that requires coherent policy mixes, sustained legitimacy, and robust academic labour foundations, a framing that speaks directly to the institutional coordination challenges examined in the present study.

## 2.2 Multi-actor governance and policy synergy

Multi-actor governance provides a conceptual framework for analysing how diverse stakeholders jointly shape policy processes through negotiation, interdependence, and shared responsibility (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 2003). In higher education, governance systems inherently involve multiple actors—including universities, ministries, funding councils, and professional bodies—whose interactions determine regulatory arrangements and resource allocation (Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Pierre & Peters, 2000). Because education hubs span internationalisation, quality assurance, student mobility, and market development, no single institution can independently manage these tasks, making coordinated multi-actor participation essential (Knight & Morshidi, 2011; Chou et al., 2017). Within this paradigm, policy synergy represents the mechanism through which coherence among policy goals, institutional alignment, and information flows is produced (Howlett & Rayner, 2007; Peters, 2015). Synergy is achieved through formal instruments such as inter-agency committees, performance-based funding, and statutory advisory bodies, as well as through informal networks facilitating communication and trust-building (Trein et al., 2019). In higher education, these mechanisms are reflected in funding agreements, quality assurance frameworks, and consultative governance structures (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Dill & Beerkens, 2010).

Hong Kong's higher education system exhibits a hybrid governance model that balances institutional autonomy with state steering. The EDB provides overall policy direction, while the UGC oversees resource allocation and quality assurance as an intermediary body between government and institutions (Cheng et al., 2011; Mok & Neubauer, 2016). Public universities enjoy substantial academic autonomy yet remain embedded in an accountability regime linking funding to performance measures (Lo, 2018; Mok & Neubauer, 2016). Interactions among the LegCo, UGC, and universities generate a multi-layered governance structure characterised by negotiation, consultation, and semi-autonomous oversight (Lo, 2018; Cheng et al., 2011). Although existing scholarship has addressed autonomy, accountability, and regulatory change in Hong Kong's higher education system (Lo, 2010; Mok, 2005), fewer studies have examined how multiple actors coordinate in implementing internationalisation and education hub policies. This gap highlights the need for a framework linking education hub logics with multi-actor governance and policy synergy to illuminate the dynamic interplay between policy discourse, institutional structures, and governance practice.

Based on this review, the paper addresses two core research questions:

RQ1: What are the principal policy shifts and functional transformations of Hong Kong's International Education Hub strategy from 2000 to 2025?

RQ2: How does multi-actor governance generate policy synergy in support of the Hong Kong education hub?

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative document analysis approach, focusing on official policy texts related to Hong Kong's international education hub strategy. Document analysis is a well-established method in policy research for capturing discursive shifts, institutional priorities, and inter-organisational relationships over time (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003).

The corpus consists of policy documents issued between 2000 and 2025 by the principal governance actors in Hong Kong's higher education system: (1) the Chief Executive's Policy Addresses (2000–2025), which articulate the annual strategic direction of the HKSAR government; (2) reports and submissions from the University Grants Committee (UGC); (3) Legislative Council (LegCo) records relating to higher education funding, governance, and internationalisation; and (4) documents from the Education Bureau (EDB), including policy frameworks, white papers, and operational guidelines. All documents were retrieved directly from official websites and archival portals, ensuring authenticity and traceability.

The analysis follows a three-step interpretive approach. First, temporal sequencing: a policy time-series analysis was conducted to trace the chronological evolution of the education hub strategy, identifying phases of initiation, consolidation, and adjustment (Howlett & Cashore, 2014). Second, thematic coding: a deductive-inductive coding framework was applied to identify recurring policy concepts, institutional roles, and governance discourses across documents (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), with key themes coded using NVivo software to enhance consistency and transparency. Third, multi-actor governance mapping: drawing on the multi-actor governance framework (Rhodes, 1997; Chou et al., 2017), the study examined institutional relationships among the EDB, UGC, LegCo, and universities, focusing on how these actors contributed to policy synergy or fragmentation. This methodological combination enables the study to capture both longitudinal policy shifts and institutional interdependencies, providing a nuanced account of the governance dynamics underpinning Hong Kong's education internationalisation strategy.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 The evolution of Hong Kong's policy address on international higher education hub

Addressing RQ1, the analysis identifies four distinct phases: (I) local supply expansion and nascent internationalisation (2000–2006); (II) introduction and institutionalisation of the hub concept (2007–2012); (III) research-driven development and national integration (2013–2021); and (IV) infrastructural consolidation and global branding (2022–2025). Each phase is characterised by identifiable shifts in policy

discourse, including changes to non-local student quotas, research funding structures, and spatial planning for the Northern Metropolis. Table 1 presents a textual analysis of Policy Addresses delivered by HKSAR Chief Executives from 2000 to 2025.

