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# A model of selective integration: higher education dynamics in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to develop and apply a “selective integration” model to explain the dynamics of cross-border higher education in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA). It investigates the tensions between top-down, state-steered integration policies and the bottom-up, functional collaboration among universities. The study identifies the key drivers and barriers shaping regional integration by analysing policy design, cross-border university alliances and individual institutional strategies.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The analytical framework draws from theories of regional integration in political science combining three theoretical perspectives – sovereign, neo-functionalist and institutionalist – to analyse higher education integration across four dimensions: functional, academic, structural and cultural. This framework is applied through a qualitative, multi-component research design comprising: a systematic analysis of key policy documents; a case study of the GBA University Alliance and an analysis of the strategic responses of two leading Hong Kong universities and their mainland campuses.

**Findings** – The findings reveal a “selective integration” model where progress is highly uneven. Integration is actively promoted and advances rapidly in the functional and academic dimensions where it aligns with state-steered economic and technological goals and is enabled by university adaptation. However, integration is systematically constrained and progress is minimal in the structural and cultural dimensions, where deep-seated political differences and the preservation of regional autonomy act as powerful barriers.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study presents a novel framework combining political science integration theories, and higher education studies on cross-border higher education and internationalisation. In so doing it contributes a model of “permission-based spillover,” demonstrating how integration is achieved across political, historical and cultural boundaries. This model challenges the more traditional binary between deep supranational integration (e.g. the EU) and cautious intergovernmentalism, offering a framework for understanding state-steered regional integration where economic and technological synergies are pursued without threatening political autonomy.

**Originality/value** – This paper offers a novel interdisciplinary framework for analysing regional integration of higher education in politically complex and asymmetrical environments. The “selective integration” model provides a nuanced understanding of the GBA and serves as a crucial analytical counterpoint to the EU’s supranational model. It offers insights for other regions, such as ASEAN and Mercosur, that also navigate the tension between economic integration and the preservation of national sovereignty and regional autonomy, providing a guide for policymakers and university leaders in developing effective cross-border strategies.

**Keywords** China, Universities, Regional integration, Cross-border collaboration, State steering

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

The Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) is one of the pillars of China’s national strategy and aims to create a globally leading hub for innovation, industry and economic vitality (Outline Development Plan for the GBA (hereafter the GBA Plan), 2019). This megaregion comprises the Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of Hong

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Kong and Macao, alongside nine cities in Guangdong Province's Pearl River Delta. Given its strategic importance, the development of higher education within the GBA has become a subject of increasing scholarly attention (Mok, 2022a; Oleksiyyenko *et al.*, 2024). Its prominence in the context of China's "One Country, Two Systems" policy lies in the region's potential to become a global centre for financial, technological and knowledge exchange. Against this backdrop, the emergence of a cross-border higher education sector creates both opportunities and challenges for policy makers, institutional leaders and academics trying to set up educational and research collaboration.

A central tension in the GBA's higher education development is the evolving distinction between cooperation and integration. While foundational documents such as the GBA Plan (2019) consistently stress "cooperation", a new discourse has emerged. Since 2019, calls for "integration" have become increasingly prominent, voiced by government officials, reflected in news media and adopted by scholars as a valuable lens for analysis (Zhang, 2025; Xu and Lu, 2019; Xie *et al.*, 2021). This terminological shift is prompted by tangible growth in joint programmes, cross-border campuses and student exchanges. This paper contributes to the debate on higher education integration in the GBA by investigating when and how cross-border activities constitute cooperation and when they can be characterised as elements of deeper, systemic integration; it also analyses the key drivers and barriers shaping integration dynamics.

To investigate the shift from cooperation to integration, our paper is guided by three central research questions:

- RQ1. How is higher education integration defined and understood within the unique context of the GBA?
- RQ2. What are the factors facilitating or hindering higher education integration in the GBA, particularly in terms of inter-institutional collaboration?
- RQ3. How do universities in the GBA respond to policy directives on integration?

To answer these questions, we first build an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining political science and higher education studies to review the definition and scope of regional integration. We then analyse how it is designed in policy and implemented in practice, examining the factors that promote and hinder regional integration in higher education.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We begin by outlining the political and educational context of the GBA under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. The subsequent two sections establish our conceptual and theoretical foundations: first, we review the literature to define regional integration as a concept with four distinct dimensions (functional, academic, structural and cultural); second, we introduce a theoretical framework combining intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism and institutionalism theories. After detailing our qualitative methodology, the paper presents its empirical analysis. This section examines the dynamics of regional integration by analysing multi-level policy frameworks (spanning central, provincial and SAR governments), collective and individual university responses and barriers to higher education integration. Finally, the discussion section synthesises the findings to elaborate on our proposed "selective integration" model, discussing its limitations and implications for theory and policy.

