

A comparative study of the academic experiences between local and non-local community college students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose – Although community colleges play a role in democratizing education and engaging in social integration, particularly in times of economic transition, there remains a lack of qualitative studies on academic achievement gaps between the various student populations attending community colleges. Therefore, this study examines the academic experiences of local and non-local students at Hong Kong's community colleges within the framework of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. The research delves into the challenges posed by language barriers, family support structures and the rigidity of policy environments.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper applies qualitative research to explore the experiences of both local and non-local students concerning how their cultural capital and institutional policies influence their academic experience. The study relies on in-depth interviews to uncover subtle challenges faced by non-local students.

Findings – The findings show that local students generally have better academic experiences and success, which is attributed to their native fluency in Cantonese and familiarity with the local education system. In contrast, non-local students face significant barriers to achieving good academic experiences and social integration.

Research limitations/implications – Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. Although participants were selected from five community colleges in Hong Kong, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in other educational contexts, such as vocational education. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, while providing rich insights, may limit the applicability to larger populations. Lastly, the study focuses on current and retrospective experiences but does not track participants' long-term academic and social trajectories.

Originality/value – The study highlights how institutional policies may unintentionally favor local students and underscores the critical role that family support plays in student choices and outcomes. It offers new insights into the local and non-local academic experience disparities at the community colleges in Hong Kong, highlighting the significant impact of cultural capital and institutional policies on student success. The findings provide valuable guidance on how to support and empower diverse student populations in both current and similar educational contexts through the development of more inclusive education policies.

Keywords Hong Kong, Higher education, Comparative study, Community college, Learning outcome

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving educational landscape of Hong Kong, community colleges serve as critical conduits, broadening access to tertiary education and bridging the gap between secondary education and undergraduate studies. As these institutions grapple with

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Jisun Jung, whose invaluable guidance and insightful mentorship have illuminated my academic journey. I also extend my sincere appreciation to the twenty associate degree students from various community colleges in Hong Kong who generously participated in this study. Despite their busy schedules, including transitions into employment or further studies, their willingness to openly share personal experiences has profoundly enriched this research. Their unique and compelling narratives reinforced my conviction in the significance and impact of this work. As a former associate degree student myself, I am honored to have the opportunity to meaningfully contribute back to this community.



unprecedented enrollment surges, the necessity for a nuanced analysis of differential student outcomes becomes paramount. Existing studies have explored disparities in academic preparedness, social integration, and resource access among different student groups (Wong, 2021b). Cultural capital, linguistic competence, and family support are likely to differ significantly from those of local students, imposing actual or potential impacts on the academic achievement and social integration of non-local students—a core problem this research intends to investigate (Lai *et al.*, 2011).

Non-local students from Mainland China and other countries [1], more often motivated by a search for high-quality education, make up a significant portion of the student population. This group faces a range of challenges, such as language barriers, pressure to adapt to a new system in education, and a lack of social and cultural capital (Bodycott, 2009). These challenges are closely tied to their academic preparedness, which differs significantly from that of local students. In particular, international students often lack the same level of academic support from their home environments, directly affecting their ability to navigate educational resources and perform academically (Li and Bray, 2007).

While various factors influence academic experience, this study specifically examines the role of cultural capital and perceptions of community college policies. Using a qualitative approach, it explores students' lived experiences, focusing on linguistic skills, family support, and institutional challenges. Drawing from Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the study investigates how these factors shape students' adaptation and academic success.

The role of family cultural capital and institutional policies in shaping academic trajectories is critical and informs this study's focus on credit transfer and admissions processes (Almutawa, 2024; Kyriakides *et al.*, 2017). By narrowing the focus to these dimensions, this study collects authentic student narratives through in-depth interviews to critically assess whether certain policies inadvertently disadvantage specific student groups. The goal is to provide actionable insights for improving equity and inclusivity in community college systems. In this context, the study will explore the following research questions:

- (1) How do local and non-local community college students perceive the impact of cultural capital on their academic experiences, respectively? In what ways do they believe different forms of cultural capital contribute to their academic experiences, respectively?
- (2) How do local and non-local students describe their experiences and perceptions of community college policies, respectively? How do these perceptions relate to their academic success, respectively?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to deeply understand the key factors affecting students' academic experiences and social integration, thereby guiding educational policy and practice in Hong Kong.

