



香港恒生大學
THE HANG SENG UNIVERSITY
OF HONG KONG

跨學科學院
School of Transdisciplinary Studies

Strategies to Attract and Retain High-Calibre Doctoral Talents in Hong Kong

Research
Brief

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research brief reports preliminary findings from the project ***Strategies to Attract and Retain High-Calibre Doctoral Talents in Hong Kong***, funded by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region through the **Public Policy Research Funding Scheme** (Project Number: **E2025.B12.011**). Led by **Prof. MOK, Ka-Ho Joshua** and his research team, the project responds to growing global competition for doctoral talent and to Hong Kong’s ambition to strengthen its position as an international education and talent hub. The study is set against major changes in international higher education, including the rise of Asian education hubs, intensifying competition for skilled talent, the impact of COVID-19, and the growing influence of geopolitical uncertainty, visa changes, and global instability on student mobility.

The aim of the research is to understand how Hong Kong can develop more effective strategies to attract, support, and retain high-calibre doctoral talent, while comparing its policy approach with those of the United Kingdom, Singapore, and Malaysia. The wider project uses a four-phase mixed-methods design combining policy document analysis, qualitative interviews, survey research, and social listening. This brief focuses mainly on evidence from the policy analysis, survey, and some interviews. Together, these findings show that Hong Kong is well positioned as a competitive destination for doctoral talent, but its long-term success depends on moving beyond attraction to stronger retention. Hong Kong performs strongly because of its generous doctoral funding, English-medium learning environment, globally visible universities, flexible post-study pathways, and supportive dependant work rights. At the same time, the study makes clear that attraction alone is not enough.

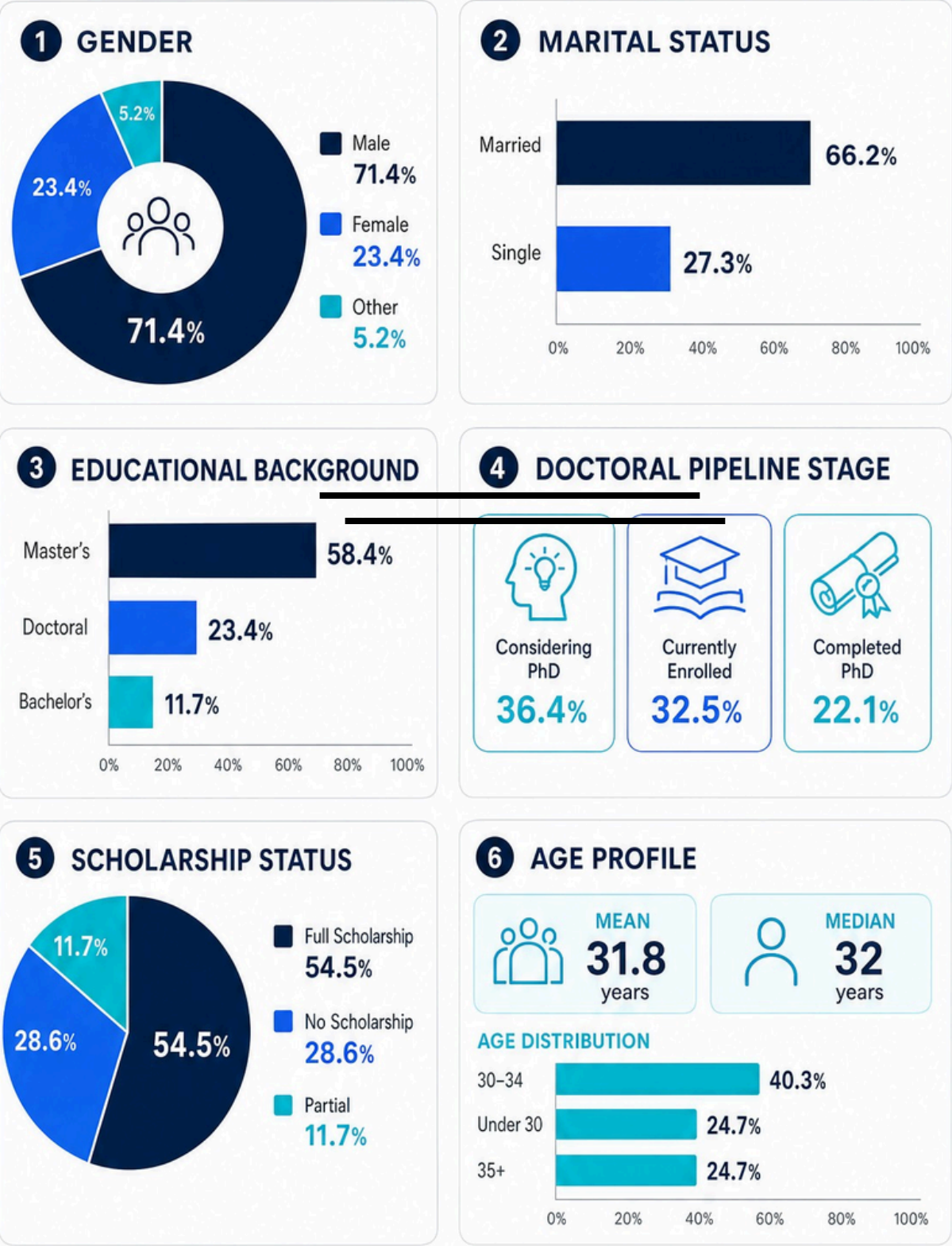
Financial difficulties, housing costs, affordability pressures, and uncertainty about career opportunities after graduation remain major concerns for doctoral students. The evidence also shows that students increasingly make decisions in light of geopolitical stability, visa predictability, and wider global uncertainty. The overall message is that Hong Kong already has many of the policy foundations needed to attract and retain doctoral talent, but clearer long-term career pathways, lower practical barriers, and stronger support across the full doctoral pipeline – from recruitment to graduation to long-term career and settlement – will be essential if this advantage is to be sustained.