### Context

The political landscape of the GBA is defined by the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, which accommodates three distinct regulatory environments across mainland

China, Hong Kong and Macao (Xie *et al.*, 2021). Established under the Basic Law following the handovers of Hong Kong (1997) and Macao (1999), this principle grants the two SARs a high degree of autonomy. However, the relationship with mainland China, particularly for Hong Kong, has been complex and marked by political crises (So, 2011). Against this backdrop, mainland China’s central and local governments have launched extensive policies that frame the GBA initiative as a new vehicle for integrating the SARs into the national socioeconomic development process. This creates a unique context for higher education, where cooperation is encouraged under a single national sovereignty, yet operates across three systems that each retain their specific higher education policy, distinct academic governance and university management.

While the GBA Plan (2019) designates universities as engines for developing the region into a global innovation, technological and education hub, the extent to which Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macao SARs have integrated their higher education systems remains unclear (Li, 2021). Despite significant policy efforts to promote and intensify cooperation between universities in the GBA, it has been noted that the differences in administrative systems, governance structures and institutional and academic cultures, between Hong Kong and Macao, as former colonies of the UK and Portugal respectively and mainland China have posed challenges (Xie *et al.*, 2023).

Although the establishment of branch campuses in Guangdong by universities in Hong Kong contributes to enhancing the overall educational strength in the region, different educational systems can also result in difficulties related to university governance, curriculum design and mutual recognition of degrees. For example, institutions in Hong Kong have a high level of autonomy, allowing academic staff to participate in institutional development planning and decision-making (Postiglione and Jung, 2017). While higher levels of institutional autonomy and academic freedom are important factors in the global standing of several Hong Kong universities, these may create tensions in the context of higher education integration in the GBA, where alignment with centrally coordinated agendas for national socio-economic development is increasingly emphasised. By contrast, universities in Guangdong are governed by a “top-level design” framework, which is implemented through a dual leadership system. In this parallel structure ultimate authority lies with the university Party Secretary, who is consequently the *de facto* leader of the institution on all major decisions (Vickers and Zeng, 2017).

Furthermore, cultural and language differences across the GBA present significant challenges. Hong Kong universities primarily use English as their medium of instruction and favour discussion-based pedagogical approaches, whereas students in mainland China rely mostly on Chinese language and on traditional teacher-centred instruction (Yu and Zhang, 2016). Academic cultural differences, such as the emphasis on critical thinking in Hong Kong’s more Westernised education model, can also pose difficulties, as these students may not be comfortable with the more hierarchical classroom dynamics prevalent in mainland China (Vyas and Yu, 2018).

Existing scholarship on higher education in the GBA has explored these dynamics from several angles. One strand of research examines how policy interventions – such as flexible course recognition and joint research programmes – enhance cross-border collaboration (e.g. Mok, 2022b). Another focuses specifically on the more complex process of integration, analysing it from both a macro perspective of government-driven strategies (Liang, 2022) and a meso-level perspective centred on university initiatives (Liu and Pan, 2024). A recurring theme in the literature is the fundamental challenge to integration posed by the region’s three distinct higher education systems, each with its own accreditation and quality assurance standards (Postiglione and Jung, 2017). While these studies identify key policies

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and actors, the concept of integration often remains under-defined, creating the need for a more systematic analytical model.

### Literature review

This paper turns to political science to conceptualise regional integration in higher education, a choice motivated by two key factors. First, the GBA is not merely an economic or educational space; it is an inherently political project. The “One Country, Two Systems” framework creates a quasi-international dynamic, where issues of sovereignty, autonomy and intergovernmental negotiation are central to any integration process. Consequently, understanding these dynamics requires theoretical tools provided by regional integration studies based on political science. Second, whereas models of internationalisation and cross-border cooperation exist within higher education studies, they often function as analytical typologies for describing policy design and implementation. They are effective at understanding what is happening but are generally not explicitly grounded in a foundational discipline equipped to capture the political drivers and constraints that shape the conditions under which integration happens.

Following this rationale, we draw from political science theories originally developed to explain the formation of the European Union. Early conceptions described regional integration as a linear process where nation-states willingly “mingle, merge, and mix,” ceding sovereignty to resolve conflicts (Haas, 1955). This view was refined by Schmitter (1970), who argued that integration is a non-linear, cyclical process shaped by actors’ responses to crises and internal contradictions.

In contrast, scholarship within higher education has typically approached regional integration through more descriptive analytical models. These models often seek to categorise different levels of cross-border activity, using terms like “cooperation,” “partnership” and “collaboration” (Knight, 2024) or proposing linear trajectories from initial contact to full integration (Woldegiorgis, 2013). A widely adopted typology further illustrates this approach, distinguishing the following stages: *cooperation* as voluntary joint activities between neighbouring institutions, such as cross-border student exchanges and bilateral research projects (Beerkens, 2002); *coordination* as common frameworks and procedures across the region, e.g. regional credit transfer agreements and quality standards (Van Damme et al., 2004); *harmonisation* as coordination of educational programmes, agreed minimum academic standards, equivalence and comparability of qualifications (Woldegiorgis, 2013) and *integration* or a unified regional system with shared governance structures and common resources (Chou and Ravinet, 2017). We note that the GBA Plan (2019) uses *cooperation* to refer to cross-border activities at a macro level, e.g. between Province, Municipality and SAR authorities. *Collaboration* is used at meso and micro level to characterise cross-border activities between universities and their subunits, e.g. joint campuses, collaborative research projects, or educational exchanges.

