

# Hong Kong students entering Mainland China universities: a review of the admission scheme

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Studying abroad is not new for Hong Kong students, especially those from the middle class. For a variety of reasons, traversing to Mainland universities has been an unconventional path confined mostly to students who pursued specific programs, or had family or social ties. Beginning in 2012, an admission scheme was launched for Hong Kong students applying to Mainland universities. The purpose of this paper is to review the admission scheme.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper draws on both quantitative and qualitative data sources. It includes statistics from official records of students' application and enrollment figures, and documents obtained from multiple sources, as well as qualitative data through interviews of Hong Kong students who are studying in the Mainland universities.

**Findings** – The key findings are that since the implementation of the admission scheme, the number of applicants is rather stable irrespective of the changing socio-economic and political context. With the preferential treatment for Hong Kong students, low tuition fees, government financial assistance and scholarships, most students still consider studying in the Mainland a backup plan rather than a first choice. The academic performance of the students and academic/career aspirations have influenced their choice and decisions.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes through providing both primary and secondary data to help understand the level of acceptance on the scheme since its implementation. It also reveals the perceptions of the students who have made their choice to study cross the border. In facing the emergent economic, socio-cultural and political challenges, some policies recommendations are proposed to boost the acceptance of the scheme. Moreover, it fills the research gap on student mobility from Hong Kong to Mainland China in the corpus of literature.

**Keywords** Student choice, Study abroad, Hong Kong students, China universities

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction: an admission scheme to universities in other parts of Mainland China

Hong Kong is a dynamic and heterogeneous society which has undergone unprecedented political, economic and social changes in the past 20 years. It has transitioned from being a British colony to a Special Administrative Region of the PRC under a "One Country, Two Systems" arrangement with a high degree of autonomy, according to the Basic Law of the HKSAR. This includes autonomy in formulating its own educational policies. Yet, deeper collaboration and integration is inevitable. With the implementation of the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) in 2012, students have new and multiple pathways to higher education, one of which is a path to enter one of the top 100 universities in Mainland China.



Under the “Scheme for Admission of Hong Kong Students to Mainland Higher Education Institutions” (DSE Admission Scheme), students can be admitted to undergraduate programs in Mainland universities based on their DSE examination results, without taking the “Joint Entrance Examinations for Students from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and Overseas Chinese-Resident Areas and Countries for Universities in PRC” (JEE PRC). This scheme is unique as it is the only government-to-government initiative supporting Hong Kong students studying outside Hong Kong. For 2018/2019 academic year, students can select from 102 Mainland universities, of which 26 are under the top-tiered Project 985/211, and half are Project 211 universities. When compared with millions of students in Mainland China, who need to compete through the National College Entrance Examination, this is a much easier track signifying the preferential treatment toward Hong Kong.

This scheme has been implemented since 2012. To what extent has it been accepted by Hong Kong students is worth investigating. To start off, this paper reviews the contextual background toward studying abroad. Second, it analyses the policies and practices of Hong Kong students studying in Mainland universities at the pre-2012 and post-2012 phases. Third, it presents findings on the acceptance of the scheme, based on secondary data, as well as first-hand data collected from Hong Kong students and administrators in Mainland universities. Then, five scenarios of student choice are identified. Finally, some policies recommendations are proposed for facing the emergent economic, socio-cultural and political challenges in the coming years.

### **The transition from elite to mass higher education**

Under the colonial period, Hong Kong has a long history of sending students abroad. Back in 1975, over 26,000 studied overseas, whereas the enrollment in Hong Kong’s own universities was only about 11,000 (Bray and Koo, 2005, p. 136). With the scarcity of local university places, studying abroad was an alternative, primarily dominated by the elite and affluent classes, which included children of senior government officials. Those officials of the colonial government whose children chose to study in the UK could enjoy the privileges of local tuition fees. Almost all other popular destinations for overseas education were Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the USA, Australia and Canada (Oleksiyenko *et al.*, 2013).

Many upper-class families even sent their children to western countries for secondary schools to prepare them for higher education (Waters, 2006). According to the data from Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department’s 2001 household survey, 32.3 percent of 74,100 persons commenced study outside Hong Kong at age 11–15, and 11.1 percent at age 10 or below. A survey revealed the top two reasons: “to receive a different mode of education” (47.1 percent) and “to improve English proficiency” (38.8 percent) (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (HKCSD), 2002). The large school sector with English as the medium of instruction in Hong Kong also broadened the opportunity for students to enter universities overseas (Postiglione, 2007, 2013).

Nonetheless, most households could not afford the high tuition fees and other expenses for sending their children abroad. Under the backdrop of massification of higher education in Hong Kong that began in the 1990s, most students could pursue some form of post-secondary education as a normal path of progression. According to World Bank UNESCO (2017) data, the Gross Tertiary Education Enrollment Ratio of Hong Kong reached 68 percent in 2015, an increase from 31 percent in 2003, as compared to the 2015 world average figure of 35.7 percent. The rapid transition from elite to mass higher education in Hong Kong was made possible by the large self-financed post-secondary education sector with strong governmental policy support. Although a small territory with only 7.4m people, Hong Kong has a total of 20 degree-awarding higher education institutions, including the eight universities funded by the public through the University Grants Committee (UGC) and

