Applied learning policy in Hong Kong as a contribution to lifelong learning

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Abstract

Applied learning (ApL) policy in Hong Kong was developed within an educational reform framework to enhance the contribution of secondary schooling to lifelong learning. This paper presents a critical assessment of the policy and its implementation from a lifelong learning perspective. It draws on a review of official documentation and interviews with key stakeholders involved in the 2003-09 developmental trials of ApL policy. Data from stakeholder interviews with policy developers, providers, school leadership personnel, course coordinators, teachers, and students were collected from the trials during 2007 and 2008. It is argued that schooling directed to enhancing lifelong learning outcomes should contribute significantly to developing, not only students’ understanding of one or more particular fields of knowledge, but also their commitment to broadening their horizons of understanding as to what might fruitfully be engaged with educationally, their commitment to lifelong engagement, and their capabilities to follow through on that commitment. Analysis of the documentation and interview data revealed that ApL provided the opportunity for a limited but significant contribution to lifelong learning for those students who engaged in it. While ApL maintained a traditional schooling focus on fields of knowledge, it was vocational rather than academic and, to that extent, it provided a broadening of participant educational horizons. For academically weaker participants, it also served to build their commitment to lifelong learning, through providing them with a rewarding educational engagement. ApL also contributed to the development of a range of generic skills and it presented a practical approach to learning: both of possible value to enhancing participants’ capabilities to engage fruitfully in lifelong learning. Those contributions overall, though, were quite limited in extent, and there was no recognition of the need for a structured approach to developing lifelong learning commitment or capability through ApL policy.

Keywords: Applied learning policy; lifelong learning

Introduction

The focus of the study reported here was the development by Hong Kong (the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the Peoples’ Republic of China) of policy for the provision of what was termed “Applied Learning” (“ApL”) as a component of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum,
which was introduced into Hong Kong secondary schools from the 2009–10 school year (Education Bureau, 2008a). That policy was developed iteratively and heuristically through a series of six trials, one starting in each school year between 2003–04 and 2008–09 and each running over two school years (Education Bureau, 2008b; Ng & Sou, 2008).

ApL policy was developed explicitly within an educational framework directed to enhancing the contribution of secondary schooling to lifelong learning, through making the senior secondary curriculum in Hong Kong more inclusive of student learning interests that are not strictly academic and using learning contexts and interests of a more vocational nature to engage students in active learning (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006a).

Both the iterative and heuristic approach to policy development and the nature of the policy itself were seen as being notable features of this policy initiative and were made the focus of the Public Policy Research grant awarded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council to the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Outcomes from the study supported by that grant are reported here. The paper focuses specifically on the ways in which and the extent to which the developing policy emerged in the trials as contributing to lifelong learning at the level of secondary schooling in Hong Kong. The process of policy development and refinement, the provision and resourcing of ApL and the conceptualisation of ApL and its outcomes are the subject of forthcoming papers.

In the next section of this paper, ApL policy in the context of lifelong learning is outlined. The research methodology is then explained, followed by the presentation of a conceptual framework of lifelong learning in the secondary schooling context. That framework is then used in the following section to evaluate the contribution of ApL to lifelong learning in Hong Kong, drawing on data obtained in the study of the ApL trials. Finally, a reflection on the findings of that evaluation is offered. The paper has been drawn together from an international perspective, focusing particularly on points that may be of interest to readers outside Hong Kong.

**ApL policy in the context of lifelong learning**

The senior secondary curriculum in Hong Kong has traditionally been an academic curriculum, preparing students for entry to university studies. The review of schooling that followed the 1997 hand-over of Hong Kong, and which laid the foundation for the subsequent educational reforms at all levels, was that published by the Education Commission (2000). It saw Hong Kong as “facing tremendous challenges posed by a globalized economy. Politically, reunification with China
and democratization have changed the ways Hong Kong people think and live” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 3). In response to those challenges, it was suggested that:

**Within the framework of life-long learning, senior secondary education should further consolidate students’ foundation for pursuing life-long learning, help students understand their aptitudes, interests and abilities, and explore and develop their diverse potentials. With a good understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, students will be in a better position to plan for their future studies and career.** (Education Commission, 2000, p. 88)

It was declared that:

**The overall direction of the education reform is to create more room for schools, teachers and students, to offer all-round and balanced learning opportunities, and to lay the foundation for lifelong learning. It will lay the favourable conditions for Hong Kong to become a diverse, democratic, civilized, tolerant, dynamic and cultured cosmopolitan city.** (Education Commission, 2000, p. 1)

And it was proposed that, “At the senior secondary and post-secondary level, a diversified and multi-channel education system will be introduced to provide more opportunities and choices” (Education Commission, 2000, p. i). That system was later stated as one “that will provide an enabling environment for every person to attain all-round development and to achieve life-long learning” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005a, p. 7).