However, the primary limitation of such stage-based models is their linearity. As Marginson and Rhoades (2002) argued, regional integration is rarely a simple progression; it is a complex process shaped by the combined effects of global pressures, national policies and local institutional agency. This review reveals a critical disconnect: the foundational political theories on regional integration offer explanatory power but lack specificity for the higher education sector, whereas the higher education models are specific but often lack theoretical depth to explain complex, politically driven integration. To bridge this gap, this paper argues for a move beyond descriptive typologies towards a more robust theoretical framework that requires critical engagement to shed light on the interplay of top-down state steering, multi-level policy and institutional agency in the context of the GBA.

### Theoretical framework

Our framework for analysing higher education integration in the GBA entails two distinct but complementary components: three theoretical perspectives that serve as explanatory lenses, and four dimensions that define the specific domains in which integration occurs.

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#### Three perspectives

The “One Country, Two Systems” framework makes the GBA a quasi-international political entity, rendering theories of state-level integration relevant. Hence, we combine three theoretical perspectives to understand higher education regional integration in the GBA: intergovernmentalism, neofunctionalism and institutionalism.

#### *Sovereign perspective: state-steered integration*

The first perspective, rooted in intergovernmentalism theory, posits that regional integration is primarily a process driven and controlled by national governments (Hoffmann, 1982). States are seen as rational actors that engage in negotiations based on national interests, whereas carefully guarding their sovereignty. Integration, therefore, proceeds cautiously through structured, top-down agreements. This state-steered model is evident in Southeast Asia, where the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) University Network (AUN) was established by consensus among governments, with its agenda and scope consistently determined by the priorities of its member states rather than by independent institutional actors (Heryadi et al., 2018). For this study, the sovereign perspective is used to understand how integration is shaped by negotiated agreements between the administrative systems of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao under the overarching authority of the central government in Beijing.

#### *Neo-functional perspective: integration through spillover*

A second perspective, drawing from neofunctionalism, argues that integration can also be driven by pressures to widen the scope for cooperation (Schmitter, 2002). The core concept is “spillover,” where initial, often technical, cooperation in one policy area engenders new challenges and incentives that lead to deeper integration in related sectors (Lindberg, 1963). The Bologna Process in Europe is a prime example in higher education. Pressures for degree comparability to support student and labour mobility created a spillover effect, leading to broader collaboration in quality assurance and credit systems, often facilitated by supranational actors like the European Commission (Corbett, 2005). In the GBA context, this perspective allows us to examine how economic and technological pressures drive “spillover” effects in specific areas like joint research and talent mobility.

#### *Institutionalist perspective: university strategic adaptation*

The institutionalist perspective provides a critical corrective to the previous two, arguing that rational models tend to neglect the influence of non-state actors, historical contexts and established norms, values and cultures. Critics of state-centric models point to the importance of multi-level governance, where subnational actors – like local governments and universities – shape integration outside of direct central state control (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). This framework has been used in higher education studies to analyse the influence of transnational and subnational actors on higher education integration dynamics (Fumasoli, 2015; Fumasoli et al., 2018; Piattoni, 2010). This is particularly salient in the GBA, given the agency of the SARs’ governments and individual universities. Furthermore, an institutionalist lens emphasises that historical legacies,

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organisational cultures and deep-seated norms can constrain or enable integration, regardless of stated political goals or functional needs (Olsen, 2007). These complexities are compounded in higher education due to its role in cultural reproduction and identity formation, which can create significant resistance to top-down, state-steered integration (Gornitzka, 2009). This perspective focuses on how universities respond strategically within the context of historical and institutional legacies.

### *Dimensions of higher education integration*

To analyse the concept of higher education integration, we have operationalised it as a four-dimensional construct. While we present these dimensions as a cohesive framework, our four dimensions of integration are derived from distinct but overlapping strands of literature.

*Functional integration* draws its name and logic directly from neo-functional theory, which posits that practical, operational cooperation can drive integration forward (Schmitter, 2002).

*Academic integration* is rooted in the extensive scholarship on higher education harmonisation, most notably the literature analysing the Bologna Process, which focuses on the convergence of degree structures, credit systems and quality assurance (e.g. Woldegiorgis, 2013; Van Damme et al., 2004).

*Structural integration* reflects concepts from governance and public administration studies, focusing on the alignment of formal policies, administrative systems and regulatory frameworks in processes of regionalism (Chou and Ravinet, 2017).

Finally, *cultural integration* is derived from sociological studies of academic and organisational cultures, which highlight the importance of shared norms, values and practices and recognise that the central role of education in identity formation can create significant resistance to integration (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Gornitzka, 2009).

By synthesising these four dimensions, our model provides a comprehensive tool for uncovering the multifaceted nature of higher education regional integration.

