

# Chinese students' selection of cross-border cooperative universities for tertiary education: intrinsic and extrinsic motivations

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to investigate and identify key motivations behind Chinese students' decisions to enroll in a bachelor's degree program at a cross-border cooperative university (CBCU).

**Design/methodology/approach** – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 undergraduate students who are currently enrolled in a cross-border cooperative university (CBCU). The data were analyzed based on the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

**Findings** – Two primary motivations were identified: intrinsic motivations, including the desire for new experiences, quality educational resources, broader horizons and institutional support; and extrinsic motivations, such as constraints from Gaokao scores, uncertainties from the National College Entrance Examination system and the institution's reputation enhancing their academic credentials. Most students exhibit a combination of these motivations, which interact to influence their university choice, with variations based on individual profiles.

**Originality/value** – By examining and understanding the motivations of Chinese students, this study provides insights for higher education institutions to enhance student-centered services and highlights the benefits of educational collaboration, offering guidance for policymakers and stakeholders involved in similar initiatives.

**Keywords** Transnational higher education, Cross-border cooperative university (CBCU), International branch campuses, Greater Bay Area (GBA), Student choice, Motivation, Self-determination theory, Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a significant growth in the internationalization of higher education in China (Guo *et al.*, 2022; Huang, 2006; Wang, 2014). Part of this internationalization effort are the cooperative universities run by both Chinese and international universities, the increase in international academic programs and an integration of international, intercultural and/or global perspective into the curriculum and teaching-learning process (Knight, 2004). According to The Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT, 2023), Mainland China has emerged as one of the leading recipients of International Branch Campuses (IBCs), a prevalent form of cross-border or transnational higher education within the context of higher education internationalization. The emergence of these institutions allows Chinese institutions to directly learn from foreign partners about educational goals, standards and curricula, thereby enhancing academic quality and internationalization (Lai and Jung, 2024; Ma *et al.*, 2019; Zhuang *et al.*, 2024). Secondly, it meets the immediate demand for programs not currently available in Chinese institutions, accelerating the training of graduates with a global outlook (Huang, 2006).



As this trend continues, higher education collaboration between mainland China and Hong Kong has emerged and matured, especially in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (Greater Bay Area) in China. The GBA includes the two Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao, along with nine municipalities, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Zhuhai. The development of the Greater Bay Area is recognized as a crucial strategic initiative in the nation's development plan, playing a significant role in promoting innovation-driven growth and advancing reform and opening-up policies (Xie *et al.*, 2021; Yu, 2021). By leveraging Hong Kong's strengths in internationalization, educational collaboration aims to position the Greater Bay Area as a hub for international education and foster collaborative innovations among students in Hong Kong and Guangdong (Xie *et al.*, 2021, 2023). Examples of Mainland China–Hong Kong cooperative universities include Beijing Normal University–Hong Kong Baptist University United International College (Zhuhai), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen) and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou).

With the rise of cross-border universities and growing opportunities for students to pursue higher education outside mainland China, it is crucial to examine the factors motivating students to choose this new educational path. Previous studies have primarily addressed contextual factors and institutional characteristics in Hong Kong's cross-border branch campuses as motivational elements for Chinese students. These factors include easier adaptation due to cultural familiarity, career benefits and support offered by the government policies, pursuing cost effective higher education (Dai *et al.*, 2024). Xie *et al.* (2024) further investigate the motivational factors including institutional prestige, flexibility in major transfers, exposure to “internationalization at home”, favorable information about the institution, strategic position in the Greater Bay Area and high salary prospects post-graduation.

Given the unique geopolitical context of the GBA and the distinctive educational opportunities it offers, most studies examining why individuals pursue higher education at cross-border cooperative universities in this area focus on the institutional and policy conditions that facilitate such decisions (e.g. Mok *et al.*, 2020; Tang, 2022; Xie *et al.*, 2022). Three key gaps emerge in this research: first, these studies often assume that individuals choose these universities primarily due to “pull factors” that attract students, without fully considering the range of options students face or the possibility that some may choose these institutions due to a lack of better alternatives. Second, in line with the previous gap, limited attention has been given to how students integrate their personal aspirations – both educational and professional – within this unique geopolitical context when evaluating higher education options. Third, while existing scholarship examines factors influencing students' selection of these universities, less attention is given to how students interpret these factors and the relative importance they assign to them in their decision-making processes.

Therefore, this study asks the following question: Why do Chinese students choose to pursue a bachelor's degree at the cross-border cooperative universities? Through interviews with 12 students enrolled in these cross-border universities, the research uncovers key aspects of their decision-making processes, highlighting the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive individuals' choices, as informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000). SDT posits that individuals' motivations for actions fall broadly into two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivations refer to engaging in activities driven by a desire to fulfill inherent interests. In contrast, extrinsic motivations pertain to actions taken for an external or separable outcome and may involve multiple processes.