Beyond funding and policy design, Hong Kong’s continued attractiveness also rests on its role as a globally connected city with strong international partnerships. Its academic institutions, cross-border collaborations, and international research networks can further strengthen doctoral students’ access to global knowledge communities, research opportunities, and long-term career pathways. This connectivity is especially important as doctoral talent increasingly considers not only financial support and rankings, but also whether a destination provides a stable, open, and internationally connected environment for research, knowledge transfer, and professional development.



PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

As at the time of this report, a total of 256 participants had responded to this survey. The survey respondents were predominantly male (71.4%), with female respondents accounting for 23.4% and 5.2% identifying as other or not specified.



Note: Total may not equal 100% because some participants did not respond to all items.

METHODOLOGY

This project adopts a four-phase mixed-methods research design to examine how Hong Kong can better attract, support and retain high-calibre doctoral talent. By combining policy analysis, interviews, survey data and social listening, the study captures both policy-level developments and the lived experiences of doctoral students across different education hubs.



Phase 1 - Policy Analysis

The project first reviews key policy documents related to doctoral education, talent attraction and talent retention in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. The analysis covers government policies, university strategies, scholarship schemes, immigration arrangements, post-study employment pathways and other support measures for doctoral students.

This phase helps identify how different education hubs position themselves in the global competition for doctoral talent. It also examines the strengths and limitations of existing policy measures, as well as the extent to which education, immigration, research, employment and quality-of-life policies are connected.



Phase 2 - Qualitative Interviews

The second phase involves more than 50 in-depth interviews with doctoral students and university leaders across the four study contexts. These interviews explore why students choose a particular study destination, how they experience doctoral education, and what factors influence their intention to stay or leave after graduation.

The interviews focus on students' first-hand experiences of funding support, academic supervision, research environment, institutional support, career prospects, immigration pathways, living costs, family considerations, social networks and global uncertainties. This phase provides rich qualitative evidence on the motivations, challenges and expectations of doctoral talent.



Phase 3 - Quantitative Survey

The third phase conducts a quantitative survey to examine broader patterns of doctoral mobility. The survey collects data on students' background, study destination choices, decision-making factors, learning experiences and post-graduation plans.

Through quantitative analysis, this phase identifies the relative importance of different factors shaping doctoral mobility, such as university reputation, research opportunities, scholarship support, visa arrangements, employment prospects, cost of living, quality of life and family support. The survey findings help provide a wider picture of mobility trends beyond individual interview cases.



Phase 4 - Social Listening

The fourth phase uses social listening to examine emerging online discussions and public sentiments related to doctoral studies and international student mobility. The research team analyses relevant digital platforms, social media discussions, online forums and student communities to understand the concerns and expectations of prospective and current doctoral students.

This phase captures real-time trends that may not be fully reflected in official policy documents or formal interviews. It helps identify students' views on destination attractiveness, scholarship competitiveness, visa uncertainty, research opportunities, employment prospects, living costs, safety, family relocation and geopolitical concerns.