By analysing how the sovereign, functional and institutional perspectives shape each of the four dimensions, this framework allows for a nuanced investigation of the GBA's unique "selective integration" model.

## Methodology

To operationalise the theoretical framework, this study employs a qualitative research design structured around three distinct analytical components, each corresponding to one of the theoretical perspectives. This multi-component approach allows for a systematic investigation into how different forces shape higher education integration in the GBA.

**Sovereign perspective:** to examine the top-down, state-steered vision for integration of higher education, we conducted a systematic analysis of key policy documents from central, provincial and SAR governments. This method is chosen to reveal the official policy for integration.

**Neo-functional perspective:** to investigate bottom-up integration and "spillover" effects, we used a case study of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao University Alliance (GBAUA). As the region's largest and most prominent university network – endorsed in policy and comprising leading institutions from all three territories – it serves as the ideal case to observe how functional cooperation evolves in practice.

**Institutionalist perspective:** to shed light on how individual institutions navigate GBA dynamics, we analysed the strategic responses of two key Hong Kong universities that established campuses in the mainland: The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) with its CUHK-Shenzhen campus and The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology



(HKUST) with its HKUST-Guangzhou campus. These universities were selected because they are prominent, well-documented examples of global universities acting as forerunners in establishing a major physical presence in the Guangdong Province. Crucially, they represent different strategic approaches and timelines of development, allowing for a nuanced analysis of institutional agency and the practical barriers encountered.

#### *Data collection and sources*

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The study draws on three types of documents. First, we collected seven core policy documents from the three regions (see [Table 1](#)), including development plans and official statements from government bodies. Because no single, formal education plan exists for Hong Kong, official publications from its Education Bureau and GBA-related offices were used.

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Second, we gathered policy documents relative to the GBAUA (see [Table 2](#)).

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Third, we gathered institutional documents to analyse the selected university responses (see [Table 3](#)).

#### *Case selection for institutional analysis*

To provide a granular view of the institutional perspective, this study focuses on the institutional responses of two leading Hong Kong universities and their mainland campuses: The HKUST with its HKUST-Guangzhou campus and CUHK with its CUHK-Shenzhen campus. These cases were selected for three reasons. First, they are the most prominent and well-documented examples of elite Hong Kong universities establishing a major physical campus in Guangdong that were the first two to cooperate with local universities. Second, they represent different strategic approaches and timelines for cross-border campus integration, offering significant insights on their respective institutional responses.

#### *Data analysis*

The collected documents were analysed using a thematic approach ([Morgan, 2022](#)) based on [Bowen's \(2009\)](#) three-step process of skimming, reading and interpretation. A coding framework was developed deductively from our theoretical framework. Each document was coded according to the three theoretical perspectives (sovereign, neo-functionalist, institutionalist) and the four dimensions of integration (functional, academic, structural, cultural). This systematic process allowed us to identify patterns related to policy aims, cross-border frameworks and institutional collaboration. While the initial coding was deductive (e.g. "functional spillover," "structural governance"), it was refined inductively during the analysis to capture emergent themes from the texts. These inductive codes included terms such as "joint programmes," "education hub" and "talent mobility," which were used to highlight specific initiatives described in the policy and institutional documents (e.g. GBA Plan, 2019, p. 31–32; HKUST, 2021; CUHK, 2022).

#### **Empirical analysis**

We proceeded in three parts, each examining the key factors shaping GBA higher education integration through each theoretical perspective. We first analysed state-steered policy frameworks in official documents, then explored selective spillover in university alliances; and finally, we investigated the institutional responses of universities. Each part is scrutinised through the four dimensions of integration.



**Table 1.** Key policy documents on higher education development in the GBA

No.	Policy documents	Publisher(s)	Year
1	<i>Framework agreement</i> Framework agreement on deepening Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao cooperation in the development of the Greater Bay Area Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao cooperation in the development of the Greater Bay Area <i>GBA plan</i> Outline development plan for the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area <i>HE plan</i> Promote the development plan for higher education cooperation in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area <i>Guangdong HE plan</i> The 14th Five-Year Plan for Education Development in Guangdong Province <i>Guangdong plan</i> The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of Guangdong Province and the Long-Term Goals for 2035 <i>HK initiatives</i> Legislative council panel on education: Building Hong Kong as an international post-secondary education hub <i>Macao plan</i> Long-term development outline for higher education in Macao (2021–2030)	National Development and Reform Commission of China, People's Government of Guangdong Province, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and the State Council  Ministry of Education of China, and People's Government of Guangdong Province  People's Government of Guangdong Province People's Government of Guangdong Province  Legislative Council of Hong Kong SAR  Education and Youth Development Bureau of Macao SAR	2017  2019  2020  2021 2021  2024  2021
<b>Source(s):</b> Table created by authors			