2. Literature review

2.1 Community college education in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's education system is highly competitive and stratified, significantly influencing social mobility and access to higher education. Historically, education reforms aimed at addressing systemic inequalities, like unequal access to resources, have paradoxically reinforced stratification. These reforms led to the creation of community colleges, primarily serving students excluded from elite universities (Luk *et al.*, 2009). While these institutions expand academic opportunities, they remain constrained by structural inequalities, limited resources, and institutional biases, affecting students' educational and professional trajectories.

Social mobility, framed as a core goal of education policy, faces persistent challenges in Hong Kong. Chiu and Siu (2022) argue that educational stratification exacerbates socio-economic disparities, limiting upward mobility. Community colleges offer second chances for

students unable to enter traditional universities, but still encounter institutional barriers such as resource limitations and systemic biases. Wong (2019) further emphasizes that the educational system, despite its attempts to democratize access, often perpetuates existing social inequalities, making upward mobility a more difficult reality for non-elite students.

The advent of community colleges in Hong Kong in 2000 significantly transformed the higher education landscape. These institutions were introduced as part of the government's efforts to expand access to higher education, a priority highlighted in several Chief Executives' policy addresses, including the 2000 and 2005 addresses (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2000). The introduction of community colleges provided alternative pathways for students to pursue associate degrees and higher diplomas. The introduction of community colleges has notably expanded educational opportunities for a broader array of students, including adult learners and those seeking vocational skills, thereby diversifying the academic community (Lee, 2022).

They offered many learners an associate degree, including those whose academic backgrounds differ from the traditional educational paths. Community colleges offer associate degrees to learners with varied academic backgrounds, providing either practical skills for the workforce or pathways to university, thereby democratizing higher education (Chan, 1999). The associate degree has been introduced as a transitional mechanism in universities (Mok, 2012). Community colleges have played a crucial role in shaping the educational trajectories of diverse student groups, including those from underprivileged backgrounds, vocational learners, and students pursuing second-chance education.

Despite the significant progress made in educational democratization, research on the lived experiences of community college students remains limited. This gap is critical to understanding how educational policies impact equity and inclusivity. Exploring these experiences is vital as a basis for targeted strategies to address the challenges faced by diverse student groups, thereby ensuring that the education system is genuinely equitable and reflective of the diverse society it serves.

2.2 *The impact of cultural capital on educational pathways*

Linguistic capital refers to the value of language proficiency, communication skills, and ability in specific social and academic contexts (Bourdieu, 1986). Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides a robust framework for understanding how disparities in cultural knowledge and skills influence students' academic trajectories. Bourdieu (1986) emphasized that cultural capital—encompassing linguistic competencies, educational credentials, and cultural familiarity—plays a pivotal role in shaping educational attainment and social mobility. Cultural capital significantly influences academic outcomes, with strong correlations between its various forms and academic attainment (Lucas, 2001).

Despite this well-documented relationship, the application of cultural capital among community college students, particularly non-local students in Hong Kong, remains insufficiently studied. Community colleges, meanwhile, are a unique environment with diverse student populations. Thus, the gap is significant because community colleges serve students with diverse cultural backgrounds and practices (Wong, 2016). Wong (2022) highlights the affective aspects of cultural capital, such as entitlement and legitimacy, which affect students' academic integration. Such emotional aspects are vital for understanding how students apply their cultural capital to interact with the educational space and mitigate their shortcomings. However, research has not explored how specific cultural capital resources—like linguistic skills or family support—interact with institutional policies to affect academic outcomes.

This research explores how cultural capital, including linguistic competencies, prior schooling experiences, and parental involvement, interacts with institutional policies to shape the academic and social outcomes of local and non-local community college students in Hong Kong. Future research should broaden this exploration by taking a more holistic approach to

examine how cultural capital impacts educational achievements across students from various backgrounds within Hong Kong's community colleges.