Since the beginning of this century, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has aimed to address the local economic transformation through higher education, with the goal of expanding internal supply. After a decade of meticulous planning and continuous advancement, by 2010 higher education had evolved into a clearly positioned, well-supported “advantageous industry” formally integrated into Hong Kong’s economic strategy. From 2000 to 2004, the HKSAR government used education as a pillar for competitiveness, implementing the “3-3-4” academic system, sub-degree qualifications, and professional diplomas to align with international standards. Although the term “education hub” was not explicitly coined during this period, its early form was already discernible. Between 2005 and 2006, participation rates surged rapidly, and the “3-3-4” system was firmly established; the concept of “education export” was introduced for the first time to attract overseas students and talent, marking the institutionalization of education internationalization. The 2007 Policy Address explicitly proposed the concept of an “education hub” for the first time, expanding international schools and increasing quotas for non-local students, thereby deeply integrating higher education with population and talent strategies. From 2008 to 2010, the development of the River Delta region and the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Innovation Circle were incorporated into higher education and research plans, with the notion of an “education industry” being introduced. Education was designated as one of the six key industries, further solidifying its positioning within institutional frameworks.

Since 2010, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has aimed to promote the universalization of education while enhancing the quality and international influence of higher education through strengthening research capabilities. From 2010 to 2012, a self-financed higher education fund was established to expand degree offerings, achieving a 65% enrollment rate in post-secondary education with institutional guarantees. Between 2013 and 2016, there was a clear shift towards research, marked by substantial investments in large-scale research funds; Hong Kong universities became part of the national research system, aligning with the “Belt and Road” initiative and the Greater Bay Area. From 2017 to 2019, continuous increases in research funding facilitated the establishment of the Hong Kong-Shenzhen Innovation and Technology Park; research grants were linked to knowledge transfer, R&D investment was tied to GDP, and the educational hub function was upgraded to a core platform for research and industry. In 2020-2021, the “Distinguished Scholars in Innovation and Technology Program” was launched, creating the InnoHK platform to attract global research institutions, fully integrating university research into the “14th Five-Year Plan” and Greater Bay Area strategies, with large-scale land supply for research infrastructure. Starting from 2022, the implementation of the “Industry-Academia-Research 1+ Plan” (with 10 billion in funding) promoted the commercialization of

research results; for the first time, cultural and artistic talents were incorporated into the educational hub, forming a dual-track development of technology and humanities.

In recent years, the quality of education provided by Hong Kong’s universities has gained international recognition. In 2023, five universities in Hong Kong ranked among the top 100 in the “2023 World University Rankings.” The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government officially proposed the development of an “International Higher Education Hub” in 2023; initiated the “Northern Metropolis University Education City”; established the positioning of the University of Science and Technology; and extended the admission of top talents to 184 prestigious institutions. In 2024, there was further emphasis on advancing the construction of the International Higher Education Hub. The “Study in Hong Kong” brand was officially launched, and the “Post-secondary Colleges Ordinance” was revised to ensure quality assurance. The Northern Metropolis Education City expanded to 80 hectares. The third InnoHK platform was launched. A HKD 10 billion innovation and technology guiding fund was established, marking the entry of the education hub into a phase of legalization, institutionalization, and comprehensive infrastructure development.

Taken together, these four phases reveal a pattern of incremental policy layering (Howlett & Cashore, 2014) in which each governance generation built upon, rather than displaced, its predecessor. The progression is significant not merely in quantitative terms—expanding enrolment quotas, rising research expenditure, or accumulating land reserves—but in qualitative terms: a gradual reorientation of policy purpose from domestic capacity-building toward a dual-track logic of international competitiveness and national strategic alignment. The emergence of the “Study in Hong Kong” brand in 2024 and the Northern Metropolis University Town in 2025 represent the institutionalisation of what began as aspirational rhetoric in 2007, confirming that the education hub agenda is now embedded in Hong Kong’s long-term governance architecture.

#### ***4.2 Multi-stakeholder governance synergy on Hong Kong’s international higher education hub***

Addressing RQ2, this section analyses how the EDB, UGC, and LegCo have interacted to generate governance synergy around the education hub agenda. The UGC has primarily been responsible for strategic vision and academic institutional frameworks; the EDB has led policy design and implementation; and the LegCo has provided institutional oversight, resource allocation, and legislative support. Table 2 documents key governance actions by each institution from 2004 to 2025.

As Table 2 documents, the governance of Hong Kong’s education hub strategy has been characterised by functional differentiation and sequential deepening across three principal actors. What is analytically notable is not merely that multiple institutions were involved, but that their contributions evolved in distinct temporal patterns: the UGC established the normative and academic framework ahead of formal policy designation; the EDB translated aspirational commitments into

**Table 1.** Evolution of Hong Kong SAR Government's Policy Address and the concept of international higher education and an education hub.