01

Findings



FINDING 1: HONG KONG IS THE TOP-RATED PHD DESTINATION

Average Willingness to Pursue PhD in Selected Countries (1–10)

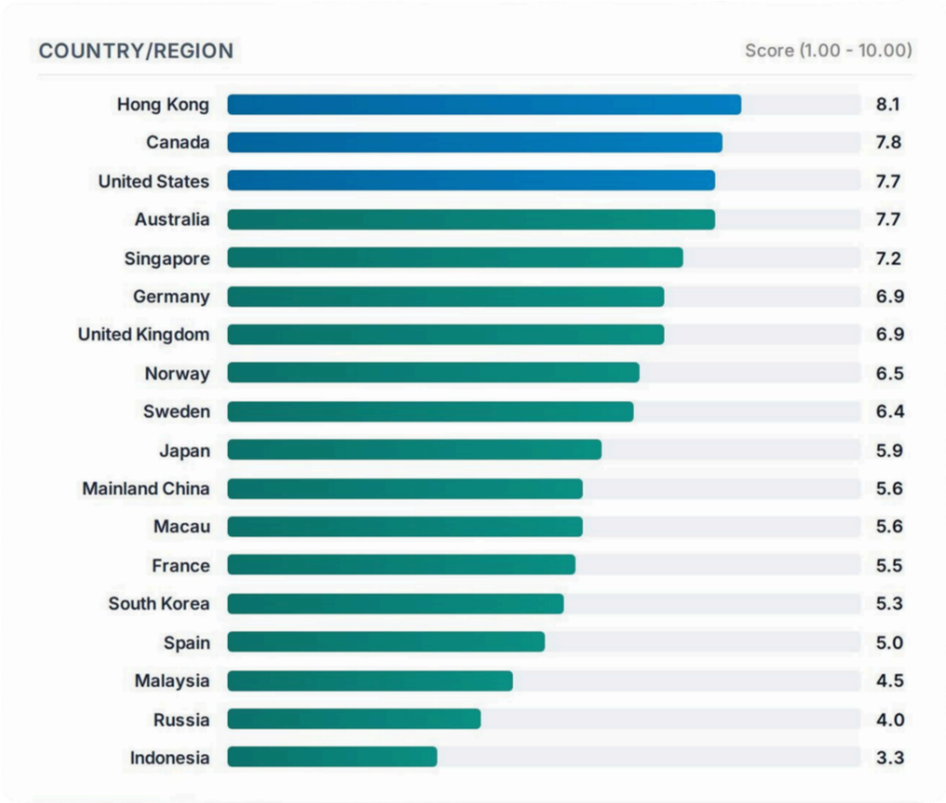


Figure 1. Preferred PhD Study Destinations by Country



ANALYSIS

Hong Kong was the most preferred PhD destination among the places assessed in the survey. Respondents rated it ahead of Singapore, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, showing that Hong Kong is seen as a strong and competitive doctoral study destination.

What the policy analysis shows: The policy review suggests that Hong Kong combines strong scholarships, flexible post-study pathways, a globally visible research environment, and strong international connectivity, helping to explain why it stands out as a preferred destination. Its international partnerships and cross-border collaborations can further enhance doctoral students’ access to global research networks and future career opportunities (Refer to Table 1 – Finding 7).

Key evidence from the Survey: Hong Kong recorded the highest average willingness score among all destinations assessed.

8.1
/10

TAKEAWAY

Hong Kong already has strong international appeal, but it must build on this advantage to remain competitive.

FINDING 2:

SCHOLARSHIPS MATTER MOST IN DESTINATION CHOICE

Study Destination Choice Factors (1–10)



Figure 2. Key Factors Influencing Where Students Choose to Pursue a PhD



ANALYSIS

Scholarships and tuition support were the strongest factors shaping where students want to study for a PhD. This was followed by English-medium of instruction, tuition costs, safety, and employment prospects.

What the policy analysis shows: The policy review shows that Hong Kong offers the highest annual doctoral stipend among the four systems reviewed, along with full tuition support and expanded fellowship quotas, making funding one of its clearest strengths (Refer to Table 1 – Finding 7).

Key evidence: Funding support ranked above all other destination-choice factors in the survey.



TAKEAWAY

Strong scholarship support remains essential for attracting high-calibre doctoral students.

FINDING 3:

FINANCIAL PRESSURE REMAINS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE



Figure 3. Barriers to Pursuing a PhD Abroad



ANALYSIS

Even though students value doctoral education highly, financial difficulties remain their most commonly reported challenge. This shows that access to funding does not remove everyday economic pressure, especially in high-cost environments.

What the policy analysis shows: While Hong Kong performs strongly on scholarships, the policy review also shows that Hong Kong is among the most expensive locations for living and family relocation, which weakens the practical value of generous funding (Refer to Table 1 – Finding 7).