2.3 Comparative experiences and policy impacts on students

The motivation for cross-border Chinese students to pursue higher education in Hong Kong differs significantly from those of local students studying abroad, who often face greater challenges in adapting to entirely new cultural and academic environments (Lai *et al.*, 2011). Chan and Ngan (2017) further highlight the challenges, noting that the mobility experiences highly reflected the students' adaptation and integration. Leung and Waters (2022) pointed out the role of intermediary spaces, which serve as critical environments that can either facilitate or hinder international students' academic and social integration. These spaces significantly influence the integration process, acting as accelerators that facilitate success or as barriers that impede progress. This contributes to the complexity of the cross-border educational experience, which is not only academic but also deeply personal, with the experience intertwined with students' identity negotiations (Gao, 2024).

Existing research tends to homogenize the experiences of students, which can obscure how specific policy frameworks contribute to distinct educational pathways and outcomes for non-local students (Wong, 2015). This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the pre-college cultural capital endowments, including language skills, family support, and academic preparedness, help or hinder their journey in community colleges, whether or not they pursue further studies at the university level. This perspective builds on Lo (2013) emphasized that educational policies and economic considerations are crucial in shaping these mobility patterns, complicating the translation of policies into practice.

What remained to be seen was whether this spread of community colleges had really increased opportunities and the number of enrollments superficially, what this policy had enabled in terms of daily life (Lee, 2022). This study, therefore, seeks further clarification of the contribution of policy frameworks in the daily processes of academic and social integration of students in community colleges through the perceptions of students, bridging the concept between policy objectives and the educational realities lived by students (Li and Bray, 2007).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative design to investigate and compare the academic experience of local and non-local students in Hong Kong community colleges. Qualitative methods are ideal for exploring how factors like cultural capital, language proficiency, and family support influence students' educational experiences (Creswell, 2013). Understanding participants' life experiences and perceptions of cultural capital and institutional policies is key to explaining academic achievement differences.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, balancing flexibility with focus on key themes. These interviews provided insights into participants' educational experiences and social transitions (Patton, 2014). Guided by Bourdieu's framework on cultural capital, the interview questions covered themes such as prior education, language skills' role in academic integration, family support, and perceptions of institutional policies. For instance, participants were asked "How do language skills affect your academic journey and integration into college life?" and "How do you perceive the policies affecting local and non-local students, and how do they impact your experience?"

According to Wong (2020), narrative inquiry is useful for capturing constructed meanings; exploring individuals' narratives helps address complexities and contradictions in their experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). This approach provided nuanced insights into participants' academic and social experiences.

3.2 Participants

The subjects of this study were 20 students studying in two years of Associate Degree programs in two community colleges in Hong Kong, and these students were divided into equal groups of local Hong Kong students and Mainland China students. The distribution of participants is shown in the [Figure 1](#) below:

This distribution aimed to represent both local and non-local students, providing a holistic view of their educational experiences at various academic and professional stages. A purposeful sampling strategy ensured a diverse range of participants, with varied backgrounds, educational paths, and future aspirations, enhancing the depth and breadth of the data collected (see [Table 1](#)).

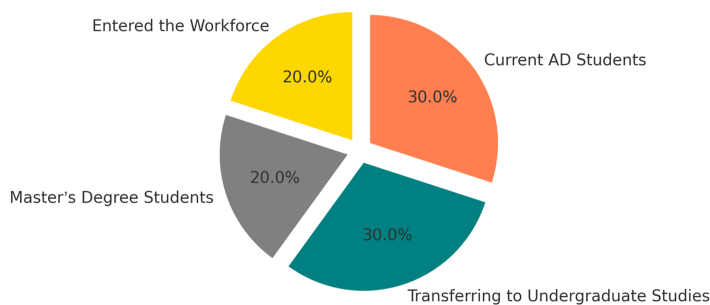
3.3 Data collection and analysis

The data collection process involved two key phases: participant recruitment and in-depth interviews, followed by thematic analysis.

Participant recruitment: Recruitment began by reaching out to faculty members at Hong Kong community colleges, who helped identify potential participants. Recruitment advertisements were also shared on social media to ensure a diverse sample, targeting both local and non-local Associate Degree students from Hong Kong and Mainland China.

In-depth interviews: Interviews were conducted to explore participants' educational experiences and perceptions. Most interviews were face-to-face, with others held via Zoom to accommodate preferences. Interviews lasted 30–60 min, and participants could choose to converse in English, Cantonese, or Mandarin. When necessary, interview content was translated into English for clarity.

Data analysis: The data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) approach. The analysis involved familiarizing with the data, identifying codes, and refining them into themes. The researcher ensured consistent interpretation to deepen understanding of academic experience and social integration among local and non-local community college students.