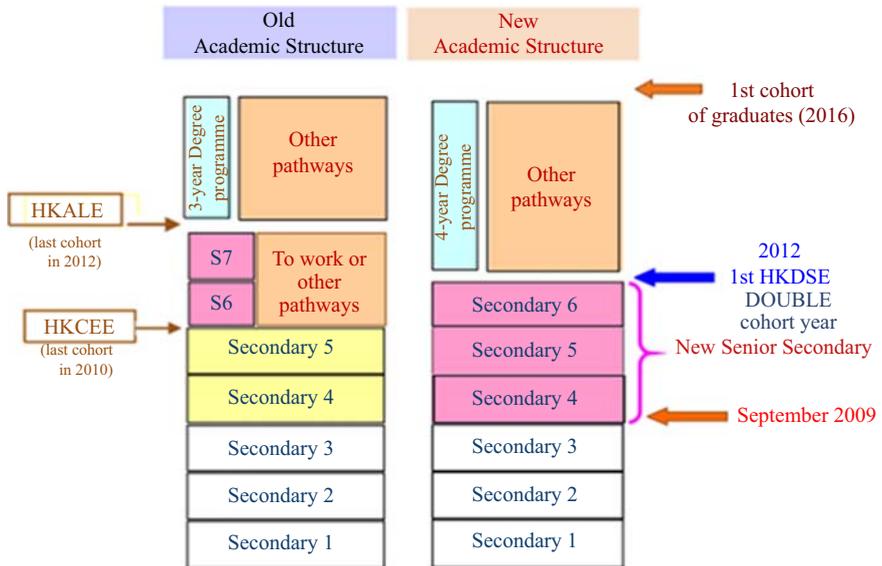
a host of self-financing institutions. Such skyrocketing enrollment in higher education transformed higher education in Hong Kong (Kember, 2010; Trow, 1973). Jung and Postiglione (2015) argued that Hong Kong has entered a post-massification stage.

**The Chinese Mainland as a study destination: before and after reunification**

Much research on international student mobility investigates students traversing from developing to developed countries, mainly from east to west (USA, UK, Australia, Canada) (Altbach, 1998; McMahan, 1992). Mainland China hosts the third highest number of foreign students. There is a bundle of favorable factors pulling students to study in Mainland China, namely, reputation of the country and its institutions, cost, safety and security (Hu *et al.*, 2016; Cao *et al.*, 2016), optimistic belief in China’s future development, bright prospects of learning Chinese language, and scholarships (Jiani, 2017). Many students are attracted to the Chinese Mainland primarily by future economic gains and immediate financial considerations. While these favorable pull factors may be applicable in attracting Hong Kong students, the uniqueness lies in the relationship between Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region and the Chinese Mainland, as well as the shared heritage of Chinese tradition and socio-cultural linkages between the two systems.

*Pre-2012 phase: policies and practices*

Before the retrocession to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, Hong Kong’s educational policies and practices were much akin to the British system, with the 5-2-3 system: five years of secondary school, two years of matriculation for entering university and three years of undergraduate education. This system remained in place until the reform and implementation of the Senior Secondary Curriculum and four-year university curriculum under the 3-3-4 system which began in 2009. A comparison of the old and new academic structure is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.**  
Comparison of old and new academic structures of Hong Kong

**Source:** Adapted from the Report on Review of the Academic Structure of Senior Secondary Education on May 2003 (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2003)

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Prior to 2012, the Hong Kong 5-2-3 academic system was not aligned with the (3-3-4) system in Mainland China. The main admission path for Hong Kong students to enroll in Mainland universities was through the JEE PRC which was commissioned in 1981. The structure of the JEE PRC follows that of National College Entrance Examination in the Mainland but the subjects and syllabus are modified. Under this examination, Hong Kong students had to take five subjects, namely, Chinese, Mathematics, English, plus two subjects (Physics and Chemistry for Science stream, and Geography and History for Arts stream). This syllabus is different from Hong Kong's public examination for secondary graduates. It meant that the students need to prepare separately for this examination. The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority was authorized to administer the applications and arrange for the examination in Hong Kong. Students were eligible to take the examination as long as they held a Hong Kong identity card, whereas they can complete their secondary education either in a Hong Kong or in a Mainland school.

Other than this JEE PRC, three universities have had a long heritage of enrolling overseas Chinese students, including those from Hong Kong. The first was Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. As one of the most sought-after universities under JEE PRC, it obtained the approval of State Ministry of Education to arrange an individual examination which started in 2003 in Hong Kong. The syllabus follows that of JEE PRC and the students only need to take three subjects, namely, Chinese, English and Mathematics. In 2010, 104 students applied for this examination, and 57 were admitted. The admission quota is kept stable at around 60 students per year. Western Medicine is one of the most popular subjects of Hong Kong students and the curriculum was integrated with Zhongshan Medical University.

The other two universities, Jinan University in Guangdong and Huaqiao University in Fujian, also have a long tradition of hosting Hong Kong students. There are multiple enrollment channels. Besides JEE PRC, they offer the "Two Universities Joint Entrance Examination" (TU JEE) for Hong Kong students since 1979. Students have to take four subjects. For the academic year of 2017, the minimum admission score of Jinan University is 350 marks (full mark is 600, 150 per subject), whereas that of Huaqiao University is 320 marks. Moreover, for students obtaining 300 marks or 240 marks may also apply for the one-year preparatory Course of Jinan and Huaqiao Universities, respectively, then articulated to undergraduate programs afterwards. Besides, these two universities also admit students through the Secondary Principal Nomination Scheme in Form 6. The stratification of the three universities is clear to the students. With their long heritage and relations in the society of Hong Kong, and with liaison offices set up locally, as well as the strong alumni networks, their reputations are well established. Coupled with the aggressive recruitment strategies, they have attracted Hong Kong students who are interested to study in the Mainland.

Moreover, studying in Mainland China universities is generally considered as a lower cost option as Hong Kong students enjoy the same tuition fees as Mainland students. Students who cannot gain admission through the 15,000 UGC-funded first-year university places can opt for the self-financing programs in Hong Kong but demanding a much higher tuition fees. A government subsidized undergraduate program in Hong Kong costs HKD42,000 per year, whilst that for a typical program in Mainland universities is only around RMB5,000 (HKD6,000) per year.