Year	Policy Address Theme/Title	Evolution of Higher Education Policy and the International Education Hub Concept
2000	Serving the Community, Sharing Common Goals (Theme)	Targeted a 60% tertiary participation rate for secondary school leavers within a decade; diversified post-secondary pathways beyond traditional sixth-form routes through professional diplomas and sub-degree qualifications; restructured university admissions and compressed secondary schooling to six years while extending degree programmes to four; broadened credit transfer mechanisms and opened the sector to private university establishment.
2001	Building on our Strengths, Investing in our Future (Theme)	Channelled a 46% increase in education funding over five years to underpin the knowledge-based economy; set a target to double the share of secondary school leavers accessing tertiary education from 30% to 60% within ten years; advanced the "3+3" secondary restructuring and four-year degree model to align with international norms; raised teacher quality and professional development.
2003	Capitalising on Our Advantages, Revitalising The Economy (Theme)	Directed education investment toward economic restructuring and human capital development; expanded lifelong learning provision and manpower retraining aligned with the restructuring economy; sustained education reform to raise overall quality; actively sought to draw Mainland and overseas talent and professionals to work and reside in Hong Kong; introduced population-quality measures emphasising the holistic development of young people.
2004	Seizing Opportunities for Development, Promoting People-based Governance (Title)	Allocated approximately 25% of government expenditure to education; advanced tertiary diversification and institutional specialisation to pursue academic excellence; supported continuing education through the \$5 billion Continuing Education Fund; accepted the "3-3-4" academic structure; strengthened a qualifications framework; sustained communication with school communities on reform; oriented education provision toward <b>servicing Mainland and Asian regional needs</b> .
2005	Working Together for Economic Development and Social Harmony (Title)	Noted strong performance by Hong Kong students in international assessments; recorded tertiary participation at 53%; planned to expand second- and third-year university places to accommodate associate degree graduates; allocated additional resources for teacher professional development; provided \$20 million annually to the UGC for public policy research <b>in higher education institutions</b> .
2005-06	Strong Governance For the People (Title)	Education spending exceeded one-fifth of annual government recurrent expenditure; scheduled introduction of the "3-3-4" structure for September 2009; reinforced biliteracy and trilingualism proficiency and professional competence of language teachers; positioned education as a regional value-creation platform for nurturing talent across the Asia-Pacific and drawing high-quality students to Hong Kong; introduced a proactive admissions scheme to <b>attract talent from the Mainland and abroad</b> ; addressed population policy to ensure future workforce quality.
2006-07	Proactive Pragmatic Always People First (Title)	Established an Academy for Gifted Education to cultivate students of exceptional potential; advanced preparatory work for the "3-3-4" structure on schedule; subsidised teacher professional development; adopted a more outward-looking stance toward <b>recruiting talent globally and from the Mainland</b> .
2007-08	A New Direction for Hong Kong (Title)	For the first time formally committed to strengthening Hong Kong's standing as a regional education hub; introduced 12-year free schooling from 2008-09 and confirmed the "3-3-4" structure was on track; expanded the international school sector by releasing greenfield sites and examining hostel feasibility; implemented a package of measures to <b>draw non-local students</b> by enlarging admission quotas and easing employment restrictions; revised the Quality Migrant Admission Scheme to <b>broaden talent recruitment from the Mainland and internationally</b> .
2008-09	Embracing New Challenges (Title)	Secured broad support for designating higher education land use at the Lok Ma Chau Loop; collaborated with Shenzhen to leverage the benefits of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Innovation Circle; launched an Innovation and Technology Fund internship programme to <b>develop local talent and attract R&amp;D-oriented graduates</b> ; earmarked four greenfield sites and four vacant school premises to <b>expand the international school sector</b> .
2009-2010	Breaking New Ground Together (Title)	Formally designated education services as one of six priority industries; articulated a policy objective to elevate Hong Kong's competitiveness as a regional <b>education hub</b> complementing Mainland development; explored admission of Mainland senior secondary and non-local programme students; advanced self-financing higher education by reserving urban sites; initiated a Higher Education Review by the UGC to formulate a long-term development strategy.

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**Table 1.** Evolution of Hong Kong SAR Government's Policy Address and the concept of international higher education and an education hub. (Continued.)