**Table 2.** Key documents and sources for the GBAUA case study

No.	Document/Source	Issuing body	Relevance to analysis
1	Official website <a href="https://eao.sysu.edu.cn/ghmua/">https://eao.sysu.edu.cn/ghmua/</a>	GBAUA	Provides official mission statement (“one-hour academic circle”), full membership lists and history
2	Annual 6th to 8th Report (2023–2024)	GBAUA secretariat	Offers evidence of specific activities (e.g. Lingnan culture camp), and discussions on student exchange, providing insight into functional and cultural integration initiatives
3	GBA Plan (2019) and Guangdong HE Plan (2021)	Central/provincial governments	Policy documents that explicitly endorse and task the GBAUA, linking the bottom-up alliance to the top-down sovereign perspective

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**Table 3.** Key documents and sources for HKUST and CUHK case studies

No.	Document/Source	Issuing body	Relevance to analysis
1	Strategic Plan 2021–2028	HKUST	Outlines the university’s official strategy regarding the GBA and the rationale for the Guangzhou campus. Used to analyse the institutional perspective
2	HKUST-Guangzhou Website and Official Announcements (2021)	HKUST Guangzhou	Provides details on the innovative “Hub-Thrust” academic structure and cross-campus requirements, serving as key evidence for academic and functional integration
3	CUHK Strategic Plan 2021–2025	CUHK	Outlines university’s strategy to strengthen its presence in mainland China, leveraging GBA opportunities to advance education, research collaboration, and talent development
4	CUHK Official News Announcement (2022)	CUHK / CUHK- Shenzhen	Describes the new 2 + 2 programme, providing evidence for the evolving and pragmatic nature of academic integration between the two campuses after a period of separate development

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*Sovereign perspective: integration by top-down state steering*

The sovereign perspective shows how political authority shapes the boundaries and possibilities for integration within the “One Country, Two Systems” framework. The analysis of policy documents demonstrates that state-steered frameworks enable functional and academic integration but avoid addressing deeper structural and cultural integration.

*Functional integration: strong policy support.* The Framework Agreement (2017, p. 3) establishes the sovereign foundation for integration by positioning higher education as a cornerstone of regional development. With respect to the functional dimension, the GBA Plan (2019, p. 31) proposes establishing the GBA as an international education hub to attract renowned universities from Hong Kong, Macao and around the world to mainland China. The plan also emphasises improving mechanisms for talent mobility to stimulate innovation

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(GBA Plan, 2019, p. 13). This focus on functional integration is echoed in the HE Plan (2020) and Guangdong HE Plan (2021, p. 32–36), both calling for the development of world-class universities and disciplines in the mainland to increase talent and enhance technological innovation.

*Academic integration: selective policy promotion.* Academic integration receives cautious policy support, with measures designed to promote cooperation. The GBA Plan (2019, p. 31) supports “collaboration among GBA universities to establish joint programmes,” laboratories and research centres, and encourages the GBA University Alliance to facilitate credit recognition. These policies notably avoid mandating common academic standards or unified quality assurance systems that would require major concessions in the higher education systems’ autonomy. Equally, regional policy responses show different approaches to academic integration. Guangdong HE plan (2021, p.52) outlines ambitious goals of “educational cooperation enhancement” and “encouraging cooperation among higher education institutions in the GBA to enhance credit recognition, student exchanges and research collaboration.” In contrast, Hong Kong’s policy response is more limited, listing three measures: encouraging cooperation between higher education institutions in the three regions, jointly establishing laboratories and research centres and sharing and commercialising research outcomes. Macao, due to its small size and late educational development, is more focused on strengthening its niche markets and existing competitive advantages, namely, tourism and gaming industry. Hong Kong and Macao are engaging in mutually beneficial cooperation with the mainland; however, their selective approach reflects political considerations to maintain their respective degrees of educational autonomy.

*Structural integration: maintaining systemic boundaries.* Our analysis of policy documents (Guangdong HE Plan, 2021; Macao Plan, 2021; HK Initiatives, 2024) shows that all three regions systematically elude addressing structural integration. These policies do not openly mention unified governance structures, common regulatory frameworks, or comprehensive quality assurance systems across the GBA. Particularly, these policies consistently use terms such as “cooperation,” “collaboration” and “exchange” rather than “integration” when referring to GBA governance-related issues. These more general terms seemingly reflect the attempt to maintain autonomy under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework by the three regions.

*Cultural integration: acknowledging diversity.* Cultural integration receives the least attention in the policy documents analysed, which might indicate awareness and recognition of the deep sensitivities involved. Indeed, the policies acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity. For example, Macao Plan’s (2021, p.9) emphasis on Portuguese language courses, tourism specialisation and gaming industry exemplifies how cultural and economic uniqueness is strategically leveraged to avoid pursuing cultural integration. These policies may suggest that cultural integration cannot be enforced through sovereign power but must be developed over time through sustained cooperation. The GBA’s long-term plan validates this incremental approach by aiming to “promote the enhancement of cultural soft power” and “facilitate the further exchange and integration of diverse cultures,” signalling a focus on gradual influence over immediate homogenisation (GBA Plan, 2019, p. 9).