In summary, at the pre-2012 phase, given the different academic systems crossing the border, and the requirement of taking separate entrance examinations, only specific groups of Hong Kong students have interest to go northwards. Some could have been attracted by specific discipline of study, or the low tuition fees. Another group of students are migrants from the Mainland who already have strong family and social ties in their motherland. During this period, the policies and practices of Hong Kong students to study northwards were primarily driven by the Mainland Government and its universities. The role that Hong Kong Government played is minimal.

*Post-2012 era: DSE Admission Scheme to Mainland universities*

2012 marks a new era in Hong Kong's educational system with the new Secondary Academic Structure of 3-3-4. One of the major reasons for the launch of DSE Admission Scheme to Mainland universities is to tackle the surge of demand for university places in the double cohort year. The first cohort of senior secondary graduates who had completed the three years' curriculum and took the first DSE examination amounted to 73,074 candidates. In the same year, the last cohort of the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination who had completed the two years' matriculation program was 41,500 candidates, making a total of 114,574 secondary school graduates. However, the number of university places was limited. It gave tremendous pressure to the students, parents and government administrators.

Back in April 30 and July 12, 2010, a Legco member, Ms Starry Chan, asked the questions in the Panel of Education of whether HKSAR government can "liaise with its counterparts in the Mainland and explore the possibility of exempting local students from the joint entrance examination and accepting the HKDSE examination results for university admission" (Hong Kong Legco, 2010). And yet the response was that "giving preferential treatments to local students might be seen as unfair to other candidates." It was only until August 2011 when Li Keqiang, then Vice-Premier of State Council, visited Hong Kong and announced a package of support measures covering a wide range of areas, which included waiving the entrance examinations for Hong Kong students. On November 2011, State Ministry of Education announced the pilot scheme under which 63 Mainland Higher Education institutions will consider admitting Hong Kong students based on their results in DSE and Advanced Level Examination (Hong Kong Legco, 2012). It reflects that this specific scheme is very much driven by Mainland China.

For the relevant policies in relation to the qualifications of programs offered by Chinese Mainland universities, back in 2004, under the "Memorandum of Understanding between the Mainland and Hong Kong on Mutual Recognition of Academic Degrees in Higher Education," it stipulates that the holders of Bachelor's degrees from recognized higher education institutions in the Mainland China can apply for admission to postgraduate or professional studies in universities in Hong Kong. It indicates that upon return to Hong Kong, the students can further their education. For employment, after individual assessment by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications, the degrees obtained by these graduates are recognized under the Qualification Framework as Level 5 or bachelor degree level, and thus eligible for applying for civil service jobs in Hong Kong. The recognitions on the credentials are imperative when the students are considering the option to study northwards.

Under the DSE Admission Scheme, the students are admitted based on their DSE examination results. The minimum admission criterion is the same as that for students to enter a university in Hong Kong. The students have to attain 3-3-2-2, that is level 3 or above in both Chinese Language and English Language, and level 2 or above in Mathematics Compulsory Part and Liberal Studies. In March of each year, students can apply through a centralized system, and select four Mainland universities, with four programs for each university. The list of universities has been expanded gradually from 63 to 102 during the period from 2012/2013 to 2018/2019. After the DSE examination results are announced, the results will be passed directly from the educational authorities from Hong Kong to the Chinese Mainland universities.

From the Mainland Government's policy perspective, as a preferential treatment to Hong Kong students, their tuition fee is the same as Mainland students which is substantially lower than that in Hong Kong. From the Hong Kong side, the Education Bureau launched the Mainland University Study Subsidy Scheme in July 2014 to support students in need. Students who pass a means test will receive a full-rate subsidy of HKD15,000 or half-rate subsidy of HKD7,500 per year (Hong Kong Legco, 2016). Started

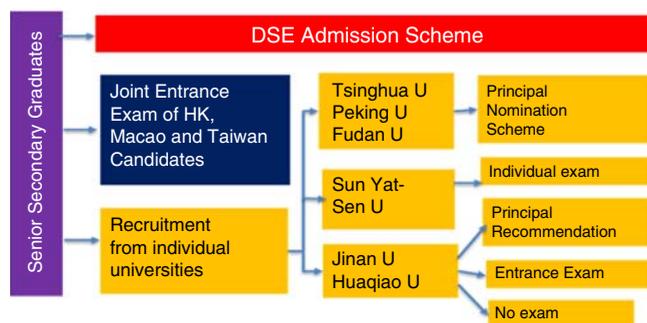
from 2016/2017, the funding scope was expanded to more Mainland universities, irrespective of their admission channels. Packaged under the HKD5bn funding for education in Chief Executive, Carrie Lam’s maiden Policy Address in 2017, a subsidy of HKD5,000 per year is granted to students, waiving the financial screening.

Figure 2 summarizes the admission channels for students to pursue undergraduate education in Mainland after 2012. For the recruitment by individual universities, three elite universities, namely, Tsinghua University, Peking University and Fudan University, offer a Secondary Principal Nomination Scheme which give conditional offer to students even before they take DSE examination. This fast track initiative was originated from the Lee Shau Kee Scholarship, first offered to Hong Kong students entering Fudan University in 2006, later expanded to Tsinghua University and Peking University in 2009. Some traditional elite secondary schools and pro-Beijing patriotic schools in Hong Kong are invited to nominate top performing students. The places available are limited to around ten students per year per university.

Other promotional activity from Hong Kong Government includes a large-scale Mainland China Higher Education Expo held around November or December of each year since 2012. In this two-day event, there are talks by State Ministry of Education on the application procedure and admission arrangements. Briefing sessions are conducted by universities on the characteristics and career prospects of individual programs. Exhibition booths are set up to provide information on features of programs, admission criteria, number of places. During sharing sessions, some Hong Kong graduates from Mainland share their study life, and some senior managers of corporations give talks on career prospects after graduation. Moreover, Education Bureau also arranges the recruitment staff of the Mainland universities to give talks in six secondary schools across Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Territories, so that the students and teachers can receive first-hand information.

