

Hong Kong's Higher Education Hub Ambitions: Perspectives of PhD Students

Ewan Wright

The Hong Kong government has ambitions to establish its higher education system as a world-class education hub. A flagship initiative is the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme, which aims to attract the “best and brightest” PhD students globally. Evidence demonstrates success in recruiting talented students, delivering high-quality academic training, and preparing graduates for academic careers. Nonetheless, further policy efforts are required to overcome deeply embedded hierarchies in global higher education that still privilege Western universities.

For a long time, Western (primarily Anglo-American) universities have dominated global research in terms of agenda setting, prestige, and resources. Yet research capacity is gradually becoming more distributed across higher education systems worldwide. Similar dynamics are playing out in doctoral students’ recruitment and training, particularly regarding the geographic locations in which they pursue their studies. It has been widely proclaimed that student mobility is in “flux,” with emerging mobilities challenging dominant flows to universities in the West. Perhaps most notably, East Asian higher education systems are recruiting more doctoral students, through intraregional mobility within East Asia but also via interregional ties across Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Political developments in many Western countries may well accelerate these trends as geopolitical tensions, immigration tightening, and funding cuts constrain international student recruitment. However, patterns of mobility and ideas of status in global higher education are “sticky,” meaning that changes can be slow, uneven, and require concerted policy support.

A Higher Education Hub in Hong Kong

Against this backdrop, governments across East Asia are striving to establish higher education hubs, positioning their higher education systems as centers of world-class education, training, and knowledge production. These initiatives include policies to attract doctoral students from around the world who can actively contribute to universities during their studies and potentially become long-term skilled migrants. At a deeper level, education hubs are linked with ambitions to expand the scope, standards, and standing of higher education systems on the global stage. Hong Kong, with its English-language and internationally facing universities (several universities are consistently ranked among the top 100 globally), is well-positioned to become a higher education hub and capitalize on shifting student mobility dynamics. Indeed, the Hong Kong Chief Executive’s 2025 Policy Address directly references an education hub strategy, setting targets for universities to draw more international talent.

The Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme

A flagship initiative is the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS), which aims to attract the “best and brightest” globally to pursue a PhD in Hong Kong. This scheme, established by Hong Kong’s Research Grants Council, is open to both local and non-local students (students from the Chinese mainland and other locations outside Hong Kong). For the 2026–27 academic year, the HKPFS provides an annual stipend of US\$43,690 along with a conference- and research-related travel allowance of US\$1,820 per year for 400 new PhD students. These HKPFS recipients represent a minority of the over 10,000 doctoral students in Hong Kong’s universities, selected according to the following criteria: academic excellence, research ability and potential, communication and interpersonal skills, and leadership abilities.

A research team based at the Education University of Hong Kong recently sought to evaluate the success of the HKPFS—and Hong Kong’s higher education hub ambitions more broadly—by exploring several factors: the motivations behind students’ decisions to pursue PhD studies in Hong Kong, their experiences during their PhD programs, and their subsequent career outcomes. Funded by the Public Policy Research Funding Scheme of the Hong Kong Government, [the project](#) gathered survey data from current non-local HKPFS students. The survey was followed by in-depth interviews with current HKPFS students and HKPFS graduates in a range of academic disciplines and from all of Hong Kong’s publicly funded universities.

Perspectives of Hong Kong PhD Students

A common theme expressed by the participants was that the Hong Kong PhD was “underrated.” The survey found that the HKPFS attracts talented PhD students worldwide: the sample included 43 nationalities, with over half from outside the Chinese mainland. Nearly half held master degrees from top-100 globally ranked universities, meaning they were competitive PhD candidates in global higher education. In the interviews, Chinese mainland students often discussed Hong Kong as a first

choice owing to familiarity and regard for its universities. For others, however, Hong Kong was a less obvious choice compared to Western higher education systems or universities in their home countries. These students were typically met with the question “Why Hong Kong?” from peers, suggesting their choice departed from more established PhD destinations. Most had at least some connection with Hong Kong or Hong Kong’s academia, with the HKPFS scholarship often proving decisive in their decision making.

Additionally, the survey highlighted the students’ high academic productivity: 70.4 percent had presented at an international conference, 56.5 percent had published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, and 44.3 percent had published in SSCI-/SCI-indexed journals. Interviewees generally reported very positive views about their PhD academic training, perceiving it as equal in quality to leading universities in the West. They discussed professors’ international standing, ample resources for research activities (e.g., international conferences), and an academic culture oriented toward productivity. Yet they also noted that many professors had received academic training from Western universities, indicative of a preference for Western-trained faculty.

Furthermore, three-quarters of survey respondents were planning to pursue academic careers, with two-fifths aiming to work in Hong Kong’s academia. Still, interviews revealed a certain ambivalence about career prospects. Universities in the West were deemed to favor domestically trained graduates. A perceived preference for Western-trained academics, particularly from elite universities, extended to Hong Kong. One participant described a feeling that “Hong Kong’s universities don’t value their own graduates.” Many observed that only the most competitive Hong Kong PhD graduates could secure tenure-track academic jobs in Hong Kong, including those with outstanding publication records and prior degrees from elite overseas universities. Despite this, a Hong Kong PhD could

serve as a springboard for academic careers upon returning home or pursuing further mobility, especially in the Chinese mainland and across Asia. Over two-thirds of interviewed graduates were working in academia worldwide, but only a small proportion (14 percent) were at Hong Kong’s universities.

The Hong Kong PhD in Global Higher Education

Hong Kong is a rising higher education hub. As a key example, through the HKPFS, Hong Kong’s universities are attracting talented PhD students globally, providing high-quality academic training, and preparing graduates for academic careers worldwide. At the same time, “sticky” patterns of mobility and status in global higher education persist, contributing to the notion of the Hong Kong PhD being “underrated.” Hong Kong remains a less obvious study destination, indicating that more should be done to raise awareness of PhD opportunities. The students emphasized the quality of their PhD studies in Hong Kong. They simultaneously believed that Hong Kong’s universities prefer to hire Western-trained academics, suggesting that global higher education hierarchies remain influential even within systems aiming to challenge them. Although this preference may partly reflect efforts to avoid “academic inbreeding” in recruitment, education hubs’ long-term success seems contingent on domestic employment opportunities for graduates. Nonetheless, the Hong Kong PhD served a different role for many students: it provided significant opportunities for academic careers outside Hong Kong or the West. This implies that a smart education hub strategy would be to target collaborations, mobility, and networks across Asia and other contexts where the higher education system is already highly regarded instead of being overly concerned with the West. Forging a new path in global higher education, rather than seeking to overturn existing hierarchies, is likely Hong Kong’s best bet to cement its position as a world-class education hub.

Ewan Wright is an associate professor in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the Education University of Hong Kong. Email: etmwright@eduhk.hk.