### *Neo-functional perspective: integration through permission-based spillover*

The neo-functional perspective examines how economic and technological pressures drive integration through spillover effects. To this end, we used the GBA University Alliance (GBAUA) as a case to demonstrate bottom-up integration processes. Through the analysis of

four integration dimensions, we find that spillover effects take place within the boundaries of centralised designed policies.

*Functional integration: successful spillover.* The alliance was jointly initiated and established in 2016 by the three leading universities in the three regions, including Sun Yat-sen University, the CUHK and the University of Macau. The goal is to combine the high-quality educational resources of elite universities to promote educational exchanges and cooperation across the GBA. The GBAUA's development from the original 26 to 45 universities with 64 professional sub-alliances, including medical, innovation and entrepreneurship alliances, provides evidence of functional spillover effects where initial networking success creates demand for specialised collaboration platforms (see Table 4). The alliance's slogan, "Jointly building the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao one-hour academic circle," demonstrates how functional pressures for mobility and resource sharing have driven integration initiatives in higher education providing transport infrastructure to achieve closer connections.

The GBAUA membership composition reveals a dynamic institutional network that has evolved significantly since its founding. Although the alliance includes the vast majority of major public and private universities from Hong Kong and Macao, not all higher education institutions from these two regions are members. The growth of the alliance since its 2016 inception has been exclusively driven by new member-institutions located in Guangdong province. Remarkably, this expansion is characterised by the inclusion of six cross-border collaborative campuses: three are Guangdong campuses of established mainland universities, two are Guangdong campuses created by Hong Kong universities and one is a joint-venture institution founded by a mainland and a Hong Kong university. The contemporary nature of this strategic growth is highlighted by the integration of newly founded institutions, such as The HKUST (Guangzhou), established in 2022.

*Academic integration: moderate spillover.* Academic integration shows moderate spillover effects within the GBAUA. Originally, the alliance was included in the GBA Plan (2019, p.31) and Guangdong HE Plan (2021, p.52), which specifically call for developing cooperation structures like the GBAUA to explore information sharing, cross-institutional credit recognition, mutual recognition of scientific research outcomes and more flexible student exchange arrangements. However, whereas student exchange programmes are regularly discussed in the GBAUA reports, the process of achieving curriculum coordination or degree standardisation is not mentioned, showing that spillovers stop at mutual recognition rather than integration.

*Structural integration: spillover systemic barriers.* Despite its multiyear development, the GBAUA has yet to generate spillover effects in structural integration. Academic standards, administrative procedures and strategic decisions remain distinctive characteristics of each university in the GBA. Although the alliance promotes extensive cooperation, it also operates based on a consensus-building decision making. The consensus model is a significant feature of its design, allowing the alliance to function as a carefully calibrated platform for collaboration that respects the distinct institutional autonomies within the "One Country, Two Systems" framework.

*Cultural integration: limited spillover.* The spillover effects of cultural integration are the most limited within the GBAUA. Although the alliance promotes interaction between universities with different cultural backgrounds, it has not produced significant cultural integration. For example, events such as the Lingnan Culture Research Camp, Cantonese Opera and Lingnan Culture Week and the GBA Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum represent ad-hoc targeted cultural integration initiatives (GBAUA 6th Reports, 2023; GBAUA 8th Reports, 2024). These activities primarily rely on the Chinese language,

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making participation challenging for Hong Kong's relatively large international community. Consequently, the fundamental differences in language and academic traditions between Hong Kong's English-dominated, Western-style education system and mainland China's predominantly Chinese-medium, examination-oriented system pose significant practical obstacles to achieving deeper academic cultural integration.

### *The institutionalist perspective: universities' adaptive responses*

The institutional perspective examines how universities, as actors provided with degrees of organisational autonomy, with their own histories, norms and cultures, navigate the pressures from the state and the dynamics of functional spillover. The analysis of university responses reveals a pattern of adaptive engagement in the functional and academic dimensions, coupled with significant constraints in the structural and cultural dimensions.

Functional integration: adaptive strategies *via* new campuses. Universities have demonstrated strong adaptability in the functional dimension, primarily by establishing new cross-border campuses and joint research institutes. Spurred by significant financial incentives from GBA policies, these initiatives serve as strategic vehicles for accessing new resources, talent pools and industrial partnerships in the mainland without altering the core operations of the home campus. The establishment of HKUST (Guangzhou), for instance, was a direct response to the GBA's strategic push for innovation, combining HKUST's STEM profile with Guangzhou's industrial base. This trend is further exemplified by the creation of the City University of Hong Kong, Dongguan campus in 2024 and the variety of cross-border models, from joint-venture institutions to joint campuses, all aimed at resource sharing and market presence.

*Academic integration: pragmatic and evolving cooperation.* The approach to academic integration reflects pragmatism, where universities foster cross-border collaboration through selected programmes, thereby avoiding the challenges of curriculum harmonisation focusing on the creation of distinctive joint programmes and mobility schemes. HKUST (Guangzhou) exemplifies an innovative approach, creating a complementary, interdisciplinary graduate curriculum (the "Hub-Thrust" model) that requires students to spend time at both campuses, fostering academic exchange without forcing structural alignment (HKUST, 2021). The 2 + 2 programme recently launched between CUHK and its Shenzhen campus, after a decade of separate development, shows a possible incremental path toward academic integration, driven by the practical need to enhance student mobility (CUHK, 2022).