### Students’ perspectives on admission to China’s universities

This section presents findings on the students’ responses to the DSE Admission Scheme, as well as their choice and perceptions toward studying in Mainland. It is based on three types of data sources: first, official records of students’ application and enrollment statistics, and other documents obtained from multiple sources, including Hong Kong Government’s reports, Mainland China Government’s reports and published data of China Education Exchange (HK) Centre, an organization commissioned by State Ministry of Education to



**Source:** Adapted from Handbook on the Scheme for Admission of Hong Kong Students to Mainland Higher Education Institutions 2012/2013

**Figure 2.** Admission channels for Hong Kong students to undergraduate programs in Mainland China

process Hong Kong students' applications; second, data collected through semi-structured interviews with 51 Hong Kong students pursuing undergraduate programs in Mainland universities, and five staff from various Mainland universities conducted in 2017; and, third, information gathered through observations during 13 orientation seminars delivered by Mainland universities to Hong Kong students in 2017, and the Mainland Higher Education Expo in 2016 and 2017.

### *Applications and enrollments*

First, as shown in Table I, except the double cohort year in 2012/2013, where there were over 4,000 applicants, the percentage of students applying for the DSE Admission Scheme is rather consistent at around 4 percent per year. For demographic reasons, the total numbers of DSE candidates have dropped significantly and continuously in the past few years, from 82,350 students in 2013/2014 to only 61,669 in 2017/2018. Figures in 2017/2018 showed that the number of applicants to the scheme is 2,568 (4.2 percent of DSE candidates), with a slight increase in the percentage, although the absolute number is declining.

Second, around half of the students who applied for the DSE Admission Scheme are admitted by the universities. The success rate is quite steady throughout the years. Notably, for years 2014/2015 and 2015/2016, the number of final enrollments, i.e. the students accepted the offer and studied in the Mainland, was 474 and 458, respectively, representing only around 30 percent of the number of students admitted. It can be explained that the students apply for the scheme as a backup plan instead of first choice, and they may have opted for local programs after DSE results are announced. The general (un)willingness of Hong Kong students to study in Mainland China can be reflected from the number of applications to the scheme.

On the other hand, according to the State Ministry of Education, in 2016, there were over 15,000 Hong Kong students studying in the Chinese Mainland, including postgraduate students. The number of undergraduate students is estimated to be around 13,500. The number of Hong Kong students entering the first year of undergraduate studies in

Academic year	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
No. of DSE candidates	73,074	82,350	79,615	74,170	68,167	61,669
No. of applicants to DSE Admission Scheme	4,248 <sup>a</sup> (3.7%)	2,279 (2.8%)	3,249 (4.1%)	2,988 (4.0%)	2,689 (3.9%)	2,568 (4.2%)
No. of students admitted by DSE Admission Scheme (final enrollments) <sup>b</sup>	971	1,188	474	458	–	–
No. of participating institutions (DSE Scheme)	63	70	75	78	84	90
No. of students admitted through JEE PRC <sup>c</sup>	1,900	1,900	1,903	1,778	1,770	2,095

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>2012/2013 is the double cohort year. The large number of applicants is probably due to the additional number of candidates from HKAL Examination (41,500) as they can also apply to this scheme; <sup>b</sup>the final enrollment figures are obtained from LC Paper No. CB(4)812/15-16(02) in 2016; <sup>c</sup>JEE PRC refers to the "Joint Entrance Examinations for Students from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and Overseas Chinese-Resident Areas and Countries For Universities in PRC." The number of students who actually enrolled after admission is not available

**Sources:** *Handbooks on the Scheme for Admission of Hong Kong Students to Mainland Higher Education Institutions* (from 2012/2013 to 2018/2019) and Legco document (2016), Statistics from HKEAA (from 2012 to 2017)

**Table I.**  
Number of applicants and final enrollments to Mainland universities

Mainland through different channels was over 5,800 in the two academic years of 2014/2015 and 2015/2016. Of them, only 16 percent were admitted under the DSE Admission Scheme (Hong Kong Legco, 2016). Other than this scheme, major admission channels are the JEE PRC and direct recruitments from Mainland universities, especially in Guangdong and Fujian, as elaborated in the earlier section. According to the interview of a school principal which provides preparatory courses for students taking JEE PRC in Hong Kong, each year, there are around 500 students who entered through JEE PRC, 1,500 students admitted to Jinan and Huaqiao Universities, and 60 to Sun Yat-sen University. He considered this scheme to be unsuccessful because most of the students are not locally bred Hong Kong students, but mainly migrants from the Chinese Mainland who are taking the JEE PRC or applying to Jinan and Huaqiao Universities directly.

According to the findings from interviews of staff in both Jinan and Huaqiao Universities, the numbers of Hong Kong students who entered their undergraduate programs in the last two years are summarized in Table II. Around half of the students who were admitted finally accepted the offer. The students are taken in through different channels. Table III reflects that JEE PRC and TU JEE remain the major admission paths for Huaqiao University.

As regards the most popular universities, the top three are Sun Yat-sen University, Jinan University and Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine as shown below, all located in Guangdong province (Table IV).

The disciplines of study mostly aligned with the interests of Hong Kong students are business and management. Medicine (including western Medicine and Chinese Medicine). They are also key attractions of some universities (Table V).