Key evidence: Financial difficulties ranked as the top challenge reported by survey respondents.



TAKEAWAY

Financial support must be paired with wider cost-of-living measures if Hong Kong wants to retain talent.

FINDING 4:

CAREER PATHWAYS SHAPE WHETHER STUDENTS STAY

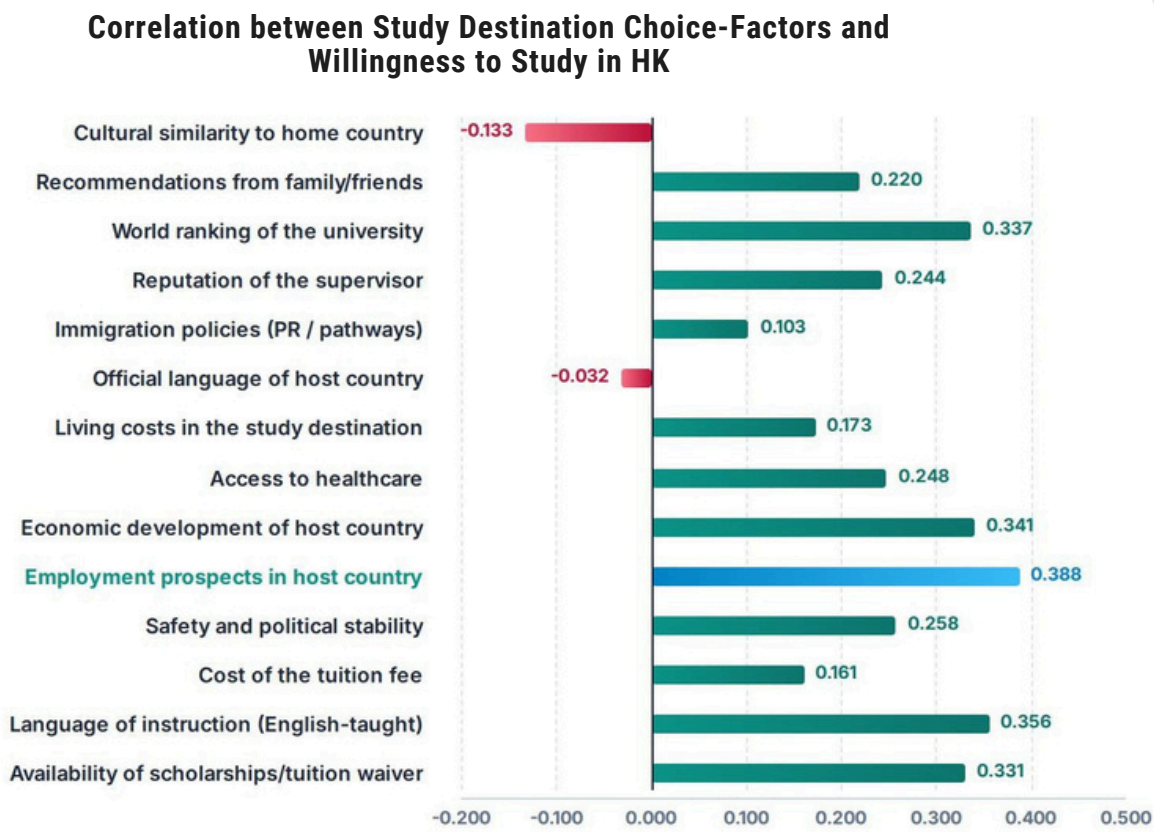


Figure 4. Relationship Between Study Destination Factors and Willingness to Study in Hong Kong



ANALYSIS

Career opportunities after graduation strongly influence whether doctoral students want to remain in the host location. Students are more likely to stay when they can see clear pathways into research, academic, or professional careers.

What the policy analysis shows: Hong Kong’s IANG arrangement, post-PhD R&D subsidy, and broader talent visa architecture give doctoral graduates a more flexible transition pathway than some competing systems, strengthening its retention potential (Refer to Table 1 – Finding 7).

Key evidence: Career prospects after graduation were one of the strongest factors linked to stay intentions.



TAKEAWAY

Retention depends not only on study experience, but also on what happens after graduation.