*Structural integration: deliberate avoidance.* Structural integration faces the most significant institutional resistance. The deeply embedded differences in governance, administrative systems and university cultures between Hong Kong's common law tradition and the mainland's civil law, party-led system pose fundamental barriers. For example, the delayed cooperation between CUHK and its campus in Shenzhen was partly due to their distinct departmental structures and administrative systems, which limited the scope for deeper institutional integration. Overall, universities respond to GBA policies and incentives by creating new, separate structures (like a branch campus) rather than attempting to merge or fully align existing ones, thereby preserving the institutional autonomy of the home campus.

*Cultural integration: acknowledging diversity.* Finally, cultural integration remains very limited due to profound institutional differences. The "Westernised" academic culture in Hong Kong – characterised by English as the primary medium of instruction, critical pedagogy and high institutional autonomy – contrasts sharply with the mainland's academic culture. This is evident even in collaborative ventures. While new campuses like HKUST (Guangzhou) aim to share a common ethos with the home campus, they must also operate

**Table 4.** Member universities of GBAUA 2016–2025Social  
Transformations  
in Chinese  
Societies

2016: founding members (26 Universities)	Guangdong Universities (10)	<i>Sun Yat-sen University – initiator</i> South China University of Technology Jinan University South China Agricultural University Southern Medical University Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine South China Normal University Guangdong University of Technology Guangdong University of Foreign Studies Shantou University
	Hong Kong Universities (9)	<i>The Chinese University of Hong Kong – initiator</i> Lingnan University The University of Hong Kong Hong Kong Metropolitan University City University of Hong Kong The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Hong Kong Baptist University The Hong Kong Polytechnic University The Education University of Hong Kong
	Macao Universities (7)	<i>University of Macau - initiator</i> University of Saint Joseph Macao University of Tourism City University of Macau Macau University of Science and Technology Macao Polytechnic University Kiang Wu Nursing College of Macau
2017: new embers	Guangdong Universities (2)	Shenzhen University Southern University of Science and Technology
2019: new members	Guangdong Universities (9)	<i>Tsinghua Shenzhen International Graduate School* Harbin Institute of Technology (Shenzhen)* Beijing Normal University at Zhuhai*</i> Guangzhou University Foshan University Guangzhou Medical University Dongguan University of Technology Wuyi University Guangdong Ocean University
2020: new members	Guangdong Universities (3)	<i>The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen)*</i> Guangdong University of Finance & Economics Guangdong University of Petrochemical Technology
2021: new member	Guangdong University (1)	Lingnan Normal University
2022: new member	Guangdong University (1)	<i>The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou)* (2022)</i>
2023: new member	Guangdong University (1)	Guangdong Pharmaceutical University
2024: new members	Guangdong University (2)	<i>Beijing Normal–Hong Kong Baptist University*</i> Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering

**Note(s):** \*GBA campus of a mainland or Hong Kong university**Source(s):** From the GBAUA Website, last accessed 31/07/2025

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within the cultural and political norms of their local environment. This persistent divergence means that whereas functional and academic cooperation occurs, deeper integration of shared values and practices remains a long-term goal.

### Discussion

This paper has presented a novel theoretical framework combining political science theory and higher education studies to advance our understanding of higher education regional integration in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao GBA. We, firstly, asked how integration in higher education is defined and understood within the unique context of the GBA; the empirical analysis shows that higher education integration in the GBA follows a selective integration model, driven by the dynamic interaction of state steering, spillover and adaptation. In addressing research question two about the key factors facilitating or hindering higher education integration, our evidence supports a model in which integration progress depends on political sensitivities and universities’ institutional settings. Functional integration progresses more rapidly because it meets practical needs for economic development and technological innovation hence not challenging regional and institutional autonomies. Academic integration advances more modestly through pragmatic and selective cooperation, such as establishing new campuses and joint programmes. This responds to research question three on how university practices align with official policy directives on integration; the findings show a pattern of policy-practice alignment in functional areas, but significant divergence in structural and cultural domains where safeguarding distinct regional and institutional characteristics is paramount. Specifically, structural integration faces systemic barriers as it requires concessions in regional autonomy that are incompatible with the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, whereas cultural integration progresses slowly because it threatens regional and institutional identities rooted in different historical trajectories. Our findings are summarised in [Table 5](#).

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This selective model challenges traditional integration theories that assume either automatic “spillover” or consistent resistance. Our findings suggest that in the context of the GBA, neo-functionalist spillover is not an automatic process across the four dimensions of integration, but is gated by sovereign and autonomy concerns, creating a form of “permission-based spillover.” Likewise, the state-steering view overlooks the significant individual and collective agency of universities in driving functional and academic cooperation within the boundaries set by the state. The GBA therefore constitutes a model of selective integration, where top-down state steering establishes the arena within which functional spillover and institutional adaptation take place.