To sum up, it is estimated that there are around 2,900 first-year students entering Chinese Mainland universities each year, of which over 60 percent (around 1,700 students)

No of students	2017/2018		2016/2017	
	Admitted	Enrolled	Admitted	Enrolled
Jinan University	2,584	1,300	2,549	1,365
Huaqiao University	800+	424	700+	374
Total		1,724		1,739

**Table II.**  
Number of students admitted and enrolled in Jinan and Huaqiao universities

Admission channels	No of students
DSE Admission Scheme	66
Joint Entrance Examination, PRC	103
Two Universities Joint Entrance Examination	148
Secondary School Principal Nomination Scheme	55
Preparatory Course	52
Total	424

**Table III.**  
Breakdown of admission channels for Huaqiao University in 2017/2018

Three most popular universities by applications		Location
1	Sun Yat-sen University	Guangzhou
2	Jinan University	Guangzhou
3	Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine	Guangzhou

**Table IV.**  
Popular universities – applications to DSE Admission Scheme (2017/2018)

Source: China Education Exchange (HK) Centre (2017)

go to Jinan and Huaqiao Universities. The DSE Admission Scheme opens a new pathway for all students, whereas the JEE PRC and other existing channels remain the dominant admission paths of the students.

**Students choice: five scenarios**

After presenting students’ application and enrollment statistics, based on the findings of interviews of 51 students, the research revealed that students’ academic performance and academic/career aspirations are important factors which influence their choices. Based on the decision scenarios that we discovered, it is possible to classify all students into five types, namely, the Cream, Achievers, Opportunists, Loyalists and Passive Recipients, as shown in Figure 3. In this study, academic performance is operationally defined as the students’ DSE scores. Their clarity of academic/career aspirations refers to whether they have set a clear goal of entering specific program or discipline of study, or aspire to embark on certain types of jobs after graduation.

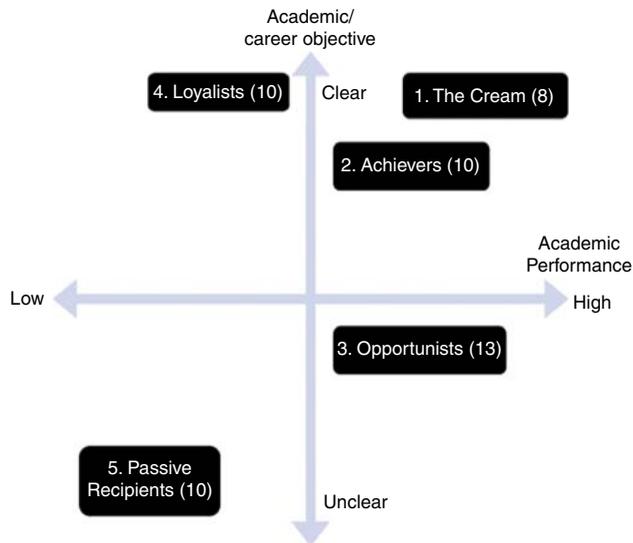
*Scenario 1: the cream*

The Cream refers to the first quantile of students with DSE marks of 19 or above in four core subjects. Compared to all other DSE candidates, the Creamers may choose to study in either local universities or overseas universities.

**Table V.**  
Popular disciplines of study – applications to DSE Admission Scheme (2017/2018)

	Disciplines of study	Applicants (%)
1	Medicine (include western Medicine and Chinese Medicine)	11.7
2	Economics, management, finance and trade	11.1
3	Language	4.8
4	News and communications	3.3
5	History	2.1

**Source:** China Education Exchange (HK) Centre (2017)



**Figure 3.**  
Five scenarios of students’ choice

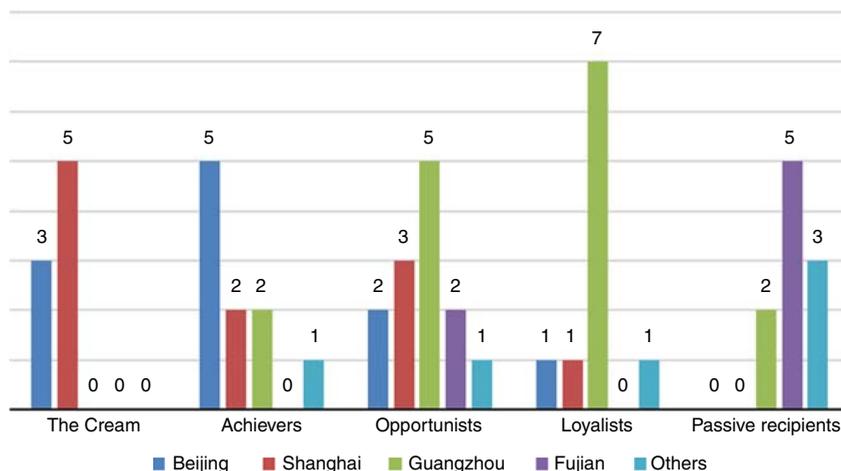
**Note:** The numbers in the bracket are the number of students in each scenario

The first scenario involves eight students who have high academic performance and clear academic or career objectives. Five of them are males, and three are females. Six of them are locally born in Hong Kong. For the two born in the Mainland, one has migrated to Hong Kong for 12 years, and another for 7 years. All eight students entered Project 985 universities. As shown in Table VI and Figure 4, three of them are in Beijing and five in Shanghai. As regards the admission channels, six of them are admitted through the Secondary Principal Nomination Scheme to the three elite universities (one to Peking University, two to Tsinghua University and three to Fudan University). They received the Lee Shau Kee Scholarship of HKD50,000 per year, of which HKD30,000 in cash, and HKD20,000 to finance study trips arranged by themselves. They commented that this financial support was very attractive. During the winter and summer holidays, they plan for trips in Mainland China. For the remaining two students admitted through DSE Admission Scheme, both are aspired to be medical doctors, and entered Fudan University (Student S01) and Shanghai Jiaotong University (Student S06).

The first characteristic of the Cream is that before taking the public examination, they are confident that their DSE scores will be good enough for university admission. The final results proved it as they have received multiple offers from universities in Hong Kong, the Mainland, etc. For example, Student B02 now studying Economics and Finance in Tsinghua University had to make a choice amongst three offers: Imperial College in UK, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) in Hong Kong and Tsinghua University in Beijing. The reasons of choosing Tsinghua University are the reputation of the program and the University, and the social network in Mainland.