This vision — endorsed by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region — was to be given expression in the NSS curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). That curriculum, introduced from the 2009–10 school year, is the middle component of what was termed the “‘3+3+4’ academic structure” (Education Bureau, 2008c), the first “3” representing the three years of junior secondary schooling, the second representing the three years of senior secondary schooling (being reduced from four years), and the “4” representing the four years of bachelor degree studies at university (being raised from three years), or other learning experiences at tertiary level. The NSS curriculum was developed to include four core subjects — Chinese language, English language, mathematics, and liberal studies — and six elective subjects, the latter optionally including up to three ApL courses across the second and third years (SS2 & SS3) (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b). Under the NSS structure, a single final examination — the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) — replaced the previous two examinations: the initial Hong Kong Certificate of Education
Examination (HKCEE) and the final Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) (Education Bureau, 2008c).

The development of ApL policy in Hong Kong was initiated publicly in the Learning to learn reports of the Curriculum Development Council (2001) and the Education and Manpower Bureau (2001). The courses were first conceptualised as Career-oriented Studies (COS), involving Career-oriented Curriculum (COC), later re-named ApL from 2006 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. iii). The policy was developed progressively, iteratively and experimentally in the course of the six, progressive, annually initiated, two-year-long trial pilots of the policy, launched from the 2003–04 school year through that of 2008–09. However, pressure from the HKCEE at the end of Secondary Five encouraged a less-than-two-year span of the trial courses — two semesters in Secondary 4 studies and the first semester of Secondary 5 studies, rather than two in each year (Education Bureau, 2008b). Policy development over the trials was informed by on-going monitoring of the trials and two periods of extensive stakeholder consultations initiated in mid 2005 and late 2006.

Although target students for ApL were any students in the last two years (SS2 & SS3) of secondary schooling, the piloting was held at a slightly lower level of schooling: secondary 4–5 (equivalent to SS1 & SS2 under the NSS structure). However, the student population was otherwise similar. From 2006, ApL was also linked to Education Bureau\(^1\) initiatives to provide senior secondary pathways for students with intellectual disabilities (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b).

Three “modes of ApL delivery” were envisaged:

> Schools, tertiary providers and workplaces are encouraged to adopt and combine three non-exclusive modes of delivery, which involve different degrees of school engagement. In Mode 1, schools arrange for students to attend courses according to timetables agreed with the tertiary providers. In Mode 2, [tertiary-provider-run] courses take place mainly in the schools. In Mode 3, schools deliver courses entrusted to them and quality assured by tertiary providers. (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. 16)

The providers of ApL throughout the trials were vocational and other tertiary education providers, largely through Mode 1 provision, but with a significant proportion in Mode 2. The majority of the latter involved, to varying degrees,

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1. Note that the responsibilities here of the Education Bureau (EDB) were vested in the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) until 2007.
teachers of the host school as co-contributors to the ApL course teaching. Mode Three provision was not developed in the trials.

ApL courses were seen as falling within six “Areas of Studies”: applied science; business, management and law; creative studies; engineering and production; media and communication; and sciences (Education Bureau, 2011). Any one course was to contribute 10 per cent of a student’s assessment in the HKDSE (with up to three courses in total). The ApL curriculum was seen as being based on “five curriculum pillars”: “Career-related Competencies, Foundations Skills, Thinking Skills, People Skills, and Values and Attitudes” (Curriculum Development Council and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2009, p. 38). In the initial trials, each ApL course was seen as involving class contact of “150–180 hours (similar to the curriculum of one senior secondary subject)” (Chan, 2004). This course length was subsequently fixed at “180 contact hours” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. 14). Consistent with the policy directives, most of the ApL trial courses were taught in Cantonese, rather than English. The lead teachers of ApL courses during the trials were largely experienced and variously qualified vocational or tertiary education teachers.

Learning assessment was undertaken largely by the teaching staff, although external assessment occurred in special cases, such as in the courses accredited by the Hong Kong Institute of Accredited Accounting Technicians (HKIAAT), which undertook the more formal learning assessment (the mid-term and final examinations), while commissioning selected educational providers (“course operators”) to deliver the courses and undertake the on-going in-course assessment. The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) was responsible for the moderation of assessments made by individual course providers from the start of the 2007–09 trial cohort (Fu & Ng, 2008).

Research methodology

The heuristic approach taken by the EDB to the development of ApL policy indicated the importance of taking a grounded and interpretive approach to the research — one in which the experiences and interpretations of different categories of participants were examined in some depth and used as the primary source of data (following, e.g., Cohen & Manion, 1994). It pointed also to a conception of policy as intended action and as discourse, in which the intended actions and outcomes of the articulated policy were open to “the potential for a policy text to mean different things to different people” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 120).