Note(s): The four categories in [Figure 1](#) are defined as follows: (1) Current AD students: participants actively enrolled in associate degree programs; (2) Transferring to undergraduate studies: participants who have completed associate degree requirements and are transitioning to university-level education; (3) Master's degree students: participants pursuing or having completed master's programs; and (4) Entered the workforce: participants who have completed their academic programs and are currently employed

Source(s): The author

Figure 1. Distribution of participants by student stage

Table 1. Interview participants' demographic information

Status	Local participates	Community college attended	Non-local participates	Community college attended
Currently enrolled associate degree students	Cl	HKU SPACE	Hl	HKU HPSHCC
	Ne	HKBU CIE	My	HKBU CIE
	Mz	HKU SPACE	Yu	HKBU CIE
Transitioning to undergraduate studies	Tn	HKBU CIE	Ls	HKU SPACE
	Au	HKBU CIE	Wd	HKU SPACE
	Yk	HKCC	Ds	HKU SPACE
Master's degree students	Tt	HKCC	Yt	HKBU CIE
	Ky	HKBU CIE	Zk	HKBU CIE
Entered the workforce	Lm	HKCC	Wl	HKBU CIE
	Wf	PolyU SPEED	Nk	HKBU CIE

Source(s): The author

4. Findings

4.1 Previous educational experience

Students' prior educational experiences are crucial in shaping their academic journeys and adaptability. Community colleges in Hong Kong host local students from the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) system, which fosters critical thinking and prepares students for tertiary education (Education Bureau, 2017). In contrast, non-local students from Mainland China often come from the Gaokao system, which is focused on exam performance and criticized for limiting creativity and critical thinking (Gao, 2023). This section examines how these educational backgrounds influence academic experiences and social integration within the community college environment.

4.1.1 Impact of previous educational systems. Local and non-local students come from starkly contrasting educational systems, translating into differing levels of academic preparedness and success. Local students have been prepared for critical thinking and a wider range of subjects through the DSE system, which aligns with community college expectations. Ne, a local student, said,

The DSE system helps me build critical thinking and facilitate management over various subjects; it also makes the shift from secondary school to community college much easier.

In contrast, non-local students, mostly from Mainland China's Gaokao system, face challenges arising from the heavy rote memorization and testing pressure of the Chinese examination format. Their academic background often did not provide the conditions required for the learning style in Hong Kong's colleges. For Ds, a non-local student,

In mainland China, it was largely rote memorization for exams. But here (community college), I find it struggled to adjust to the requirements for critical analysis and group projects.

Studies have revealed a clear correlation between past academic experiences and later accomplishment in the higher education sector, as pre-university experiences help to shape the readiness and adjustment of learners into a new academic environment (Shahiri *et al.*, 2015; Anuradha and Velmurugan, 2015). The Gaokao system's emphasis on high-stakes testing contrasts with the DSE's holistic approach, suggesting a longer adjustment period for non-local students accustomed to the former (Mok, 2015).

4.1.2 Academic adaptation challenges. Non-local students face significant adaptation challenges due to their previous experiences with examination-driven education, contrasting with the more flexible, student-centered approach in Hong Kong's community colleges. A non-local student shared,

The way of learning here is very different. I had a hard time adjusting to the group work and the emphasis on participation, which we don't have on the mainland. (My)

Language barriers and cultural differences further hinder non-local students' academic and social integration. Student adjustment theoretical frameworks emphasize that language skills are paramount to integration (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Strengthening support systems is essential to help non-local students navigate this transition, ensuring both academic success and overall welfare (Light *et al.*, 1987).

Local students tend to come from a stronger academic background, but some still find it challenging. High expectations and pressure to perform well have led to significant stress and anxiety. Local student Au said,

I have already adapted to the local education system by now, but the demand for getting good grades and entering top universities is intense. It's a constant struggle to balance everything (Au).

These results underscore the significant impact of prior educational experiences on students' adaptation to new academic environments. Non-local students face challenges adjusting to differing teaching styles, affecting academic performance, while local students experience stress due to high expectations (Asif *et al.*, 2017; Wong, 2021b).