Year	Policy Address Theme/Title	Evolution of Higher Education Policy and the International Education Hub Concept
2010-11	Sharing Prosperity for a Caring Society (Title)	Confirmed education as one of six industries where Hong Kong holds clear comparative advantages; education constituted the largest single government recurrent expenditure item at over 20%; established a \$2.5 billion fund for self-financing post-secondary development; raised publicly funded first-year degree places to 15,000 and doubled senior-year intake to 4,000; estimated post-secondary participation at approximately 65% of the age cohort; reviewed non-means-tested loan arrangements.
2011-12	From Strength to Strength (Title)	Committed \$5 billion to the Research Endowment Fund; extended <b>student exchange programmes</b> to sub-degree level; increased the Start-up Loan Scheme by \$2 billion to support student hostel development in self-financing institutions; facilitated <b>international school sector</b> expansion by providing approximately 5,000 additional places.
2013	Seek Change Maintain Stability Serve the People with Pragmatism (Title)	<b>Partnered with universities to commercialise</b> research and development outcomes; fostered government-industry-academia-research collaboration; positioned Hong Kong as a centre for intellectual property trading; designated <b>higher education as a supported land use</b> for the Lok Ma Chau Loop development; identified the need for <b>student hostel land provision</b> .
2014	Support the Needy Let Youth Flourish Unleash Hong Kong's Potential (Title)	Progressively raised senior-year undergraduate intake at UGC-funded institutions by 1,000 places, enabling 5,000 sub-degree graduates annually to articulate into subsidised degree programmes by 2018-19; subsidised up to 1,000 students per cohort for self-financing undergraduate study in selected disciplines; launched a scholarship scheme for up to 100 outstanding local students per cohort to study <b>at renowned overseas universities</b> ; established a \$100 million scholarship fund rewarding achievement in sport, arts and community service; introduced the Mainland University Study Subsidy Scheme providing up to \$15,000 annually for eligible students; <b>supported participation in international exchange programmes</b> .
2015	Uphold the Rule of Law Seize the Opportunities Make the Right Choices Pursue Democracy Boost the Economy Improve People's Livelihood (Title)	Injected \$5 billion into the <b>Innovation and Technology Fund</b> ; launched the Technology Start-up Support Scheme for Universities to foster commercialisation of R&D deliverables; opened the first application round for Hong Kong branches of Chinese National Engineering Research Centres; noted <b>16 Partner State Key Laboratories</b> ; strengthened government-industry-academia-research collaboration; enabled undergraduate participation in <b>Southeast Asian volunteer services</b> ; examined expansion of publicly funded healthcare professional degree places.
2016	Innovate for the Economy Improve Livelihood Foster Harmony Share Prosperity (Title)	Promoted Hong Kong tertiary education across <b>Belt and Road countries</b> to recruit undergraduate students; channelled \$1 billion into the scholarship fund; established <b>the Innovation and Technology Bureau</b> to coordinate university engagement; allocated \$2 billion for mid-stream applied research at UGC-funded institutions; maintained 16 Partner State Key Laboratories and five Hong Kong branches of Chinese National Engineering Research Centres; <b>attracted Karolinska Institute and MIT to establish Hong Kong research facilities</b> ; positioned six universities in the Shenzhen Nanshan High-Tech Zone; proposed an \$800 million Gifted Education Fund.
2017 (The Policy Address)	Make Best Use of Opportunities Develop the Economy Improve People's Livelihood Build an Inclusive Society (Title)	Directed the UGC to broaden research grant criteria to encompass <b>knowledge and technology transfer</b> impact; concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with Shenzhen for the <b>Hong Kong-Shenzhen Innovation and Technology Park</b> at Lok Ma Chau Loop; subsidised six universities to establish over 120 technology start-ups; injected \$1 billion into the <b>Targeted Scholarship Scheme</b> ; eased <b>visa requirements for Belt and Road</b> nationals for study and employment.
2017 (The Chief Executive's 2017 Policy Address)	We Connect for Hope and Happiness (Title)	Set a target to double gross domestic R&D expenditure to 1.5% of GDP; committed no less than \$10 billion to university research funding; launched a \$500 million Technology Talent Scheme including a <b>Postdoctoral Hub</b> ; injected \$3 billion into the Research Endowment Fund; jointly developed the Hong Kong-Shenzhen Innovation and Technology Park at Lok Ma Chau Loop; intensified recruitment of leading <b>overseas scientific research institutions</b> ; established a \$12 billion Hostel Development Fund; expanded <b>Belt and Road scholarship coverage</b> .
2018	Striving Ahead Rekindling Hope (Title)	Allocated \$20 billion to the Research Endowment Fund under the Research Grants Council to bolster university research capacity; established a \$3 billion scientific research matching fund to diversify funding sources; extended the Study Subsidy Scheme to self-financing sub-degree programmes; advanced STEM education; launched the <b>Technology Talent Scheme</b> ; supported three new Research Grants Council fellowship schemes; advanced the <b>Mainland-Hong Kong Innovation and Technology Cooperation Arrangement</b> .

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**Table 1.** Evolution of Hong Kong SAR Government's Policy Address and the concept of international higher education and an education hub. (Continued.)