	Location of universities					Total
	Beijing	Shanghai	Guangdong	Fujian	Others	
The Cream	3	5	0	0	0	8
Achievers	5	2	2	0	1	10
Opportunists	2	3	5	2	1	13
Loyalists	1	1	7	0	1	10
Passive recipients	0	0	2	5	3	10
Total	11	11	16	7	6	51

**Table VI.** Students' choice under five scenarios by location of university



**Figure 4.** Students' choice under five scenarios by the location of university

The second characteristic of this group of students is that they have clear academic or career objectives which enable them to undertake well-planned actions in fulfilling their aspirations. Eventually, they are successful through enrolling in diverse field of study, including western Medicine (Students S01, S06), Law (Student B01), News and Communication (Students S02, S03), Economics (Student B02), English Language (Student S04) and Data Sciences (Student B03). Some of these subjects are career oriented toward the traditional professions like medical doctors, lawyers, etc.

The third characteristic is that most of these students are locally born, from middle to upper class, studied in traditional elite or pro-Beijing patriotic schools in Hong Kong. Their socio-economic status, social origins and the secondary schools they come from may have influenced their choice of study path.

#### *Scenario 2: the achievers*

The second scenario involves ten students, who have attained relatively good examination scores (15–18 marks in four core subjects), also with clear academic or career objectives before entering universities. Three of them are male, and seven are females. Half of them (five) are locally born. For the other five students born in Mainland, two are new migrants who have settled in Hong Kong for less than seven years. The Achievers are studying in more diverse locations: five in Beijing, two in Shanghai, two in Guangdong and one in Nanjing as shown in Figure 4. Instead of enrolling in the top three elite universities, half of them (five) are studying in Project 985 universities, such as Beijing Normal University, Renmin University, Nanjing University, whilst the rest have entered Project 211 universities, namely, China University of Political Science and Law, Jinan University.

Most of them (eight) are admitted through the DSE Admission Scheme. Their field of study varies a lot, covering Law, Accounting, western Medicine, Chinese Medicine, Chinese, History, Sociology, Politics. Like the Cream, the Achievers have keen interest on certain subjects, and yet more of them are attracted to Social Sciences or Humanities subjects instead of the traditional professions.

Similar to the Cream, most of the Achievers (seven) have alternate offers of undergraduate programs from different universities with their DSE scores, but these offers are not their most preferred choice. For example, Student G03 got a scholarship from her secondary school to study Mechanical Engineering in a UK university, an offer from City University of Hong Kong for Multimedia Studies, as well as an offer from Wuhan University in Medicine. She decided to enroll Sun Yat-sen University's medical program as she has aspired to become a medical doctor since primary school, and the location is closer. Another Achiever, Student B07, claimed that she never thought she could study Law in Hong Kong. Her DSE results are 4, 3, 3, 4 in four core subjects, which is far lagging behind the admission criteria of Law schools in Hong Kong. She felt lucky when known that she was admitted by China University of Political Science and Law, hence giving up the offer of Marketing program from Hong Kong PolyU. It entails a choice between multiple options, and the quest for specific subjects has become the major reason of the decision to study in Mainland universities. This reflects that with clear academic or career aspirations, the Achievers have adopted proactive strategy to plan their study path through applying different admission channels for Bachelor programs. The family background and the secondary schools of the Achievers are more diverse as compared with the Cream.

#### *Scenario 3: the opportunists*

The third scenario involves 13 students who have average academic capability (from 10 to 17 marks in four core subjects) and do not have clear academic or career orientation. Ten of them are females, and three are males. Six of them are locally born, and four are new migrants. They are neither targeted to pursue on a specific field or discipline of study, nor

have any clear career goals. Instead, they have multiple interests, and are more dynamic in making their study choice. They are studying in diverse locations when compared with the other four scenarios (Figure 4). Five of them are in Guangdong, three in Shanghai, two in Beijing, two in Fujian and one in Wuhan. Nine of them are admitted through DSE Admission Scheme. One of them has taken the Individual Entrance Examination of Sun Yat-sen University, and three of them entered through the Direct Admission channel of Jinan University after DSE examination results were announced. The deficiency in English is one factor limiting their choice. Four students got Grade 2 in English Language in DSE examination which made them unable to enter Hong Kong universities.

Amongst the Opportunists, six of them got alternate offers of Bachelor programs from Hong Kong. However, most are not the generally recognized top three, namely, HKU, CUHK and HKUST. For example, Student G04 enrolled in Medicine from Sun Yat-sen University, and gave up a Nursing program from a public hospital in Hong Kong, which will path her way to become a registered nurse. When looking back after one year's study in Mainland, she started to realize that the academic pressure was so huge that she felt regretful of not accepting the nursing offer.

Another five students received offers from Associate Degree in Hong Kong. To them, the option of going to the Mainland is more appealing as they can have a Bachelor degree directly, without having the hazard of finding an articulation for degree after the two-year program. The decision of this group of students is much easier.

For the selection of Mainland universities, the Opportunists do not have strong preference to enter specific program or university; rather, it is a matching of the admission criteria and their examination scores. Some selected integrated universities, like Wuhan University, Xiamen University. Although these are renowned universities in Mainland China, some interviewed students were not familiar with them when they made the decision to enroll the programs. For example, when asked why choose Wuhan University, Student M01 said:

No particular reason. Just that I meet the minimum admission requirement [...] September when the semester begins, that is the first time that I been there.

His ideal university is Xiamen University as his parents came from Fujian.