4.2 Language barriers and adaptation

In the context of community colleges, proficiencies in Cantonese and English play a crucial role in students' academic success and social inclusion. These challenges are explored through comparisons, utilizing existing theories to enrich the analysis.

4.2.1 Impact on academic experience. Language challenges are a significant barrier for both local and non-local students, particularly in Cantonese and English, which are essential for navigating Hong Kong's education system.

Cantonese, essential for academic and social interaction, presents challenges for non-local students. Many struggles with integration and participation in academic and social settings. Among two non-local interviewees, this struggle was apparent:

My native language is Mandarin. Although I study Cantonese in Hong Kong, I still feel unclear when expressing my views (Ct).

I remember a Hong Kong teacher awkwardly explaining something to me in Mandarin after class because I didn't understand a question (Ds).

These struggles often lead to feelings of isolation and frustration as they navigate a predominantly Cantonese-speaking system. Wong (2021a) highlighted how language barriers exacerbate academic and emotional challenges for non-local students. This aligns with Bourdieu's order of discourse, where social actors with less linguistic capital tend to be subordinated (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Research indicates that language barriers can lead to feelings of inferiority and exclusion, further hindering academic performance and social integration (Norton, 2013).

English also presents challenges, particularly for students from non-English-medium schools, who may struggle with English-medium instruction. Students from Chinese language-medium schools often find it difficult to keep up. Non-local students face the additional burden of mastering both English and Cantonese as a second language. For instance, multiple participants shared:

The language barrier caused by not being good enough in English makes me lack confidence in class, especially during presentations and discussions.

I would not miss a beat if the teacher spoke Chinese, but now, if the teacher talks quickly in English during lectures, I fall behind in the lecture and the content on the PowerPoint (Yo).

This insecurity leads to decreased class performance and further social distance. Christie (2009) contends that language barriers heighten a keen sense of inadequacy and stress in students facing serious academic obstacles. These struggles highlight the need for universities and colleges to offer students who are not local academic support services, which includes language support.

Local students proficient in English face fewer obstacles in both academic and social settings. For Mz, a local student from an EMI school, she wrote:

My secondary school was an English-medium school . . . after years of being immersed in speaking English due to my environment (Mz).

Students in this immersion English program have a distinct advantage academically. Understanding lectures, completing assignments, and joining discussions depend on being competent in English. Early language education is a critical for academic success and continued support in higher education (Archer and Hutchings, 2000).

4.2.2 Impact on social integration. Effective communication is vital for academic success and social integration. Non-local students often face language barriers that lead to social isolation and hinder peer relationships. Non-local students often face language barriers that hinder social integration, making it difficult to form friendships with local peers. Several non-local interviewees pointed out this issue:

Since I didn't speak Cantonese when I first arrived in Hong Kong, I found it hard to make friends with local students, echoed multiple respondents.

This social exclusion compounds their academic difficulties and affects their overall well-being. Research on social integration in higher education consistently underscores the importance of peer support and social networks in fostering academic success and emotional health (Tinto, 1993).

On the other hand, local students enjoy smoother communication with classmates and teachers, aiding their social and academic integration. Ky's experience of using Cantonese to integrate more effectively highlights this:

Speaking Cantonese helps me quickly and better integrate into local student circles. We can discuss assignments or projects more smoothly, (Ky)

Proficiency in both languages gives local students a significant edge in academic and social contexts, enhancing their overall experience. Wong (2021b) contends that bilingual ability boosts academic confidence and strengthens social connections, essential for student retention and success.

Bourdieu's linguistic capital framework reveals that non-local students' limited language skills hinder academic and social integration, while local students' stronger linguistic capital facilitates smoother adaptation. Addressing these disparities is crucial for creating an inclusive learning environment.

4.3 Family support

Family support is vital for the academic success, emotional well-being, and overall welfare of community college students in Hong Kong. This support encompasses financial aid, emotional encouragement, and practical academic assistance, but its nature and level differ significantly between local and non-local students. Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital, family networks can provide resources that enhance students' educational outcomes, but the availability and effectiveness of this support depend on proximity, socio-economic status, and cultural expectations (Bourdieu, 1986).