FINDING 5:

RETENTION INTENTIONS ARE HIGH

Willingness to Stay in Hong Kong After PhD (% of respondents)

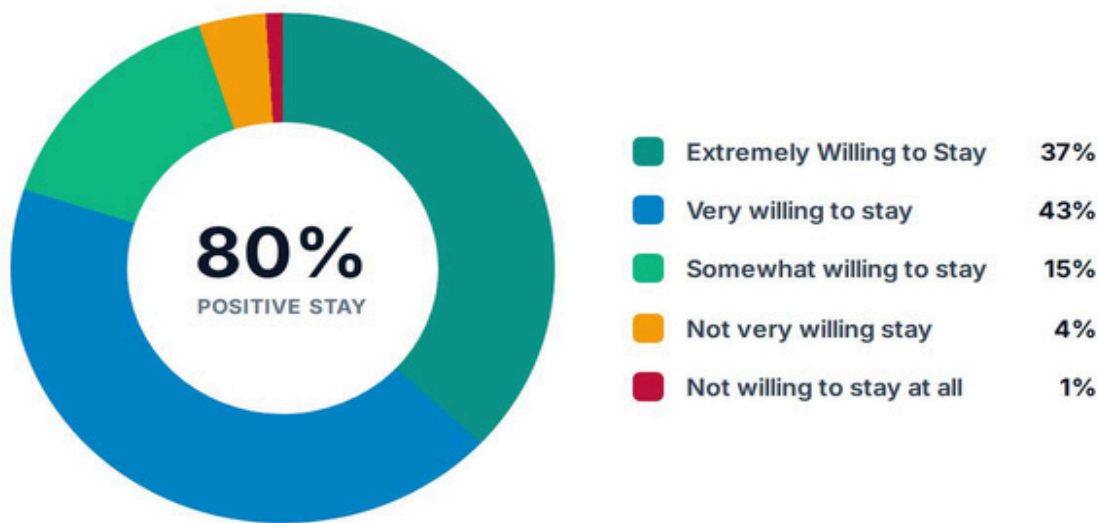


Figure 5. Willingness to Remain in Hong Kong After Completing a PhD



ANALYSIS

Most respondents said they were very willing or extremely willing to remain in the host location after graduation if conditions were favourable. This suggests that doctoral students are open to long-term settlement when they feel supported.

What the policy analysis shows: The comparative review indicates that clear post-study pathways, accessible visa arrangements, and supportive dependant rights are important policy conditions that can help turn positive intentions into actual long-term retention (Refer to Table 1 – Finding 7).

Key Survey Evidence: A strong majority of respondents expressed positive intentions to stay after completing their PhD.



TAKEAWAY

Hong Kong has a strong opportunity to convert student mobility into long-term talent retention.