Year	Policy Address Theme/Title	Evolution of Higher Education Policy and the International Education Hub Concept
2019	Treasure Hong Kong: Our Home (Title)	Committed to advancing innovation and technology development; prioritised land supply expansion and <b>talent investment</b> ; seized strategic opportunities from <b>the Belt and Road Initiative and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area</b> to generate new professional services growth areas; deployed resources to advance relevant scientific research and development.
2020	Striving Ahead with Renewed Perseverance (Title)	Set a strategic objective to develop Hong Kong into <b>an International Innovation and Technology Hub</b> ; advanced Hong Kong-Shenzhen cooperation on <b>an I&amp;T hub within the GBA</b> alongside collaboration in education, talent nurturing and youth exchange; supported the Shenzhen-Hong Kong <b>Innovation and Technology Cooperation Zone</b> ; launched a five-year \$2 billion Global STEM Professorship Scheme; increased recurrent education expenditure by \$13.5 billion over three years; assisted universities in GBA education service delivery; expanded postgraduate funding and technology talent resources; <b>broadened non-local talent attraction</b> .
2021	Building a Bright Future Together (Title)	Allocated a 4-hectare site to the University of Hong Kong for new campus facilities; provided CUHK a 2.5-hectare site near its Medical Centre for research development; supported Hong Kong Polytechnic University in assessing its Hung Hom Bay Campus for academic and research use; consolidated the <b>Hong Kong-Shenzhen Innovation and Technology Park</b> and surrounding areas into the San Tin Technopole, providing approximately 150 hectares for I&T use; confirmed Hong Kong's foundation as a <b>global research collaboration hub</b> ; launched InnoHK research clusters drawing 28 world-class universities and research institutes to establish laboratories; recorded 16 State Key Laboratories, 6 Hong Kong branches of Chinese National Engineering Research Centres, and 22 Joint Laboratories with the Chinese Academy of Sciences; pledged more <b>proactive non-local talent attraction</b> .
2022	Charting a Brighter Tomorrow for Hong Kong (Title)	Established <b>the International Innovation and Technology Centre</b> ; launched the \$10 billion RAISE+ Scheme to promote <b>R&amp;D commercialisation outcomes</b> ; requested the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts to explore a Northern Metropolis campus and raise <b>non-local student intake</b> ; encouraged UGC-funded universities to <b>increase non-local enrolment</b> ; launched the <b>Top Talent Pass Scheme</b> targeting graduates of the world's top 100 universities; extended <b>the non-local graduate immigration limit</b> from one to two years and expanded coverage to GBA campus graduates; enhanced research institution and I&T enterprise subsidies under the <b>Research Talent Hub</b> Scheme by approximately 10%.
2023	A Vibrant Economy for a Caring Community (Title)	Committed to building an international post-secondary <b>education hub</b> ; proposed doubling the <b>non-local student quota</b> at UGC-funded universities to 40%; injected \$1 billion into the Government Scholarship Fund, <b>increasing Belt and Road Scholarship</b> quotas by 50% and Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme by one-third; allocated \$100 million to seed the Alliance of Universities in Applied Sciences; planned the Northern Metropolis University Town; facilitated Universities of Applied Sciences establishment; sustained the <b>“Research, Academic and Industry Sectors One-plus Scheme” (RAISE+)</b> Scheme; expanded <b>the Top Talent Pass Scheme to 184 institutions</b> ; temporarily exempted full-time <b>non-local postgraduate students from part-time work</b> restrictions.
2024	Reform for Enhancing Development and Building Our Future Together (Title)	Advanced development of an international post-secondary education hub; committed to nurturing <b>future talent and launching the Study in Hong Kong brand</b> ; broadened the vocational talent pool and promoted multiple entry pathways; introduced legislation amending the Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance and promulgated an updated Institutional Review Manual for implementation by 2026; reserved over 80 hectares for the Northern Metropolis University Town; encouraged institutions to introduce overseas brand-name programmes; launched a pilot hotel-to-student-hostel conversion scheme; commenced preparation for <b>the third InnoHK research cluster</b> ; launched a new round of the \$1.5 billion Research Matching Grant Scheme; established a \$10 billion <b>I&amp;T Industry-Oriented Fund</b> .
2025	Deepening Reforms for Our People Leveraging Our Strengths for a Brighter Future (Title)	Committed to <b>building an International Education Hub</b> ; accelerated Northern Metropolis University Town development and <b>established a University Town Planning and Construction Working Group</b> ; advanced the <b>International Innovation and Technology Centre and people-oriented scientific research</b> ; launched the Study in Hong Kong Task Force to promote the <b>Study in Hong Kong brand</b> ; raised enrolment ceilings for self-financing <b>non-local students to 50%</b> and over-enrolment ceilings for self-financing research postgraduate programmes to 120% from 2026-27; expanded student hostel supply; stepped up international teaching, <b>research talent and student recruitment</b> ; advanced Universities of Applied Sciences; implemented mutual recognition of vocational and professional qualifications with the Mainland; <b>strengthened industry-academia-research talent exchanges</b> ; hosted major international conferences including the <b>Asia-Pacific Association for International Education Conference</b> .

Source: Compiled from the original text of the annual Policy Address on the Hong Kong Government's official website.

operational instruments; and the LegCo subsequently anchored these instruments within the legislative and spatial planning apparatus. This sequencing produced a form of institutional path dependency (Howlett & Cashore, 2014) whereby later actors operated within the constraints and opportunities created by earlier decisions, generating governance coherence but also embedded inertia in areas such as land allocation and enrolment regulation.

The Education Bureau has played a pivotal role in policy design and implementation throughout the development of Hong Kong as an education hub. The document *Developing Hong Kong as a Regional Education Hub*, submitted to the Legislative Council in 2007, marked the first time that the concept of an education hub was formally proposed as a policy objective. This initiative was supported by specific measures such as relaxing the quota for non-local student admissions, establishing scholarship funds, and facilitating employment and internship opportunities for international students in Hong Kong. This not only signified the transformation of the education hub concept from a policy aspiration in the Chief Executive's Policy Address into tangible policy practice but also represented institutional innovation by the Education Bureau in international student recruitment and talent acquisition.