4.3.1 Common challenges in family support. Family support is recognized as a common challenge for local and non-local students, but it manifests in different ways. This refers to families' emotional and financial support and academic help. Many students receive

inconsistent, depending on parents' educational background and socio-economic status. A non-local student shared:

In my opinion, purely in terms of financial support, yes, that's for sure. However, regarding emotional support, I feel it's difficult for my parents to set aside the past failure in the gaokao. They might still be discussing this issue even now, possibly because the significance of the gaokao is deeply ingrained in their minds. Therefore, I sometimes find it challenging to reconcile with my parents. (Wd).

One local student shared about a lack of academic support at home:

My mother can guarantee my basic tuition, but because my mother is in the old days, their education may not be more than junior high school . . . This might make it difficult for her to provide additional academic support, like finding tutors or educational consultants. However, at least she did not cause extra mental pressure in my study, so for me, this is already a form of help. (Yk).

As Wong (2021c) points out, one reason students perform well in school and are emotionally more resilient is the presence of a family support system. However, many students believe their families cannot provide them with the support they need, as it is difficult to get emotional or academic support from parents who have never been to university or lack financial resources.

4.3.2 Local students and family support. Local students often have supportive families, although this is not always guaranteed. Their close relationships with family members allow for frequent interactions and direct support. Local student Ne added:

I live with my family, and they are the ones who mostly support me in terms of finances. They contribute so that I can afford tuition and living expenses, so I can afford to focus more on studying. (Ne)

This relieves financial pressure, helping students focus more on their studies. However, emotional support can be lacking, as families are often unaware of what their children are experiencing in college. Au, another local student, said her parents,

Although my parents are very supportive financially, they don't really understand the stress I'm under. They think that as long as I don't have to work, I should have no problem studying. (Au)

Social capital within families, such as financial resources and emotional support, influences educational outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986). Local students benefit from being close to their families, which enhances their social capital. Proximity allows for regular financial and emotional exchanges and immediate help, which can be repeatedly drawn upon. By staying at home or visiting their families, local students have a solid foundation backing them up. This aligns with Bourdieu's theory of social capital, which suggests that strong family networks can aid in forming social capital, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes (Portes, 1998). Yet pressure to reaching out can be exacerbated by limited emotional insight, as revealed by Au's story, underscoring the intricate nature of family support relationships.

4.3.3 Non-local students and family support. Non-local students in Hong Kong often lack the social capital that local students have, such as family support. Being cut off from their families means reduced direct emotional and financial support, leaving them feeling more isolated and under pressure. The lack of proximity limits their capacity to access family support for academic and personal support. This aligns with Bourdieu's theory that less social capital in the dominant social fields brings disadvantages (Putnam, 2000).

Geographical distance and cultural differences make it even harder for non-local students to receive family support. Being far from families forces teens to independently navigate academics and personal life challenges. Ds, a non-local student, said:

My parents understand that the environment in Hong Kong is challenging, but they see it as an opportunity for growth. They hope I can face these challenges head-on rather than giving up or seeking refuge back home at the first sign of difficulty. (Ds).

This distance makes it difficult for the families of non-local students to provide consistent financial support, requiring students to be more strategic with money. Yo, another non-local student, said there is a financial strain:

I have to manage my money as the college doesn't offer hostels for associate degree students. That's my top-most expense as a student in HK, and I need to rent off-campus. My parents don't always have money to give me, so I have to make money too by working part-time (yo).

In addition, many non-local students require intermediaries or agents for support in their educational journey, complicating their support structure. These intermediaries can sometimes mislead families, resulting in unfocused efforts and increased stress for the student. A non-local student said her degree agent misled her parents:

My parents were misled by an agency that promised I could get into HKU if my GPA were high enough. So, I studied hard. Later, we discovered that we had been deceived, but no other options were left. It felt like a dead end, but I knew I had to give it my all. (My)

Non-local students face significant challenges adapting to the Hong Kong educational environment, partly due to the lack of local family support networks that many local students benefit from. This distance drastically limits family support, both psychologically and financially, affecting their entire educational journey (Bourdieu, 1986). The weak family support and dependence on intermediaries also complicate their understanding of scholarships. This case further highlights the need for comprehensive support strategies for non-local students who lack the social capital to overcome various challenges.

4.4 Policy impact

Students' previous educational experiences significantly influence their ability to adapt to policies and institutional expectations in community colleges. Local students from the DSE system benefit from training in critical thinking, which aligns with policies emphasizing interactive learning. In contrast, non-local students from the Gaokao system may struggle to adapt due to the exam-focused nature of their education. Educational pathways shape students' academic and social outcomes by intersecting with policy impacts in community colleges.