FINDING 6: HONG KONG IS ESPECIALLY STRONG AT RETAINING TALENT

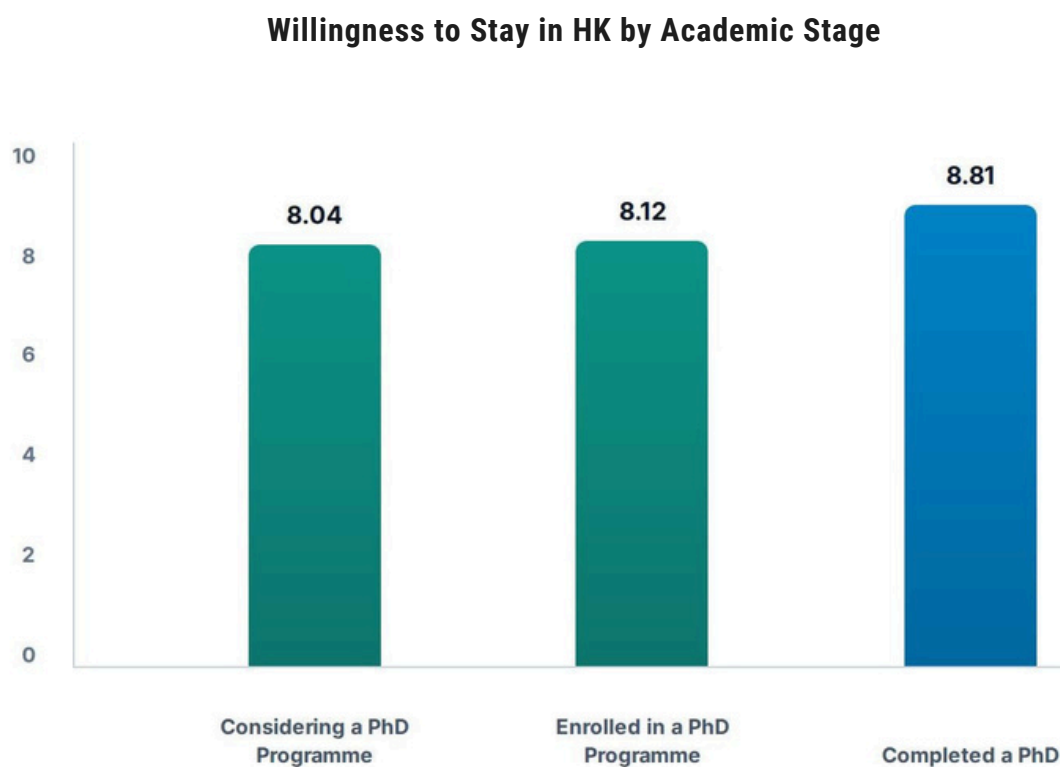


Figure 6. Willingness to Stay in Hong Kong by Academic Stage



ANALYSIS

The evidence suggests that Hong Kong’s strongest advantage may be at the retention stage. Interest in Hong Kong rises among respondents who are already enrolled in doctoral study or who have completed a PhD.

What the policy analysis shows: Hong Kong performs especially well on post-study stay options, talent pathways without immediate job offers, and access to postdoctoral support, all of which reinforce its capacity to keep doctoral talent after graduation (Refer to Table 1 – Finding 7).

Key evidence: Hong Kong’s attractiveness was strongest among more advanced doctoral groups in the academic pipeline.



TAKEAWAY

Hong Kong should invest not only in recruitment, but especially in post-study retention measures.

FINDING 7: GEOPOLITICAL STABILITY AND GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY NOW SHAPE DOCTORAL MOBILITY

Quotes from International Doctoral Students in Hong Kong



With everything happening globally, I wanted to choose somewhere stable where international students are still welcomed

Hong Kong PhD Student from Myanmar



I paid attention to how governments around the world handled the COVID-19, and the way Hong Kong's government managed the COVID-19 was one of the factors that influenced my decision.

Hong Kong PhD Student from Ghana



ANALYSIS

Doctoral students increasingly choose study destinations not only for academic quality and funding, but also for geopolitical stability, visa predictability, safety, and the wider global environment. In a more uncertain world, students are paying closer attention to whether a destination feels stable, open, and reliable over the full course of doctoral study and beyond.

What the policy analysis shows: The comparative policy review suggests that immigration flexibility, post-study certainty, and broader governance stability now matter alongside scholarships and research reputation. Hong Kong's relative strength lies in its flexible post-study pathways and talent visa arrangements, but global uncertainty and changing geopolitical conditions remain important factors shaping international perceptions.

Key evidence: The qualitative evidence shows that COVID-19 disruptions, geopolitical tensions, and changing visa policies are increasingly influencing doctoral mobility decisions and destination attractiveness.



TAKEAWAY

Talent attraction is no longer only about scholarships or rankings – it is also about whether students see a destination as stable, predictable, and internationally connected.

02

Final Summary



POLICY STRENGTHS ARE CLEAR, BUT LIVING COSTS REMAIN A BARRIER

Hong Kong’s relative position on each policy dimension
(qualitative ranking of the four jurisdictions – Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia,
and the United Kingdom)
(Table 1)

Dimension	Strongest	2nd	3rd	Weakest	HK Position
Post-study stay window	UK (36 mths)	HK (24 mths)	SG (12 mths)	MY (n/a)	★★★★☆ (2nd)
Talent visa without job offer	HK (TTPS)	UK (Global Talent)	SG (limited)	MY (n/a)	★★★★★ (Joint 1st)
Doctoral stipend (USD)	HK (US\$43.7k)	SG (US\$24–29k)	UK (US\$23–26k)	MY (US\$3.2k)	★★★★★ (1st)
Quota / national fellowships	UK (5,000+)	HK (400 from 26/27)	SG (240)	MY (limited)	★★★★☆ (2nd)
Universities in QS Top 100	UK (17)	HK (5)	SG (2)	MY (1)	★★★★☆ (2nd)
Dependant work rights for PhD students	HK / UK (full)	HK / UK (full)	SG (rarely)	MY (rarely)	★★★★★ (Joint 1st)
Cost burden of family relocation	MY (lowest)	UK (mid)	SG (high)	HK (highest)	★★★☆☆ (Joint 4th)

Star scale: ★★★★★ = strongest | ★★★★☆ = strong | ★★★☆☆ = moderate | ★★☆☆☆ = limited | ★☆☆☆☆ = weakest. Rankings are qualitative summaries of policy documents to support cross-dimensional interpretation — not weighted composite scores.



ANALYSIS

The policy review shows that Hong Kong performs strongly in scholarship provision, post-study pathways, and dependant work rights. However, high living costs and family-related expenses remain important barriers that may weaken attraction and retention.