From 2013 onwards, the Education Bureau progressively reoriented its guiding principles toward global competitiveness and internationalisation. In collaboration with the University Grants Committee and the Legislative Council, it integrated internationalisation into university funding mechanisms, quality assurance frameworks, and legal regulations. In recent years, the bureau has further advanced the "Study in Hong Kong" branding initiative, transforming internationalisation from a policy aspiration into a long-term strategy anchored in institutional infrastructure and global promotion. Through these efforts, the Education Bureau has continued to strengthen its role in attracting international students and ensuring the effective implementation of related policies.

The Legislative Council (LegCo) plays a pivotal role in the development of an education hub by fulfilling functions of institutional oversight and policy coordination. In 2011, the LegCo's Education Affairs Committee discussed the UGC's "Vision 2010 Report," affirming the strategic direction of internationalization and urging government-level support for resource allocation and research collaboration. This marked a critical step in integrating higher education internationalization strategies into the legislative framework. Subsequently, the LegCo not only ensured the allocation of educational funding through discussions and oversight but also played a significant role in advancing legal amendments and regional planning. For instance, the 2024 meeting of the Northern Metropolis Development Subcommittee explicitly proposed the goal of becoming an International Education Hub and Cradle of Future Talent, allocating 60 hectares of land for higher education development. This highlights the LegCo's influence on spatial planning and industry integration policies. Furthermore, in 2025, the Secretariat's thematic updates reinforced the implementation of the "Post-Secondary Colleges Ordinance," enhancing the regulation, quality, and transparency of self-financed institutions. These measures demonstrate that the

LegCo has provided legal and financial support for policies initiated by the Education Bureau and the UGC at both institutional and legislative levels. Simultaneously, it has integrated the development of the education hub into Hong Kong's broader socioeconomic strategy through regional development agendas, such as the Northern Metropolis and the Innovation and Technology Park.

The University Grants Committee (UGC) has played a central role as a bridge between the government and universities in terms of institutional design and academic internationalization. In 2004, the report *Building on Strength: Forging Ahead* first proposed that Hong Kong should be developed into a "regional education hub," emphasizing university autonomy and differentiated development while promoting the "3+3+4" academic reform to align Hong Kong's higher education system with international standards. The 2010 report *A Vision for Hong Kong's Higher Education System* further systematized the internationalization strategy, explicitly requiring universities to establish Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), increase the proportion of non-local students, and strengthen collaboration with Mainland China, particularly the Greater Bay Area. Subsequently, the UGC continued to prioritize internationalization in resource allocation and research funding arrangements. For instance, the 2016 governance report drew on international models, proposing improved governance mechanisms to enhance the reputation of Hong Kong's universities within the global higher education system. Entering the 2020s, under the support of the Education Bureau and the Legislative Council, the UGC has promoted the normalization of internationalization. By 2025, measures such as raising the cap on non-local students from 20% to 40%, increasing funding for overseas learning, and strengthening the "Study in Hong Kong" brand have transformed higher education internationalization into a long-term mechanism supported by funding, clear objectives, and oversight. The UGC's role is particularly prominent in institutionalizing and academically orienting internationalization, ensuring that it is not limited to enrollment policies but is comprehensively embedded in university development and academic competitiveness.

Since 2004, the roles of the Education Bureau, the University Grants Committee (UGC), and the Legislative Council in the internationalization of education have become increasingly institutionalized and functionally differentiated. This multi-stakeholder governance structure aligns with the theory of "collaborative governance," which emphasizes achieving policy coherence through vertical policy coordination and horizontal institutional integration (Howlett & Rayner, 2007; Chou et al., 2017). The Education Bureau plays a pivotal role in the design-implementation chain of the "Education Hub" strategy, particularly acting as a frontline executor in policies related to non-local students, curriculum internationalization, and the branding initiative "Study in Hong Kong" (Lo & Li, 2023). Its policy functions align with the "intermediary governance" role as defined by Kooiman (2003). The Legislative Council, as a legislative and financial oversight body, provides institutional support in resource allocation and regional spatial policies, forming a critical dimension of "institutionally supported collaborative governance" (Rhodes, 1997; Lo &

**Table 2.** Synergies between the departments of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government and the University Grants Committee (UGC).