Beyond its specific context, the GBA’s model of selective integration provides a valuable counterpoint to other regional integration processes globally. It stands in stark contrast to the supranational project of the European Union, where the pooling of sovereignty among member states creates additional, supranational institutions to foster deeper structural alignment. The GBA model, conversely, demonstrates a path of integration without convergence, where functional and economic goals are actively pursued, whereas political and structural boundaries are deliberately maintained. This makes it particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics within other intergovernmental blocs, from the consensus-driven political cooperation of ASEAN to the common market project of Mercosur. Both grapple with the tension between achieving the economic benefits of integration whereas protecting national sovereignty and principles of non-interference. The GBA case illuminates an alternative, strongly top-down state-steered, answer to this tension: it showcases how targeted, deep functional integration can be driven by powerful political and



**Table 5.** Selective integration of higher education in the GBA

Dimension of integration	Level of progress	Drivers and facilitators	Barriers and constraints	Evidence from the study
Functional integration	High	State-steered goals: Policy frames higher education as an engine for the GBA's economic and innovation strategy Functional spillover: Economic needs and industry demands create pressure for cross-border collaboration. Institutional adaptation: Universities strategically establish new campuses to access resources, talent and funding Selective state support: Policy encourages specific joint programs and credit recognition but avoids deep harmonisation. Pragmatic university strategies: Institutions create innovative, complementary programmes that foster exchange without forcing full curriculum alignment	Minimal, as functional goals align with the interests of all actors and do not challenge core autonomies	Policy: GBA Plan (2019) calls for an "international education hub." Alliance: GBAUA's expansion and "one-hour academic circle" goal. Institutions: Establishment of HKUST-Guangzhou and CUHK-Shenzhen
Academic integration	Medium	None. This dimension is actively avoided by all actors	The desire to maintain distinct academic systems and quality assurance standards under "One Country, Two Systems"	Policy: Official documents support "collaboration" on programmes, not systemic integration. Alliance: GBAUA promotes collaboration in education and student mobility. Institutions: HKUST's "Hub-Thrust" model and CUHK's "2 + 2 programme" as evolving, practical solutions
Structural integration	Low	None. This dimension is actively avoided by all actors	Preservation of autonomy: "One Country, Two Systems" framework creates fundamental boundaries to protect regional autonomy. Systemic differences: Incompatible legal frameworks, governance models (party-led vs common law) and administrative systems. Institutional resistance: Universities deliberately create new, separate entities (branch campuses) to avoid merging core governance structures	Policy: Systematic avoidance of the term "integration" in policy documents regarding governance. Alliance: GBAUA's consensus-based governance model, avoidance of relevant terms and decision-making. Institutions: the separate administrative structures of CUHK and HKUST from their Guangdong campuses, preservation of home campus autonomy

(continued)

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Table 5. Continued

Dimension of integration	Level of progress	Drivers and facilitators	Barriers and constraints	Evidence from the study
Cultural integration	Low	Limited and superficial initiatives aimed at cultural exchange and appreciation	Deep-seated divergence: Profound differences in academic culture ("Westernised" vs Mainland), language of instruction (English vs Chinese) and pedagogical approaches. Political sensitivities: Acknowledgment that cultural values and identity are sensitive areas that cannot be integrated via top-down policy	Policy: emphasis on distinctive languages, cultures and traditions Alliance: GBAUA cultural events (e.g. Lingnan culture camp) have limited reach and are primarily in Chinese. Institutions: the contrast between Hong Kong's emphasis on critical pedagogy and the mainland's more hierarchical classroom dynamics
Source(s): Authors' own work				

financial incentives steered from a distant centralised state authority (Beijing), whereas simultaneously ring-fencing the sensitive areas of structural and cultural governance.

These findings suggest that policymakers and university leaders should adopt a scaffolding strategy, building solid infrastructure in areas of success rather than pushing for structural changes that may encounter systemic resistance. For instance, policymakers from Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao could jointly establish a centralised GBA portal to streamline funding applications for cross-border research projects. For academic integration, rather than designing uniform academic standards, establishing a mutual recognition framework and shared resources, like a common library system, would represent a more effective policy to ensure comparability and transferability.

This study has its limitations, primarily stemming from its methodological reliance on document analysis. First, the analysis provides a macro-level (policy) and meso-level (institutional) view that, by its nature, offers a static snapshot of official positions, rather than capturing the dynamic evolution of the integration process. Second, this high-level perspective does not illuminate the micro-level “lived experiences” – the day-to-day realities, negotiations and challenges faced by the academics, students and administrators. Consequently, future research should adopt qualitative methods such as stakeholder interviews, to explore these realities and enhance our understanding of the complexities of cross-border collaboration at inter- and intra-institutional level.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the literature on regional integration of higher education by conceptualising and operationalising a model of selective integration. By demonstrating how functional gains can be pursued whereas core institutional autonomies are preserved, this study offers a new analytical lens for examining other regions where deep structural alignment is politically complex and challenging.

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