What the policy analysis shows: Across the five comparative tables, Hong Kong ranks first or near first on several policy dimensions, but it performs weakest on the affordability of family relocation and cost burden, highlighting a major implementation gap.

Key evidence: Policy analysis identified strong institutional advantages, but also highlighted cost-related pressure points.



TAKEAWAY

Hong Kong’s policy framework is strong, but affordability remains one of its biggest practical challenges.

HONG KONG'S COMPARATIVE POSITION

Taken together, the policy analysis shows that Hong Kong has strong foundations for attracting and retaining doctoral talent. It performs particularly well on doctoral funding, talent visa flexibility, dependant work rights, and remains competitive on post-study pathways, research environment, and international connectivity. However, these strengths are weakened by high living costs and the cost burden of family relocation. The wider implication is clear: strong scholarships and research reputation can attract doctoral students, but long-term retention depends on whether graduates can see a realistic, affordable, and globally connected future in Hong Kong. Hong Kong can further leverage its international partnerships and its strategic position within the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area to expand research collaboration, knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship, and cross-border career opportunities. This means that support should extend beyond recruitment to include career pathways, research infrastructure, housing, family support, and a stronger multi-stakeholder ecosystem that enables doctoral talent to stay, collaborate, innovate, and thrive.

- **Key strengths:** doctoral funding, talent visa flexibility, dependant work rights, international connectivity
- **Competitive areas:** post-study pathways, research environment, fellowship scale, cross-border collaboration opportunities
- **Main constraint:** cost of living and family relocation burden
- **Strategic opportunity:** stronger Hong Kong–GBA collaboration, research infrastructure, knowledge transfer, and entrepreneurship ecosystem

POLICY STRENGTHS	MAIN CONSTRAINT
 Scholarships and Financial Support A wide range of scholarships and grants help reduce financial pressure and reward academic excellence and potential.	 High Cost of Living Rising living costs—including utilities, healthcare, and, for those with dependants, children's tuition—continue to place pressure on doctoral students' financial security and overall wellbeing.
 Student Visa Advantages Post-study work rights and clear visa pathways support career development and long-term opportunities in Hong Kong.	 Housing Affordability and Availability Limited affordable accommodation and high rentals in major cities make it difficult for students to find safe, convenient and sustainable housing.
 Strong Research Environment World-class universities, research infrastructure, and innovation opportunities enrich learning and build future-ready skills.	

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen post-study career pathways

Hong Kong should expand structured pathways linking doctoral graduates to academic, research, professional, and industry roles. This includes postdoctoral opportunities, industry placements, innovation-related employment, and clearer transitions into the local research and development workforce.

2. Maintain strong scholarship competitiveness

Hong Kong should continue investing in doctoral funding while ensuring that financial support keeps pace with living costs, family needs, and the wider cost of doctoral study. Scholarship competitiveness remains one of Hong Kong’s strongest attraction tools.

3. Address housing and living costs

Hong Kong should introduce targeted measures to ease the financial burden on doctoral students and their families, including coordinated housing support, cost-of-living assistance, and clearer information on affordable living options. Emerging initiatives such as the Northern Metropolis could be leveraged to expand affordable housing, student accommodation, and integrated living and working spaces that support doctoral students’ long-term settlement and research engagement.

4. Support family-friendly talent policies

Hong Kong should build on its existing dependant and work rights by improving practical support for family relocation, childcare, schooling, healthcare navigation, and long-term settlement. Such measures are especially important for mid-career doctoral students and those with family responsibilities.

5. Leverage Hong Kong’s international connectivity and partnerships

Hong Kong should further position itself as a globally connected education and research hub by strengthening international academic partnerships, joint doctoral programmes, visiting scholar schemes, and cross-border research networks. These connections can enhance the attractiveness of Hong Kong as a destination for globally mobile doctoral talent.

6. Enhance research freedom, infrastructure, and knowledge transfer.

Hong Kong should further strengthen its research environment by supporting academic and research freedom, investing in advanced research infrastructure, and promoting knowledge transfer. A strong research and knowledge transfer ecosystem can help doctoral students and graduates translate research into policy, innovation, and societal impact.

7. Promote Hong Kong–GBA collaborative opportunities.

Hong Kong should leverage the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area as a strategic platform for doctoral training, research collaboration, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Expanding cross-border opportunities would broaden doctoral students’ career prospects and enhance Hong Kong’s regional competitiveness.

