

Strategic responses of universities to regional integration policy: the case of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This paper investigates how universities strategically respond to the emergence of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) as a national policy agenda since 2019. Based on a multi-case study of five universities in the GBA, this study explores how universities interpret, engage with, or resist cross-border regionalisation processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with university leadership and academic professionals. The findings show that strategic responses depend on the university's positioning, governance arrangements, and perceived risks of cross-jurisdictional collaboration. Some universities closely align with the GBA development by expanding campuses, while others adopt symbolic engagement strategies. These responses are not entirely policy-driven, but are based on the history and autonomy of the universities themselves. This paper contributes to the understanding of how higher education regionalism evolves in a fragmented political space and highlights the role of universities as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of state-oriented regional agendas.

Full paper

The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), a national strategy designed to enhance economic and cultural integration among Hong Kong, Macao, and nine cities in Guangdong Province of mainland China, has attracted great interest from the higher education sector and institutions. The initiative was first proposed in 2015 and officially released in 2019, which is officially considered to be a new practice of "One country, two systems" principle. Although official documents position universities as engines of innovation and cross-border collaboration, little research is known about how institutions interpret and respond to this regional agenda. This paper examines the strategic responses and position of five universities, three in Hong Kong and two in mainland China, to the evolving GBA initiative.

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach. The five universities (anonymously identified as the University Z, University K, University X, University S, University T) were selected to reflect their differences in institutional type, jurisdiction, and degree of policy engagement. The data collection method combines desk document analysis and 40 semi-structured interviews with university leadership, faculty leaders, and academic staff. The interviews explore how universities position themselves in relation to the GBA, how internal strategies are formulated, and what pressures or opportunities institutional participants identify.

The findings suggest that strategic responses are neither homogeneous nor completely reactive. The findings show three patterns. First, a small number of institutions pursue structural integration by establishing joint campuses or dual campus models across jurisdictions. These initiatives reflect a strong alignment with state-oriented visions of regional integration and are often supported by local government investment. For instance, University K and University Z have established separate legal entities in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, respectively, at the same time maintaining brand consistency and receiving academic oversight from their parent institutions in Hong Kong. These models allow for experimentation in governance and cross-border mobility, but also introduce regulatory complexity and reputational risks.

Second, some universities engage symbolically within the GBA. University X represent this approach. Despite its high ranking and international recognition, it has chosen not to establish a physical campus in the mainland. Instead, it maintains research collaborations and advisory links with institutions and departments in Guangdong Province. This strategy allows universities to demonstrate their relevance without fully committing to structural integration. Interviews indicate concerns about academic freedom, operational autonomy, and the politicisation of cross-border activities.

Third, mainland universities' engagement strategies are also different, which depends on their institutional nature and relationships with local governments. University S is a national university with multiple campuses in the region, plays a policy implementation role, and actively participates in regional education and innovation initiatives. University T, a Shenzhen-owned university, shows a more flexible, city-aligned strategy. It leverages its location to promote applied research and industry collaboration in line with local development priorities.

In all cases, institutional autonomy, perceived opportunities, and political sensitivity influence the university's positioning. While the GBA discourse emphasizes integration, the study finds that in practice, cooperation remains more prevalent. Universities selectively participate in regional initiatives based on internal priorities, reputational considerations, and governance capacity.

These findings contribute to an understanding of higher education regionalism. They show that universities are not passive actors, but rather interpret and negotiate regional strategies based on their own institutional logics. In the GBA context, strategic engagement is influenced by both constraints and proactivity factors, as governance systems, funding mechanisms, and academic norms differ significantly across borders. As Chinese higher education continues to act for national and regional goals, this differentiated response shows the tension between policy goals and institutional autonomy in a politically complex region.