This study identifies that students are motivated by intrinsic factors like new study experiences, multicultural exposure, institutional support and personal growth, as well as extrinsic factors such as mitigating uncertainties arising from the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) enrolment system, institutional reputation, pandemic safety, parental and teacher influence, school publicity and financial benefits like affordable living and scholarships.

The application of SDT to understanding individual motivations helps address the three identified research gaps. First, by identifying the external demands influencing individuals' behavior, it highlights the role of institutional contexts as both enabling and constraining, rather than purely enabling as suggested by much of the existing research on cross-border cooperative university (CBCU) selection. Second, by emphasizing students' intrinsic motivations within the institutional context, SDT provides insights into how individuals navigate and negotiate their personal aspirations within institutional opportunities and constraints. Finally, by examining extrinsic motivations through processes such as "identification" and "integration," this study reveals how individuals internalize or evaluate certain factors, thereby assigning greater importance to some aspects over others.

Results from this study can also generate insights for universities to better deliver student-centered educational services and meet students' expectations for their undergraduate experience. Furthermore, understanding students' motivations in choosing this path underscores the benefits of educational collaboration between Mainland China and Hong Kong. This understanding can guide policymakers, educational institutions and stakeholders involved in similar cooperative initiatives, both now and in the future.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 *Self-determination theory and intrinsic/extrinsic motivations*

Human motivation can be conceptualized within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 2008), which defines it as the drive to engage in action. This theory distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to individuals engaging in activities driven by a desire to fulfill their inherent interests, such as pursuing personal satisfaction or satisfying curiosity. In contrast, extrinsic motivation pertains to actions taken for an external or separable outcome. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), extrinsic motivation encompasses a range of processes, from evaluating external regulations that constrain or enable activities, to "introjection," "identification" and "integration," where individuals form evaluations of an activity and internalize its value through interactions with institutions and others. In the context of this study – the pursuit of tertiary education – the desire for a quality education to satisfy intellectual curiosity reflects intrinsic motivation, rooted in personal interest. Conversely, using education as a means to secure a better job exemplifies extrinsic motivation. To better capture individual student factors during their decision-making process in opting into CBCUs, this research will apply Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the analytical framework, categorizing student motivations into intrinsic and extrinsic categories.

### 2.2 *Intrinsic motivation for choice of tertiary education institutions*

Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation – specifically, individuals' intrinsic needs for achievement, competence and autonomy – in driving behavior (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Morris *et al.*, 2022; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Research on intrinsic motivation in university selection generally falls into two main areas. The first examines how factors like aspirations for new experiences and the pursuit of high-quality education influence students' decision-making processes. For example, Wintre *et al.* (2015) suggest that international students view overseas study as an opportunity for unique experiences unavailable in their home countries, such as exposure to diverse cultures, lifestyles and societal norms that may broaden their worldview and foster personal growth. Additionally, students are often motivated by the prospect of accessing higher-quality education, with academic prestige and advanced learning opportunities at foreign institutions holding particular appeal. Furthermore, many students identify self-motivation as a key factor in their decisions, in contrast to relying heavily on external networks, such as parents and teachers (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

A second area of research explores variations in intrinsic motivation across different demographic characteristics and institutional contexts. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2015) systematic review of students' higher education choices underscores the impact of individual characteristics, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, family income, prior qualifications and parental education, on university preferences. These personal factors, in combination with university attributes like academic prestige and educational outcomes, shape students' perceptions of competition and pressure within institutions, thus influencing their intrinsic motivation positively or negatively.

### 2.3 Extrinsic motivation for choice of tertiary education institutions

Beyond intrinsic motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000) identify four types of extrinsic motivation – external regulation, introjection, identification and integration – that describe actions undertaken to achieve a separable outcome. These motivations represent increasing levels of individual agency and are all relevant in students' selection of universities.

The first type, *external regulation*, emphasizes the role of external forces that both constrain and enable individual actions. Research on international education suggests that macro-level factors – such as political stability, economic robustness and cultural diversity in host countries – can increase the attractiveness of universities to international students (Cebolla-Boado *et al.*, 2018; Henze and Zhu, 2012). Financial constraints are also crucial, as students may prefer destinations with lower financial burdens or opportunities for scholarships and part-time work. Additionally, proximity and social connections in the host country influence students' choices to study abroad.

The second type, *introjection*, highlights how individuals make decisions partially based on the approval or evaluation of others. Students frequently consult various information sources, with peers, teachers and societal views affecting university preferences. Parents, in particular, often shape students' perceptions of the alignment between themselves and their prospective universities (Pascarella *et al.*, 2006).