8. Foster a multi-stakeholder research and entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Hong Kong should encourage stronger collaboration between universities, government agencies, industry partners, research institutes, professional bodies, and community organisations. A more integrated ecosystem can support doctoral training, research commercialisation, start-up development, and long-term talent retention.

9. Promote Hong Kong’s strengths more clearly.

Hong Kong should communicate its advantages more strategically, including its English-medium environment, research excellence, global connectivity, flexible post-study pathways, GBA opportunities, and strong international partnerships.

10. Link doctoral education to innovation and employment.

Hong Kong should strengthen university–industry collaboration so that doctoral students can see clearer pathways from research training to employment, entrepreneurship, and knowledge-based innovation after graduation.





LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study provides valuable insights into the topic, certain limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations may influence the interpretation of the findings and should be considered when applying the results to broader contexts.



1. Sample Size Constraints

The study is based on a relatively limited sample size, which may affect the statistical power and the ability to detect subtle relationships. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of perspectives within the larger population.



2. Geographic Focus

The research was conducted within specific geographic regions. Cultural, economic, and contextual factors unique to these regions may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings or populations with different characteristics.



3. Self-Reported Data Considerations

Data were collected through self-reported measures, which are subject to potential biases such as social desirability, recall inaccuracies, and subjective interpretation. These factors may influence the accuracy and reliability of the responses.

These limitations highlight areas for future research and underscore the importance of cautious interpretation when applying the findings beyond the scope of this study.





GLOSSARY

Doctoral talent	People studying for or recently completing a PhD who contribute to research, innovation, and advanced knowledge.
Retention	The ability of a place to keep talented people after they complete their studies.
Post-study pathway	The visa, employment, or settlement options available after graduation.
Education hub	A location that attracts international students and researchers because of its strong universities, policies, and research environment.
Human capital	The skills, knowledge, and abilities that people develop through education and training.



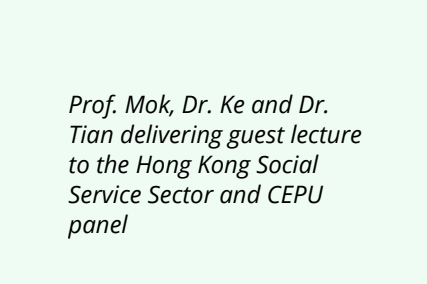
PICTURE HIGHLIGHTS

FROM THE RESEARCH ACTIVITIES IN HONG KONG, SINGAPORE, MALAYSIA, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

Hong Kong



Prof. Mok and the Project Team sharing preliminary findings with the Chief Executive's Policy Unit (CEPU) and the Press



Prof. Mok, Dr. Ke and Dr. Tian delivering guest lecture to the Hong Kong Social Service Sector and CEPU panel



The Field Trip to Singapore

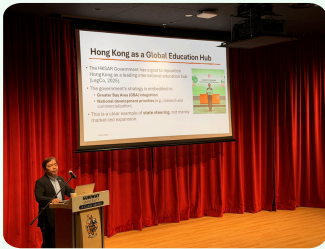


Prof. Mok's visit to Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) to present preliminary research findings and strengthen international academic collaboration.



The Field Trip to Malaysia

Prof. Mok's visit to Sunway University, Malaysia, to share preliminary research findings and strengthen international academic collaboration.

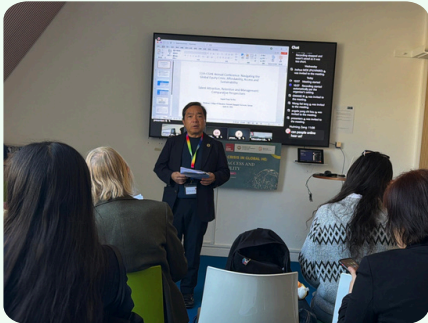


Prof. Mok's visit to Sunway University, Malaysia, to share preliminary research findings and strengthen international academic collaboration.

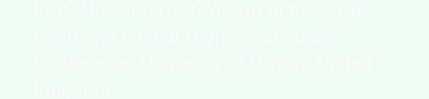


Prof. Mok and Dr. Oladosu visiting Universiti Malaya, Malaysia, to share preliminary research findings and strengthen international collaboration.

The Field Trip to the United Kingdom



Dr SZE Chun-fai, Jeff, JP (The Under Secretary for Education in Hong Kong, SAR) and Prof. Mok delivering keynote speeches on Hong Kong as an International Higher Education Hub at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom.



Prof. Mok and Dr. Oladosu at the 2026 Centre for Global Higher Education Conference, University of Oxford, United Kingdom.



RELATED NEWS ARTICLES AND PROJECT MEDIA COVERAGE

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