Year	Publishing Body	Document Title	Internationalisation of Higher Education	Policy Support for Education Hub
2004	University Grants Committee (UGC)	Hong Kong Higher Education: To Make a Difference, To Move with the Times	Emphasised enhancing university autonomy, research, and teaching quality; called for strengthening alignment with the international academic community; advocated for degree structure reform and promoted a diversified curriculum system.	Institutionalised the alignment of higher education reform with international standards; introduced an international perspective, laying the foundation for the subsequent education hub strategy.
2007	Education Bureau (EDB)	Developing Hong Kong as a Regional Education Hub	Raised the ceiling for non-local student admissions from 10% to 20%; launched the \$1 billion HKSAR Government Scholarship Fund; eased post-graduation employment and internship restrictions for international graduates.	Proposed an operational plan for the education hub for the first time; aimed to attract international students and talents; promoted the industrialisation of education services.
2010	University Grants Committee (UGC)	Aspirations for the Higher Education System in Hong Kong (Report 2010)	Emphasised the urgency of internationalisation strategies and required universities to formulate internationalisation KPIs; suggested setting up specific funding to support international student recruitment and overseas exchanges; strengthened cooperation with the Mainland, particularly the Pearl River Delta.	Explicitly proposed the internationalisation strategy as a systematic task for the first time; positioned Hong Kong's higher education within the global and regional education hub landscape.
2011	LegCo Panel on Education	Report on the Discussion of the UGC's "Aspirations for the Higher Education System in Hong Kong"	Endorsed the direction of internationalisation and diversification proposed by the UGC; emphasised that resource allocation should support international exchange and research collaboration.	Incorporated UGC strategies into the government level, forming institutionalised promotion; the education hub strategy entered the phase of policy implementation.
2013	Education Bureau (EDB)	Policy Measures of the Education Bureau in the 2013 Policy Address	Continued heavy investment in education, emphasising adaptation to globalisation and the challenges of a knowledge-based economy.	Education entered a consolidation period, with parallel focus on internationalisation and talent cultivation; the education hub strategy entered a stabilisation phase.
2016	University Grants Committee (UGC)	Governance in UGC-funded Higher Education Institutions	Drew reference from governance models in the UK, US, Australia, etc., emphasising university autonomy and international competitiveness; proposed sound governance mechanisms to enhance international reputation.	Enhanced the institutional foundation through governance reform, providing stable assurance for education internationalisation and the construction of the education hub.
2018	University Grants Committee (UGC)	UGC Annual Report 2017-2018	Encouraged universities to formulate internationalisation strategies; promoted international perspectives in curriculum, research, and exchanges; deepened international connections through recruiting non-local students and global research collaboration.	Maintained Hong Kong's status as a regional education hub; enhanced the global competitiveness and influence of Hong Kong's higher education through funding mechanisms and international cooperation projects.
2019	University Grants Committee (UGC)	UGC Annual Report 2018-2019	Emphasised maintaining Hong Kong's status as a regional education hub; promoted higher education internationalisation; encouraged universities to strengthen international student recruitment and global research collaboration.	Integrated internationalisation into resource allocation and performance assessment systems; collaborated with the EDB to implement the education hub strategy, strengthening funding and institutional support.

Continued on next page

**Table 2.** Synergies between the departments of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government and the University Grants Committee (UGC). (Continued.)

Year	Publishing Body	Document Title	Internationalisation of Higher Education	Policy Support for Education Hub
2022	Education Bureau (EDB)	Policy Initiatives of the Education Bureau in the 2022 Policy Address	Emphasised relying on “world-renowned universities and research talents” to develop talents with a global vision; proposed strengthening industry-university-research collaboration, students’ international perspective, and research innovation capabilities.	Aligned the “Education Hub” with national development strategies, consolidating Hong Kong’s hub status within regional education and research networks.
2023	LegCo Panel on Education (Subcommittee)	Report on Promoting the Development of Hong Kong into an International Education Hub	Suggested expanding the non-local student quota ratio, establishing Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), and planning the Northern Metropolis University Town.	Combined the education hub strategy with regional development; implemented land and institutional planning, moving towards infrastructural realisation.
2024	LegCo Subcommittee on Matters Relating to the Development of the Northern Metropolis	Meeting Minutes: Post-secondary Education Development in the Northern Metropolis	Clearly targeted “International Education Hub, Cradle of Future Talents”; encouraged cooperation between top Chinese and foreign universities and cross-border research; advocated for shared facilities and creating a diverse international campus environment.	Reserved 60 hectares of land for the construction of the Northern Metropolis University Town; adopted an industry-oriented approach, focusing on international hub and talent, docking with national development, and advancing in phases driven by industry.
2025	LegCo Panel on Education (Subcommittee on International Education Hub)	Promoting Internationalisation by UGC-funded Universities	Raised the non-local student quota to 40%; strengthened the “Study in Hong Kong” brand; UGC promotion at overseas exhibitions; added \$100 million to subsidise local students’ overseas studies (target: 50% of undergraduates to have overseas experience by 2025/26); promoted hosting large-scale international academic events and global recruitment.	Systematically promoted campus internationalisation, exchange networks, and global talent recruitment through a three-pronged approach of admission quotas, branding, and funding; normalised and institutionalised internationalisation through policy and resources.

Source: Compiled from official documents of the Education Bureau, University Grants Committee, and Legislative Council of the HKSAR.