The third and fourth types, *identification* and *integration*, indicate a deeper internalization of values, where external motivations evolve into personal commitment. Students value academic reputation as a marker of educational quality and a gateway to networking, internships and future employment. Research shows that the possibility of immigration also motivates individuals to study abroad, and students consider course offerings as critical in selecting programs that match their career aspirations.

### 2.4 SDT in the context of cross-border universities

The geographical specificity and political complexity of this study's context offer a unique setting for applying Self-Determination Theory to analyze individuals' motivations for choosing a specific type of institution – cross-border cooperative universities (CBCU). This study narrows its focus to a specific area, the Greater Bay Area (GBA), which encompasses two Special Administrative Regions (SAR) of Hong Kong and Macao, along with nine municipalities in Guangdong Province. It is a key initiative in driving innovation-led growth and advancing reform and opening-up policies. The Hong Kong SAR Government encourages its post-secondary institutions to provide educational services in the GBA, capitalizing on Hong Kong's advantages in higher education and global integration. To attract talent, a 2017 policy streamlined Employment Registration Certificates for Hong Kong students, enhancing job prospects in Mainland China (Greater Bay Area, 2017).

This study pays focus on undergraduate programs at cooperative universities between HK and cities that are located in mainland. A distinguishing feature is the use of English as official instruction language. Chinese students are admitted primarily through: (1) National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao); (2) an independent admission process considering Gaokao score (60%), university-specific entrance test score (30%) and high school academic level test grade (10%) and (3) a special admission process for students who received offers from foreign

universities but opted out due to the pandemic or other reasons. This special admission process was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic as a contingency plan for students who had received offers from international universities but faced challenges in obtaining visas or traveling. Under this policy, these students could use their admission offers as additional proof of academic credentials, allowing them to enroll in CBCUs without undergoing the competitive Gaokao or independent admission processes. Most admissions occur through the first two pathways.

Although research on the motivations of Chinese students to pursue higher education at CBCUs is limited, some studies have explored why they choose alternatives to domestic institutions. Chinese students are motivated to study in international universities due to the perception that their educational system is superior to that of mainland China, where admission to prestigious universities is highly competitive (Chao *et al.*, 2017; Counsell, 2011). Moreover, students aim to develop soft skills, such as innovation and critical thinking, which they believe are more emphasized in overseas education compared to China's exam-focused system (Chao *et al.*, 2017; Soria and Troisi, 2014). Chao *et al.* (2017) also note that Chinese students are motivated by the opportunity to gain an external perspective on their home country's culture, politics and society.

With the growing trend of Chinese students pursuing education beyond domestic universities, and with policies encouraging collaboration between universities in Hong Kong and mainland China, CBCUs have become increasingly popular destinations for higher education (Dai *et al.*, 2024; Zhang, 2023). These institutions serve as intermediaries between mainland and international education, offering a balanced approach to admissions, education quality, career development opportunities, cultural integration and cost-effectiveness. Though there is an overall lack of study on cross-national cooperative universities, empirical evidence stemming from studies on cross-border universities, such as universities in Hong Kong and Macau, can shed light on the exclusivity of cross-national cooperative universities as a popular choice of higher education.

First, in admissions, CBCUs differ from the highly competitive Gaokao system by offering a more diverse enrollment option, providing students with greater security in their choices for higher education (Fang, 2012). Second, students are drawn to these institutions due to their high-quality education. By incorporating courses and programs from international providers, these universities offer access to diverse, up-to-date curricula from foreign partners (Fang, 2012; Fang and Wang, 2014). Chinese students are also attracted by the reputation of international partner institutions, the opportunity to study and use English in an academic setting and exposure to new cultural practices (Liu *et al.*, 2023). Third, CBCUs offer advantages in employment prospects, as qualifications and cross-cultural skills gained through extracurricular activities at these universities provide an edge in both domestic and global labor markets (Li and Bray, 2007). Xie *et al.* (2024) emphasized the reciprocal benefits between students and these institutions, with students having prospects for high-paying jobs post-graduation. Additionally, CBCUs balance internationalization with cultural familiarity (Dai *et al.*, 2024), as Hong Kong and Macau partners offer global exposure while sharing cultural ties with mainland China, easing adaptation and offering career advantages. Finally, CBCUs are perceived as cost-effective, offering high-quality education at reasonable tuition and living costs (Xie *et al.*, 2024; Mok, 2022).

This study contributes to the existing literature in two main ways. First, while some research has explored why students from mainland China may pursue education at cross-border universities, few studies examine their motivations for attending cross-border cooperative universities, which, despite their similar-sounding names, have distinct governance structures, geographical settings and policy contexts. Second, among the limited research on cross-border cooperative universities, much emphasis is placed on policy contexts, with less focus on how students navigate these unique policies, compare them to domestic educational options and perceive the short- and long-term benefits of such an education.