4.4.1 Common policy challenges: credit transfer. Both local and non-local students in Hong Kong face hurdles with credit transfer policies, which affect academic continuity and advancement. A local student, Tn, shared:

The transfer policies are very rigid. Even if one has done the same courses in a community college, universities do not accept them. As a result, the third year university level courses are not very well accredited. (Tn)

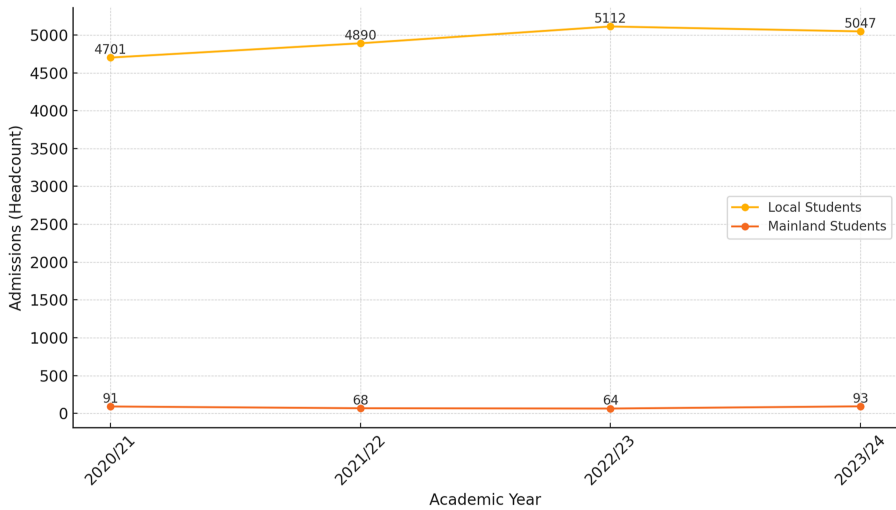
Non-local student Hl echoed this, noting the lack of credit transfer support:

When I applied for a transfer bachelor's degree, I realized competition was high, and credit transfer was challenging. If unsuccessful, you would be set back to year one, adding extra years of study. (Hl)

These restrictive policies hinder academic progress and increase both time and financial burdens for students. Wong (2021a) notes that such constraints often result in frustration and reduced motivation, especially for those already navigating cultural and linguistic challenges.

4.4.2 Challenges in accessing higher education. Access to higher education is a significant challenge for non-local students in Hong Kong. Despite strong academic records, many non-local students face substantial barriers to admission to top universities, which often prioritize local students. According to the University Grants Committee (UGC) data shown in Figure 2 below, a clear discrepancy exists between the number of local and Mainland Chinese students applying to top universities in Hong Kong.

From 2020/21 to 2023/24, local student admissions consistently outnumber those of Mainland Chinese students, with local students surpassing 4,500 admissions annually, compared to a small number of Mainland students (e.g. 91 in 2020/21, increasing slightly to 93



Note(s): University Grants Committee (UGC) Customized Data Retrieval, 2020/21–2023/24, Retrieved from <https://cdcf.ugc.edu.hk/cdcf/indepthAnalysis.action>

Source(s): University Grants Committee (UGC), The author

Figure 2. Senior year student admissions by place of origin (2020/21–2023/24)

by 2023/24). This disparity highlights the institutional preference for local students, creating challenges for non-local students despite their strong academic records. For instance, Ls shared,

My classmate, with a perfect GPA, applied to five prominent UGC universities, including the top three in Hong Kong . . . but was not admitted. At that moment, I realized I had no shot since I was not a local student. Agencies always promise admission to top universities based on grades, giving false hope, but in the end, you realize it was never really possible. (Ls)

Other non-local students share this feeling that their efforts are not adequately recognized due to systemic bias. The differentiation is considered a significant concern and provokes resentment and sympathy among the local learners. A local student, Cl, said:

I see my friends on the mainland struggling despite their grades. The system is biased against them, and it's unfair. (Cl)

This shared understanding underscores the broader challenges of the institutional challenges non-local students face.