Tang, 2017). For instance, the explicit proposal in 2024 to integrate the “Education Hub” with the “Northern Metropolis University Education City” exemplifies this kind of cross-issue policy coordination. The UGC has long been promoting the internationalization strategy and academic autonomy of higher education systems, setting university KPIs, controlling funding allocation, and evaluation standards. Its role as a “platform-type coordinator” (Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Jongbloed et al., 2008) effectively bridges governmental strategic objectives with universities’ autonomous development paths. The governance logic achieved through the coordination among various institutions is not a linear execution driven by a single policy actor, but rather a process of coordination, feedback, and institutional adjustment within a polycentric system (Trein, 2017; Knight & Morshidi, 2011). This is prominently reflected in the increase in the proportion of non-local students, the transformation of industry-university-research collaboration, and the construction of international branding.

## 5. Discussion

Hong Kong’s International Education Hub policy demonstrates a path-dependent and staged trajectory consistent with global trends in which cities and regions increasingly deploy

higher education as a strategic resource for economic competitiveness and soft power projection (Knight & Morshidi, 2011). The four phases identified—local expansion, institutionalisation, research-driven integration, and infrastructural consolidation—reflect a pattern of incremental policy layering (Howlett & Cashore, 2014), in which successive governance actors have built upon, rather than supplanted, earlier policy foundations.

Compared with other prominent education hub models, Hong Kong’s approach is distinctive in several respects. Singapore’s strategy is characterised by strong centralised state direction, with the government directly managing institutional recruitment and regulatory alignment (Olds, 2007; Sidhu et al., 2011). Australia’s model is predominantly market-driven, relying on commercial tuition revenues and institutional competition (Marginson, 2006). Hong Kong, by contrast, exhibits a hybrid governance logic that combines state steering with substantial institutional autonomy, mediated through the UGC—an intermediary body that is neither purely governmental nor purely market-oriented. This configuration offers resilience and international legitimacy, but it also generates coordination costs and delays. The frictions observed between the EDB’s policy timelines, the UGC’s academic governance priorities, and the LegCo’s fiscal and spatial oversight reflect a structural feature of polycentric governance rather than an

incidental failure (Trein, 2017; Chou et al., 2017; Lo & Tang, 2017).

A key theoretical contribution of this study is to extend Knight's (2011; 2024) typology of education hubs—centred on student flows, talent attraction, and knowledge production—by foregrounding the governance dimension. The Hong Kong case demonstrates that hub development cannot be adequately understood through functional categories alone. Rather, it is fundamentally shaped by institutional relationships, negotiation processes, and resource competition among governance actors. The progression from symbolic policy statements to operational measures is the product of sustained inter-institutional alignment, resonating with Howlett & Rayner (2007) concept of policy mix coherence, and with Maassen & Olsen (2007) emphasis on the role of intermediary bodies in translating governmental priorities into academic practice.

The Hong Kong governance model also exhibits notable limitations. The absence of a dedicated inter-agency coordination mechanism has, at various points, produced policy fragmentation—most visibly in the protracted process of securing land reserves for the Northern Metropolis University Town, which required iterative negotiations across the EDB, LegCo, and the Planning Department. This suggests that polycentric governance may be vulnerable to strategic drift during periods of rapid change, such as geopolitical realignment (Lo & Li, 2023). Furthermore, Hong Kong's deepening integration into national development strategies introduces a governance tier not fully captured by existing multi-actor frameworks. Future analytical models may need to account for the interplay between local, regional, and national governance levels in education hub development.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has examined the evolution of Hong Kong's International Higher Education Hub strategy from 2000 to 2025, focusing on shifting policy narratives and the role of multi-actor governance in shaping implementation and synergy. Through a longitudinal analysis of policy documents spanning 25 years, four developmental phases were identified—initial expansion, institutionalisation, research-led integration, and infrastructural consolidation—revealing a gradual but strategically coherent transformation in Hong Kong's higher education internationalisation.

The study makes two primary theoretical contributions. First, it extends the conceptualisation of education hubs beyond economic and branding frameworks, demonstrating that hubs are embedded in evolving governance regimes and shaped by ongoing institutional negotiation. Second, it offers a dynamic multi-actor governance framework connecting policy sequencing with institutional roles, providing a more granular account of how education hub strategies are operationalised over time. Empirically, the systematic analysis of 25 years of policy documents provides an evidence-based account of how strategic objectives were articulated, reformulated, and progressively institutionalised across four distinct phases.

This study has several limitations. It relies primarily on

official policy documents and does not incorporate interview or observational data from institutional stakeholders, which could enrich understanding of implementation dynamics and informal governance processes. Additionally, while comparative references are made to Singapore, Australia, and the United Kingdom, no systematic comparative analysis is undertaken. Future research could address these limitations through qualitative interviews, the development of comparative governance frameworks, or quantitative analysis of funding flows, student mobility trends, and research outputs.

For policymakers, the findings suggest several practical implications. Establishing a dedicated inter-agency coordination mechanism—such as a standing Education Hub Taskforce with cross-ministerial membership—could improve the coherence and pace of hub-related strategy execution. The expansion of infrastructure should be coordinated in parallel with regulatory development to prevent implementation gaps. As Hong Kong's hub strategy becomes more deeply embedded within national development frameworks, mechanisms for managing the interface between local institutional autonomy and national strategic priorities will be essential to sustaining the international credibility that underpins the hub's global appeal.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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