### 3. Data and method

This research employs a qualitative approach by interviewing 12 undergraduates currently enrolled in Mainland-HK Cooperative Universities in the GBA in Shenzhen. It integrates Eastern and Western educational approaches, with English as the primary instruction language. Chinese students are admitted via three pathways: Gaokao scores, an independent admission process or special admission for those who declined offers from foreign universities [1]. Participation was entirely voluntary, with participants providing written informed consent to take part. The study received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the author's university.

Purposeful and snowball sampling methods are used to recruit participants. Twelve respondents from various majors were recruited, with 11 through purposeful sampling and one via snowball sampling, referred by a prior participant. Most are first- or second-year students, providing fresh insights into their college selection process. Participants represent diverse geographic regions across China. Information was also collected on whether each student is an only child, as China's one-child policy was prominent when these students were born. The number of children in a family can significantly influence how much a family invests in each child's education. Table 1 details their demographic information.

After recruitment of respondents, qualitative data are collected through semi-structured interviews. In the interview, respondents were asked to reflect on the key moment of their decision-making, the influence of interactions with others and significant events and how they evaluate their choice of a Mainland-HK Cooperative University compared to other alternatives. The interview questions were structured to reflect Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory in guiding interviewees to reflect on their personal experience and development as well as external opportunities and constraints. Follow-up questions were asked to further probe participants' perceptions and address any uncertainties or ambiguities that may arise (Lune and Berg, 2017).

The study utilizes qualitative content analysis for data analysis. This method enables systematic identification of characteristics and interpretation of descriptions within the data using a coding framework (Flick and Schreier, 2014). The interview data from the participants was analyzed through a recursive coding process applied line by line to their transcripts using

**Table 1.** Student participants' profiles<sup>a</sup>

Participant	Gender	Admission method	Academic year	Major	Only child	Place of origin (province)
P1	M	Independent	2	Accounting and Financial Statements	Yes	Shandong
P2	M	Special	2	New Energy Engineering	No	Guangdong
P3	F	Special	2	English Studies	No	Shanxi
P4	M	Independent	2	Data Science	Yes	Guangdong
P5	F	Independent	2	English Studies	Yes	Shandong
P6	M	Special	2	Electrical Engineering	Yes	Jiangsu
P7	M	Independent	2	Electrical Engineering	Yes	Jiangsu
P8	M	Independent	2	Financial Engineering	Yes	Guangdong
P9	F	Independent	2	Quantitative Finance	No	Guangdong
P10	F	Gaokao	1	Clinical Medicine	No	Yunnan
P11	F	Independent	2	Applied Mathematics	Yes	Gansu
P12	F	Independent	1	Data Science	Yes	Guangdong

**Note(s):** <sup>a</sup>No significant variations in patterns of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are observed across demographic characteristics

**Source(s):** Author's own work

Microsoft Excel, categorizing each code into intrinsic or extrinsic motivations and concluding the patterns.

To achieve this, I conducted an inductive analysis by thoroughly reading all transcriptions and highlighting instances where respondents explained their motivations for choosing CBCUs, beginning with the first respondent. These motivations encompassed a range of considerations, including Gaokao scores, past academic experiences and conversations with individuals within their personal networks. I then classified each motivation as either intrinsic or extrinsic based on [Ryan and Deci's \(2000\)](#) Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This process was repeated for each respondent, with identical motivations being marked and new motivations added to the coding framework. By the time I analyzed the final two respondents, no additional categories emerged, indicating data saturation. Subsequently, I grouped similar motivations together (e.g. consolidating “worrying about the pandemic” and “concerns about gun violence in the host country” under the broader category of “safety concerns”) and re-coded the interviews using the refined coding scheme. This process involved multiple iterations between the transcripts and coding framework to ensure that the categories were both comprehensive and mutually exclusive.

I initially skimmed all interviews to create a set of codes for intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Categories were added, deleted or combined through iterative coding and revisions, until the codes accurately and comprehensively captured all motivations. The data was initially analyzed in Chinese, the native language of both me and the participants, to accurately capture the precise contextual meanings of specific phrases, before translated into English.

#### 4. Findings

Students' motivation for choosing CBCUs can be broadly classified into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations include a desire for new experiences, quality educational resources and academic and interpersonal support. Examples include experiencing new cultural environments, accessing more exchange opportunities, enjoying more liberal academic environment and flexible regulations and receiving high-quality teaching. Extrinsic motivations are more passive, often related to the university's reputation and constraints from Gaokao scores or international exams. These include mitigating uncertainties in the Gaokao enrollment process, influences from others and the institutions' reputation and ranking. Most students' decisions are driven by combination of these motivations, with variations based on admission pathways – either through Gaokao or through independent/special admission processes.