Most of the students (eight) are studying business-related subjects, like Accounting, Management, Law, etc. It is interesting to identify that some students entering professional programs, such as Law, Medicine and Chinese Medicine, have made the selection based on the opportunities that arise at the moment, instead of having clear aspiration and early planning. For example, Student S06 studying Law in China University of Political Science and Law said that this was her fourth (the last) choice in DSE Admission Scheme. Her most preferred program was German and so she selected Tongji University with heritage from Germany as her first choice. As she only got Grade 2 in Mathematics, she missed it. Nevertheless, she got offers of Bachelor program on Journalism from both Hang Seng Management College and Hong Kong Shue Yan University. Her rationale of choosing Law in Mainland university is primarily for a future job prospect as a lawyer.

#### *Scenario 4: the loyalists*

The next scenario comprises of ten students who selected to study in Mainland universities as their first choice. The three groups of students previously discussed fundamentally treat this as a backup or second-rated option. Half of them (five) are locally born, and three are new migrants. There are five males and five females. Most of the Loyalists (seven out of ten) chose Guangzhou as their ideal location of study as shown in Figure 4, of which four enrolled in Sun Yat-sen University and two in Jinan University.

The subject of study is a major reason for them to choose Mainland as their most preferred study path. Three students are studying Chinese Medicine, one in Beijing (Student B10), one in Shanghai (Student S09) and one in Guangdong (Student G16). Becoming Chinese Medicine practitioners is a strong pull factor for them to go northwards. For example, Student S09, whose mother is a registered Chinese Medicine practitioner, entered Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine through JEE PRC. Similarly, Student B10 also entered through this examination as she considered her English standard is a hindrance of getting a good job in Hong Kong. Studying Chinese Medicine becomes her aspired career path.

Two students (Students G02 and G05) chose Medicine program in Sun Yat-sen University as they conceived that its quality is amongst the highest in the southern part of Mainland China. Both have strong interest to pursue the career of a medical doctor, but consider their academic scores not eligible to enter Hong Kong universities. As recalled by Student G05:

When filling in JUPAS, there are over 20 choices. As I am aspired to become a doctor, I know my academic scores are definitely not adequate, but I still want to give myself some hope. Besides Medicine, I put PolyU's Physiotherapy etc. those related to medical.

With clear academic and career aspirations, half of them (five) entered the Mainland universities through DSE Admission Scheme. The other through different admission channels, one through Secondary School Principal Nomination Scheme, two through JEE PRC, one through Individual Examination (Sun Yat-sen University) and one through Direct Admission (Jinan University). Similar to the Achievers, they have adopted proactive strategy to plan their study path through applying different admission channels for their aspired programs in Mainland.

Regarding the academic performance of the Loyalists, it varies. For example, Student G07 attained 19 marks aimed at Sun Yat-sen University as inspired by her elder brother who attended the same university one year ago. She has strong interest in Archeology, and declined the offer of History in CUHK. Both Medicine students (Students G02 and G05) got average scores of 16, whilst Student G12 majoring in Accounting in Jinan University admitted that her English is relatively poor, and this is one reason that she cannot enter a Hong Kong Bachelor program in Accounting. Most of the Loyalists are from the lower working class, and nine out of the ten students came from secondary schools which used Chinese as the media of instructions.

To sum up, first, the Loyalists are strongly pulled by favorable factors in the Mainland, in particular, program like Chinese Medicine, and, second, they have exerted every effort to pursue this path. Finally, most of them come from the less privileged class.

#### *Scenario 5: the passive recipients*

The last scenario involves ten students who attained lower academic performance and did not have clear academic or career objective. Eight of them are males, and two are females. Five of them are locally born, and two are new migrants. None of them are studying in Beijing or Shanghai, whilst five in Fujian (Huaqiao University) and two in Guangdong (Jinan University). Huaqiao and Jinan Universities have long heritage of enrolling Hong Kong students through different channels. Thus, students with lower examination scores will treat this as the last resort. As mentioned by Students G09, F03 and F04, their standard of English was a major hindrance limiting their choice of universities. Both Students F03 and F04 took TU JEE and gained admission to Huaqiao University, both studying Engineering programs. They said that in Hong Kong, only talented students with high academic achievement can study Engineering, whilst in Huaqiao University, they met the admission requirements. They selected this discipline because it is most famous in this

University. After years of study, they realized that the academic pressure was extremely high, and they had failed in some subjects. They expressed that upon graduation, they may not pursue the profession of engineers.

Other than Engineering, other students in this group chose business-related subjects. For example, Student M03 majoring in International Finance in Sichuan University considered that what to be studied in this major should be similar across all universities, and it will be more favorable for finding jobs after graduation.

Regarding the admission channels, it varies a lot. Two students entered through DSE Admission Scheme (one with two-year combined results), two through JEE PRC, two took TU JEE, one through Direct Admission Scheme to Huaqiao University. Another pathway for the lower tier examination scorers is the Preparatory Course of Huaqiao and Jinan Universities. For example, Student S06 entered Huaqiao University's one-year preparatory course before articulating to its Bachelor program on Project Management of Engineering. Besides facing heavy academic pressure in class, she found it difficult to find an internship opportunity from engineering firm which is a prerequisite to graduate. Student G08, who got 10 marks in DSE examination, also joined the preparatory course of Jinan University, then articulating to the program of International Finance. He found it satisfactory as this is the only feasible path for him to obtain the credential of a degree. As he recalled, "Facing the dead-end, there is a door." All passive recipients did not have alternate offers for both Bachelor or Associate Degree with their academic scores.

The findings reveal that similar to the Loyalists, most of the passive recipients come from the working class, parents' education at secondary level, studied in the secondary schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction.