The preference for local students in top universities deeply affects non-local students' feelings about the educational system. This often leads to disappointment and a sense of inferiority, as they feel like their performance is not adequately reflected in admissions decisions. Such disenchantment can create a sense of isolation and marginalization, reducing their integration into the academic community (Wong, 2021b).

Institutional policies favor local students, which means non-local students must prove themselves even more without sufficient support. This lack of support only intensifies the difficulties of adjusting to a new educational system and culture. As Tinto (1993) and Astin (1999) noted, tailored support mechanisms are crucial to ensuring equitable access to opportunities and assistance for all students.

5. Discussion

This research analyzed the academic experiences of local and non-local community college students in Hong Kong, revealing how students' cultural capital, educational policies, and institutional factors shaped their academic outcomes. By applying Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, this study highlights structural and systemic factors contributing to academic experiences gaps between these student groups.

5.1 Cultural capital and language proficiency

The findings indicated that local students commonly have better cultural capital, including proficiency in Cantonese and greater familiarity with the Hong Kong educational system, which makes their transition to the academic environment smoother. In contrast, non-local students particularly those less familiar with Cantonese encounter communication barriers and hinder social integration and academic engagement. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of language skills in educational success and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1991).

5.2 Institutional policies and systemic challenges

The study revealed that current educational policies disproportionately favor local students, exacerbating inequalities for non-local learners. Rigid credit transfer policies and biased admission practices for top-tiered universities are significant challenges. This finding consistent with Li and Bray (2007), who noted the gaps in economic support and scholarship access for cross-border students. Wong (2021b) also highlighted how institutional policies influence the experiences and outcomes of students. Policymakers should consider revising the credit transfer policies to be more inclusive and flexible, facilitating smoother transitions for all students. Additionally, admission practices should be reviewed and adjusted to offer fair opportunities to non-local students by recognizing the unique challenges they faced and the contributions they bring to the institution.

5.3 Family support and social capital

Family support was a major contributor to student success impacting both academic performance and psychological well-being (Christie, 2009). Local students benefit from close proximity to their families, receiving direct emotional and financial support. In contrast, non-local students, often geographically separated from their families, struggle to receive the same levels of support. This disparity serves to underscore the importance that social capital has in educational attainment. Schools should increase support services, including personalized financial aid, and strengthen counseling and mental health programs to help non-local students cope with the emotional and psychological rigors of being away from home.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights significant disparities in academic achievement between local and non-local community college students in Hong Kong, shaped by differences in cultural capital, educational policies, and family support. The findings suggest that local students benefit from higher cultural capital, proficiency in Cantonese, and familiarity with the Hong Kong educational system, which eases their academic integration and success. In contrast, non-local students face considerable challenges, including language barriers, inflexible credit transfer policies, and limited family support, which undermine their full academic participation and performance.

The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address these disparities. Key recommendations include language support and cultural integration programs, a review of policies on credit transfer and admission to make them more inclusive, and structures that

strongly support non-local students. These are some of the key initiatives that can be undertaken to ensure a fair educational environment. This is not only critical to enhancing the academic achievement of non-local students but also to their social integration and psychic well-being.

Narrowing the achievement gap requires efforts beyond institutional policies, involving community-level engagement and inclusive strategies. Addressing the challenges faced by non-local students provides insights for policymakers and future research on fostering a more equitable educational environment in Hong Kong.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. Although participants were selected from five community colleges in Hong Kong, the findings may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in other educational contexts, such as vocational education. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, while providing rich insights, may limit the applicability to larger populations. Lastly, the study focuses on current and retrospective experiences but does not track participants' long-term academic and social trajectories.

Future research could broaden the scope by examining different educational levels, including universities or technical institutes, and exploring cross-cultural comparisons with other regions. Employing mixed-methods approaches, such as combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, would enhance the depth and generalizability of findings. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how challenges and institutional interventions evolve over time, offering a comprehensive view of students' academic journeys.

Note

1. The distinction between non-local students from mainland China and other countries is crucial due to the fundamental differences in their educational backgrounds. Mainland China students typically complete the Gaokao, a highly standardized and exam-focused national entrance exam, while international students, such as those from the IB or A Level systems, come from educational backgrounds that emphasize critical thinking, independent learning, and academic flexibility (Double *et al.*, 2023; Jia and Ericson, 2017).

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