##### *4.1 Intrinsic motivation towards gaining new experiences, receiving various supports from the institution and personal growth*

Many participants expressed that their motivation for pursuing bachelor's degrees at a cross-border university was to gain new life experiences. Some students were attracted by the school's blend of Chinese and foreign cultures offered. One participant responded:

Compared to domestic schools, I might lean more towards this kind of school experience, which integrates aspects from both sides (domestic and overseas). (P5)

Beyond the Western pedagogy and international academic atmosphere, students were also interested in China's diverse regional cultures. Studying in southern China – specifically in the GBA or Guangdong Province – allows them to experience the unique cultural identity of the region. This is particularly relevant for students from outside Guangdong Province, who were drawn to the region's rich Cantonese culture as well as Shenzhen's entrepreneurial and innovative spirit.

In fact, I had not really been to the southern region (of China) before attending university. I just wanted to experience the atmosphere of different cultures. It does not necessarily have to be international culture. For example, Guangdong people, they might have this open and inclusive mindset, like in Shenzhen. And then there are Cantonese people, they have some cultural aspects that may be different from our place. After all, where I come from is Shandong, with more traditional Confucian thinking. These differences represent multiculturalism, but this multiculturalism does not necessarily mean different countries. (P1)

Gaining new experiences extends beyond cultural aspects to include the school campus and facilities. Students believed that compared to most domestic institutions, this school was relatively newly established, so its campus environment and infrastructure were relatively good and advanced. They cited factors such as quality accommodations and the pleasant natural surroundings of the campus. One participant reported:

From a more practical and materialistic perspective, such as the living experience, it is top-notch. It should be better than many schools. Besides its hardware facilities, its landscape design is also superior compared to other universities with similar material conditions. Because, compared to some other schools, many mainland universities have a long history, so their hardware facilities may be relatively lacking. (P9)

Participants were also drawn to the numerous academic exchange opportunities offered by the school, including interactions with professors, exchange programs with the Hong Kong partner university and other foreign institutions, as well as professional networking opportunities with major companies in the Greater Bay Area. 7 out of 12 respondents highlight the importance of the diversity and quality of academic opportunities:

What I value about this school is its presence in the Greater Bay Area, which allows it to share resources with the region. For example, some companies come to our school for presentations, and we may also invite well-known individuals from the area to give lectures. These are the resources available here. (P11)

Moreover, students in cross-border universities are also attracted by other institutional support that can enrich their learning and extracurricular experience. These encompass high teacher-to-student ratio and various activities organized by the school. Such academic conditions allow students to explore their college experience with both depth and breadth:

... Some students at this school, when they wanted to organize events, they always managed to find channels and ways to do so, with teachers coming to support them. They were able to make these things happen. (P5)

Besides anticipated university support, students were attracted to the liberal environment when selecting their bachelor's programs. This included an inclusive academic environment and more flexible school regulations than other domestic institutions, which they believed would enhance their academic productivity. They believed that this "liberal" school environment would broaden their horizons – "After all, taking college entrance examinations and attending domestic schools are somewhat like an information cocoon. I hope to explore a bigger world" (P8). Access to quality education enables students to experience self-fulfillment through the learning process, while also satisfying their intellectual curiosity by exposing them to more diverse perspectives as they seek to "explore a bigger world."

Another key factor is the perceived high teaching quality, with many attributing the university's strength to its high Gaokao admission score, suggesting strong institutional capabilities. Despite alternative admission pathways such as independent and special admission, most students were admitted through Gaokao System, leading participants to perceive their classmates as highly qualified. This, in turn, reinforced the belief that the university can provide high-quality educational resources. Participants commented that "After checking, it seems that this school's admission threshold is quite high. So, the quality of

students admitted should be quite good, and once inside, there should also be access to excellent educational resources” (P2).

The perception of high-quality peers fosters a sense of accomplishment among students in CBCUs, as it enhances their ability to develop a strong sense of belonging to both the university community and the education they receive.

#### 4.2 Extrinsic motivation: passive reasons, value added to students' backgrounds and other benefits

The first extrinsic motivation is associated with external regulation (Ryan and Deci, 2000), that is, individuals' compliance or reactance towards external constraints. Many participants expressed that their major extrinsic motivations of choosing CBCUs rather than domestic institutions were due to constraints of their Gaokao score or international examination results. CBCUs are regarded as a “safety net” for students whose Gaokao scores fall short of the requirements for top-tier domestic universities but who still seek a high-quality education. Similarly, some international students face comparable circumstances, where they initially received offers from foreign universities but had to make alternative choices due to not meeting the required international exam scores.