## Discussion

The study reveals that students with higher academic scores and clear academic/career aspirations have utilized the fast track path of the Secondary Principal Nomination Scheme to enter the top three elite universities: Peking, Tsinghua and Fudan Universities. However, these students are from the twenty plus traditional elite and pro-Beijing patriotic schools. For the other students in the mainstream secondary schools, some can gain admission to their preferred programs through DSE Admission Scheme, when the other offers are not their most preferred choice. The majority (over 80 percent) of the interviewed students treat the study path to the Chinese Mainland as a backup or second-rated option rather than a first choice. This study confirms earlier research that the push factor of inability to gain access to a preferred local program or university is a primary reason of leaving one's home town (Altbach, 1998). Under a highly stratified education system in Hong Kong, academic capability is a salient factor which determines the available options of students. With a lower grade in the English subject, irrespective of their family origins of whether born in Hong Kong, some students envisage this educational pathway as a fallback.

That students hold an optimistic view of China's economic development and career prospects is a key pull factor (Hu *et al.*, 2016; Jiani, 2017), regardless of the students' social class. Students coming from different family backgrounds share similar views on this. All students considered that the broader exposure and social network gained through studying in the Chinese Mainland will help their future development. The reason of the reluctance of some teenagers to go northwards is the perception that the academic qualification earned there may not be recognized in Hong Kong. They also recognize the differences in language and professional practices. In short, some of them question the relevance of the knowledge obtained in academic programs (Central Policy Unit, 2016). As pragmatic opportunists (Dimmock and Leong, 2010), some students value the "China factor" as a desirable educational pathway.

**Policies recommendations**

Since the implementation of the Admission Scheme in 2012, the number of applicants is rather stable, irrespective of the political situation under the Occupy Central in 2014 when the youth's sentiment was aroused. The students' perceptions have not been particularly affected. In recent years, especially during the post-2014 period, new economic, socio-cultural and political factors emerge. First, from the economic perspective, the interconnectedness and interrelations with Mainland China are propelling. Hong Kong assumes a role on the Belt and Road Initiative, and is integrated as part of the Greater Bay Area Initiative. Second, on the socio-cultural aspects, the demographics of Hong Kong have undergone changes. According to the 2016 Population By-census Report (HKCSD, 2018), because of continuous inflow of young one-way permit holders from Mainland China over the past ten years, the percentage of youths who were born in Mainland rose slightly from 20.4 percent in 2006 to 21.2 percent in 2016. Recent statistics reveal that in 2016, there were over 10,000 Mainland teenagers aged 10–19 came and settled in Hong Kong, while there were only around 5,000 per year in the preceding four years (Hong Kong Legco, 2017). To what extent will this affect the popularity of the scheme is worth investigating. Third, coupled with the high property costs, downgrading of bachelor credentials, the seemingly lack of social mobility in Hong Kong has raised socio-political awareness.

The study path to Mainland universities can be considered as an alternative for upward social mobility, especially for the lower or under-privileged classes, with the preferential treatment with low tuition fees, government subsidies and scholarships. In 2017, Mainland China offers RMB15m more each year into a scholarship fund for Hong Kong and Macao students enrolled in Mainland universities, and adds a new criterion that they must “love the motherland and uphold the “One Country, Two Systems’ policy.” Moreover, if Hong Kong employees work in the Mainland, they can join China’s housing fund, which can be used to apply for low-interest housing loans to buy property or for rent.

To boost the level of acceptance of the scheme, the following suggestions are made. First, at the macro-level, three Thematic Household Surveys on Hong Kong students studying outside Hong Kong were conducted in 2002, 2005 and 2012. With the launch of the new DSE Admission Scheme since 2012, it is about time to conduct the fourth survey on the same topic. A territory-wide survey is of utmost importance in providing useful, timely and comprehensive data for planning and policy making purposes.

Second, there are six cohorts of student intakes since 2012, with the first cohort graduated in 2016. It is the appropriate time for Hong Kong Government to conduct a comprehensive review of the DSE Admission Scheme to evaluate its effectiveness. It is found that detailed statistics are not available. For example, the official data only provided the number of students admitted, but neither on the students who actually enrolled for the programs, nor statistics accessible on the drop-out rate of students. Only data of enrollments on 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 were released in the Legco paper. Indeed, other admission channels like JEE PRC and individual examinations remain the major admission paths. Moreover, the educational outcomes, students’ learning experiences, level of satisfaction and post-graduation development need in-depth investigation.

Third, there should be better coordination between different departments in supporting Hong Kong students studying in Mainland and job placement after graduation. For example, Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau has set up liaison offices in different cities in the Mainland. It should make concerted effort with Education Bureau in facilitating the students who are interested to pursue education in those cities. For job placement, a new website has been set up to help the graduates find jobs. Labor Department could help encourage job postings from more organizations, and more recruitment talks have to be arranged.

Fourth, in secondary schools, there should be more active promotion activities of the scheme to the students and parents. For some elite and patriotic schools, they have long heritage and connections with Mainland universities. But for government schools, for example, as informed by the interviewed students, there is a minimal level of promotion, only by putting the booklets on the information desk.

Fifth, the option of studying in Mainland universities shall be integrated as part of the career guidance in all secondary schools, at best started at Form 1, which has been practiced in a few schools. Parents will then be aware of this alternative in advance. It is of particular importance to the working-class families who are unlikely to send students abroad if they cannot enter local universities.

Sixth, due to the different academic systems in the secondary and tertiary education in the Mainland and Hong Kong, there should be closer alliances between Mainland universities and Hong Kong secondary schools. Through more exchanges or study trips to different universities, secondary school students, teachers and principals can have more in-depth understandings on the programs, teaching and learning environment. Some universities in Guangzhou and Fujian have actively invited Hong Kong secondary schools for such exchanges regularly. This shall be extended to universities in other cities.

To conclude, whether studying locally or in the Mainland is a complex decision involving not only the students and their parents, but also significantly influenced by teachers and principals of secondary schools, and the community. In spite of the efforts from Mainland and Hong Kong Governments in providing various incentives for Hong Kong students, the acceptance of the Admission Scheme is confined to certain groups of students like the Loyalists. Thorough policy review as well as longitudinal studies on the students and graduates' development will be instrumental in order to better utilize this channel of university access.

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