CBCUs often serve as a “safety net” for students who fall short of the required Gaokao score due to their diverse admission criteria and multi-faceted evaluation processes. 7 out of 12 highlighted how these universities' unique admission frameworks provide security. First, CBCUs offer early admission (*Tiqian Pici*) before the release of Gaokao scores, allowing students to receive early decisions and thus experience greater certainty. Once admitted through early admission, students are removed from the regular Gaokao admission pool. Second, even if students are not admitted through early admission, it does not impact their eligibility for Gaokao admissions. Third, CBCUs uses an independent admissions system that combines the Gaokao score (60%), a university entrance test score (30%) and high school academic performance (10%). Students appreciated this more balanced assessment of their academic and comprehensive capabilities.

Consequently, students believed that this scheme gave them an opportunity to be admitted in a prestigious university despite their lower-than-expected results in Gaokao. Therefore, regardless of whether their college entrance exam scores had been released, and without knowing their scores, they were still willing to register and participate in the independent admission exams offered by these schools to mitigate uncertainties that arise from the Gaokao. One respondent commented:

I feel that the college entrance exam (Gaokao) has too much uncertainty because it was my worst performance in the three years of high school exams. However, with the independent admission of the school and its 6:3:1 ratio of calculating different scores, the college entrance exam scores only accounts for a small part, and it [the admission result] also depends on your school admission test and interview. (P7)

In Ryan and Deci's framework of extrinsic motivation, it extends beyond “external regulation” to include “introjection,” where individuals shape perceptions and evaluations through interactions with others, particularly their parents and teachers. Students value information and recommendations from teachers, especially feedback from alumni, which served as crucial reference points. Participants shared that: “One teacher recommended this school to me, saying that a previous student who came here shared her studying experiences with him . . . which really attracted me” (P5). Although influenced by their parents, teachers and classmates, students felt they have the ultimate decision-making power, with parents prioritizing their choices.

The effective publicity of the institution was also an extrinsic factor. Marketing strategies such as campus tours, seminars held at high schools, as well as online resources provided students with direct insights into major flexibility, campus environment, faculty strength, etc.,

fostering a sense of affinity toward the school. Some students were further influenced by parents who attended these events and shared positive impressions, enhancing the school's appeal. They expressed as follow:

When we were in our senior year of high school, this school came to our high school for a promotional event . . . They had an admissions officer come directly, and even a professor came along . . . So, it left quite an impression on us. Secondly, through the event, everything about the school seemed quite good. . . . I think these publicity activities may indeed have changed many parents' perceptions. A few friends around me have mentioned that their parents have a very good impression of our school. My mom also holds a favorable view of this school. (P9)

Finally, extrinsic motivations can also function through processes of "identification" and "integration," where individuals taking in a value and display active personal commitment. Respondents' emphasis on university's ranking and reputation manifests such processes. They believe university ranking and reputation as indicators of institutional strength, which in turn would enhance professional prospect. The reputation of the Hong Kong partner institutions influenced students' interest in cooperative universities. Participants also saw university ranking as a strong signal of their academic standing to external audiences, relevant for both advanced studies and employment. Participants expressed their considerations such as:

At that time, considering that if I were to pursue graduate studies in the future, aiming for a good graduate program, this school would also be a great steppingstone. (P8)

Nowadays, many companies are gradually becoming more aware of this school . . . They know that students from this school are also capable and highly regarded. (P9)

Notably, some of the aforementioned intrinsic motivations – such as the pursuit of quality educational resources and institutional support – can align with or be translated into extrinsic motivations, including the aspiration to secure better career opportunities or to advance educational attainment. In particular, the use of English as the medium of instruction was also attractive for many participants. Some believed it could make up for the limited English exposure in their middle and high school years. Others felt that it would better prepare them for future studies abroad at the master's or doctoral level. They expressed:

This school mainly uses English as the medium of instruction, which I think is crucial whether I pursue studies in Hong Kong or abroad in the future. (P11)

Another extrinsic factor was the campus' geographical location. Many participants believed that studying in the GBA, specifically in Shenzhen, would offer professional and career opportunities in major cities like Shenzhen and Guangzhou, as well as the Hong Kong, due to the cooperative nature of the institution. However, students generally viewed location as an added benefit rather than a decisive factor, with its appeal varying by demographic characteristics. For instance, students who were the only child and whose hometowns were outside Guangdong Province were less likely drawn by the location, prioritizing proximity to family for support. Most of them enrolled in the university with the expectation of returning to their places of origin to work and provide support for their families.

Safety concerns, particularly amid the pandemic, significantly influenced students' choice between CBCUs and international alternatives. During strict pandemic restrictions, concerns about health risks high travel costs, and strict quarantine policies, led some students and their parents to decline offers from foreign universities in favor of domestic CBCUs through special admission schemes. Although the impact of the COVID-19 on students' choices is gradually diminishing, other safety concerns persist. Students remain wary of recent monkeypox outbreaks, political instability and reports of incidents such as robbery, shootings, scams and riots abroad, as shared through news and social circles. These additional safety considerations have reinforced the perception that choosing transnational cooperative universities in China offer the benefits of both Eastern and Western educational experiences while ensuring their safety. One respondent commented:

Because at that time, both going to Hong Kong and going abroad were very difficult. It could be stuck in Hong Kong for three years without being able to return. At that time, there was also the lottery system, which was very troublesome. Going abroad, besides COVID-19, there was also monkeypox. It was very scary . . . During the time I applied, there were often reports of someone missing in the UK or someone unable to be contacted or being defrauded. My teacher also had students who were defrauded as soon as they went to the UK. So, I will consider some safety issues. (P3)

Many participants also mentioned that, although not a decisive factor, the cost-effectiveness of transnational cooperative universities is one of their advantages. They compared tuition fees and living costs in these institutions to universities in Hong Kong and overseas, and concluded that studying at CBCUs allow them to receive international education at a lower economic cost. They believed that this educational approach offers high “value-to-cost ratio”. They expressed sentiments such as: “I think I can have the same quality of education as in the foreign country, while also having a better quality of life. That is how I feel” (P2); “I do not need to spend as much money as studying for a US or UK undergraduate degree, but I can still receive an international education” (P8).

In this study, the only student admitted solely based on Gaokao scores also stated that a significant factor for choosing this school was because it offered other attractive benefits, including higher scholarship than any other school and an opportunity for a direct bachelor’s-to-doctorate program. Despite this student’s Gaokao scores being adequate for admission to most of China’s 985 and 211 universities as well as top-ranked universities in Hong Kong, and despite being eligible for scholarships from these universities, this student ultimately chose this university because it offered the highest scholarship. The student explained:

The school presented attractive conditions. One was that I could receive a full scholarship based on my Gaokao scores to come to this school. Hong Kong universities did not offer me a full scholarship. At that time, I also signed an agreement here for a direct PhD program, based on my Gaokao scores. (P10)

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This research aims to examine why Chinese students choose to pursue a bachelor’s degree at a cross-border cooperative university between Mainland China and Hong Kong located in the GBA, specifically Shenzhen. Using qualitative data from interviews with 12 undergraduates at a Mainland China–Hong Kong cooperative university, the study applies [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#)’s Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to identify intrinsic and extrinsic motivations driving students’ university choices. This theoretical framework allows the study to uncover more student individual factors in their university decision-making process.

The primary intrinsic motivations identified include the desire to gain new academic experiences and multicultural exposure, both within national and international contexts; an appreciation for various forms of institutional support, such as academic resources, career services, exchange opportunities and extracurricular activities and a commitment to personal growth, including improving English proficiency in an English-medium instructional environment.

Following [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#)’s framework of extrinsic motivation types, this study also identifies various extrinsic motivations. Key motivations stem from academic constraints like Gaokao and international exam requirements, which render CBCUs a “safety net” for students. The decision-making process is further shaped through “introjection,” where students consult teachers and parents to gather information and develop preferences toward different higher education options. Processes of “identification” and “integration” lead students to view CBCUs as providers of quality education, favorable scholarships and strong career prospects due to high rankings. Safety concerns and cost-benefit evaluations also impact their educational choices.

It is worth noting that different factors carry varying degrees of importance in students' decision-making process, which provide insights for stakeholders such as students and leaders of CBCUs. First, the option of early admission was highlighted and appreciated by most participants. The three admission pathways (Gaokao-based, independent and special admission) help achieve a balance between equal opportunity and diverse student intake in university admissions (Muthanna and Sang, 2015). Participants admitted through independent admission feeling that their overall capabilities were more fairly evaluated. This process significantly mitigated uncertainties that associated with Gaokao results and provided them with a "safe choice" in the national college admission process without affecting subsequent regular admissions. Participants viewed this approach as compassionate, and it may offer valuable insights for other universities in designing their admission schemes.

Second, consistent with Xie *et al.* (2024), students consider the institution's ranking and reputation among the most crucial factors in their decision-making process. Dai *et al.* (2024) also noted that despite being located in Mainland China, the cross-border branch campus was perceived to carry the prestigious "Hong Kong" label, appealing to students as an internationally recognized institution. This study's findings align with prior observations. Participants frequently expressed that their primary considerations were gaining admission to the highest-ranked universities given their exam scores and major preferences. They associated ranking and reputation with academic strength, believing it would ensure high-quality teaching and resources. For educational institutions with similar cooperative ventures, these insights emphasize the importance of selecting reputable Hong Kong partners and focusing on national and global rankings to attract students. Moreover, students valued liberal environment, flexible regulations, diverse activities, high teaching standards and English instruction, underscoring the need for student-centered to enhance recruitment.

Third, the social network one is embedded significantly influenced students' decision-making. Xie *et al.* (2024) reported that parents exerted considerable influence in guiding students' decisions regarding choices of admission schemes, universities and majors. This study confirms these observations but reveals that participants emphasized that their autonomy is generally respected, even with parental guidance. Parents supported students but ultimately prioritized the students' self-determination. Participants viewed teachers as knowledgeable and experienced sources of advice, often valuing their input more than that of parents. This highlights the responsibility teachers hold to provide thoughtful, informed guidance.

Forth, geographical location within the Greater Bay Area (GBA) influenced university choices, though not decisively. Consistent with Dai *et al.* (2024) and Xie *et al.* (2024) students found campuses in strategic locations attractive for employment and quality of life, anticipating improved job prospects, exchange programs and networking opportunities. However, individual demographic factors such as being an only child or from outside of Guangdong could lessen the appeal of the region, suggesting that cross-border universities might benefit from emphasizing their unique strengths beyond location.

Lastly, the role of GBA in shaping students' university choices also opens avenues for discussing how external contextual factors influence individual decision-making. One particularly salient factor is the impact of COVID-19. Although this study was conducted toward the end of the pandemic, many students reported that their decisions continued to be shaped by its effects. In response to the pandemic, CBCUs implemented alternative admission processes, as previously discussed. Additionally, COVID-19 increased the appeal of CBCUs compared to international universities, largely due to the relatively lenient public health policies in other countries. This highlights how public health considerations have become a more prominent factor in students' decision-making processes. In a similar vein, future research could explore how macro-level exogenous shocks, such as pandemics or economic crises, influence students' university choices.

The application of SDT to understanding individual motivations helps address the three identified research gaps. First, by identifying the external demands influencing individuals' behavior, it highlights the role of institutional contexts as both enabling and constraining,

rather than purely enabling as suggested by much of the existing research on cross-border cooperative university (CBCU) selection. Second, by emphasizing students' intrinsic motivations within the institutional context, SDT provides insights into how individuals navigate and negotiate their personal aspirations within institutional opportunities and constraints. Finally, by examining extrinsic motivations through processes such as "identification" and "integration," this study reveals how individuals internalize or evaluate certain factors, thereby assigning greater importance to some aspects over others.

This study is among the first to apply Self-Determination Theory to examine students' university choices. Unlike previous studies that simply categorize students' motivations into individual and external factors (e.g. Dai *et al.*, 2024; Xie *et al.*, 2024), this research highlights the complexity of extrinsic motivations. By incorporating processes such as "external regulation," "introjection," "identification," and "integration," as previously discussed, the study provides deeper insights into how students interpret and engage with external influences, emphasizing a perceptual mechanism and students' agency in making university decisions.

At a broader theoretical level, this study contributes to the understanding of individuals' educational choices as a process of navigating institutional contexts that are simultaneously enabling and constraining. Existing research on students' university choices in the Greater Bay Area (GBA) predominantly focuses on the enabling role of institutions, particularly the advantages conferred by GBA's political significance (e.g. Xie *et al.*, 2021; Xie *et al.*, 2023). In contrast, this study also highlights the restrictive aspects of institutional structures, illustrating how students assess and compare various domestic and international opportunities before deciding to enroll in CBCUs. More specifically, the intrinsic motivations outlined above – such as students' self-assessment of their qualifications based on Gaokao scores and their concerns about international opportunities – offer valuable insights into how individuals negotiate their personal aspirations within institutional opportunities and constraints. This study, therefore, extends the discourse on university choice by demonstrating how students actively engage in decision-making rather than passively responding to structural conditions.

This study has certain limitations and would benefit from complementary future research. First, participants were selected solely from one Mainland China–Hong Kong cooperative university. Expanding to a wider range of institutions could reveal varied student motivations. Second, while the sample is diverse within the researcher's capacity to achieve data saturation, future studies could include students from broader socio-economic backgrounds to validate these findings. Finally, while this study provides a framework for understanding motivations for choosing CBCUs, further research is needed to examine how these preferences are shaped by, for instance, one's social network. Despite these limitations, this study addresses the gap in understanding individual motivations for choosing CBCUs by situating individual motivations within the Greater Bay Area's educational context, providing insights into how students navigate institutional flexibilities in college selection.

#### Note

1. The last method, introduced during the pandemic, is now rarely used.

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