The interpretive research paradigm adopted in the research was seen as involving
the use of rich description and interpretation of the experiences of key players in
the policy development and the developmental trials (Denzin, 1997) and as calling
for an articulation of the intended policy from a policy formulation perspective
(Rist, 2003). It suggested the value of comparative case studies of different trial
contexts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). It also suggested that the impact of the policy
needed to be assessed, not only in terms of the extent to which it met the policy
intentions, but also in terms of the actual impact or effects of the policy, regardless
of the policy intentions (Adamson & Morris, 2000).

The data sources were the following:

1. Publicly available Hong Kong ApL policy documents of all types.

2. In-depth, interpretive, narrative-style individual interviews of key ApL policy-
developers on the purposes of, approach to, impact of, and issues arising in the
development and the developmental trials of the policy.

3. In-depth, focused, narrative-style, interpretive individual interviews of key
personnel involved in the developmental trials of ApL policy — ApL providers,
school leadership personnel, course coordinators, and teachers — on their
interpretation of the policy, its implementation and impact.

4. Focus group interviews of a diversity of ApL students — across schools,
providers, modes of provision, fields of study, and subjects — on their
learning experiences in the courses, the issues raised, and the impact of those studies on
them.

Data collection extended over the period December 2007 through October
2008. Analysis extended over that period and beyond.

ApL policy documents were obtained from the Education Bureau, its website
and through document searches. The documents used in this study included the
following:

• Formally published materials: Curriculum Development Council (2001);
Education and Manpower Bureau (2006a, 2006b, 2006c); Education and
Manpower Bureau, 2005); Education Commission (2000);

• Explanatory brochures, directives, requests, texts of presentations, discussion
papers, and other such documents, including: Chan (2004); Education Bureau
(2011, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c); Fu and Ng (2008); Ip (2008); Lai (2008); Law
(2006); Ng (2006); Sou (2007, 2004); Wardlaw (2008, 2007).


• Published research reports: Cheung and Wong (2006); Ng and Sou (2008).
Internal monitoring reports from the Education Bureau (and the Education and Manpower Bureau until 2007) were not made available to the research team, although information and conclusions from those reports were used extensively in many of the documents accessed. All available documents were subject to analysis, interpretation and critical review from the perspective of the aims of the study.

Interviews were conducted in the language chosen by the interviewee: either English or Cantonese. English language interviews were conducted by the Chief Investigator (the senior author) with the Senior Research Assistant (the second-named author) in a supporting role. Chinese language interviews were conducted in most cases by the Senior Research Assistant and otherwise by another local member of the research team. All student focus groups were conducted in Cantonese — the majority (16) by the Senior Research Assistant, although five were conducted by other research personnel when scheduling demanded it.

Eight of the 13 providers involved in the 2007–09 trial cohort were selected to be involved in the study. The selection was made to ensure that all Areas of Studies were included and to maximize the spread across courses. Six of the selected providers agreed to be involved. That sample was judged to preserve the intended sampling diversity. An initial meeting was held with the provider-designated senior officer responsible for ApL in each institution — to explain the purposes of the study and its conduct. Matters of research ethics and integrity were emphasized in the course of the interviews. A written project description, with research ethics and integrity assurances, was also made available either during the meeting or subsequently. These meetings sought and obtained the cooperation of each providing institution for the conduct of interviews and student focus groups. Key provider personnel to be interviewed were identified and their inclusion negotiated in the course of the meeting. A selection of 21 ApL classes from which the teachers would be interviewed and student focus groups formed were also identified and agreed to, either in the course of the meetings or in subsequent emails or telephone discussions. Those selections sought to cover as wide a selection of courses as possible across the six Areas of Studies, and to include both Mode One and Mode Two provision wherever possible. The interviews involved providers of ApL courses in two cohort trials: 2006–08 and 2007–09.

Selected interviewees were invited to be involved — initially by email or telephone — and were sent a brief project description and the checklist of interview topics tailored to the category of interviewee in each case: policy developers, ApL providers, school leadership personnel, program coordinators, course coordinators, and teachers. All 36 of the personnel approached to be interviewed agreed to be involved. Interviews were scheduled at a time and in a location (in all cases a private space at the interviewee’s workplace) to suit the interviewee and the need for privacy and quiet for the interview. After confirming the interviewee’s understanding
of the purpose and nature of the interview and their willingness to be involved, the interviews proceeded to cover the topics listed in the interview checklist. The conduct of each interview was conversational and sought to follow pertinent points raised by the interviewee in each case. As far as was politely possible, respondents were discouraged from speaking on behalf of others. Interviews lasted in the order of 45 minutes each (range: 30-90 minutes).

All interviews were audio-recorded. Audio-recordings were subsequently transcribed, with transcriptions being sent to interviewees for checking, verification and any amendments (additions, deletions, or modifications). The transcriptions were analysed by working systematically and iteratively through each transcription to identify the key points raised under each of the checklist topics. Supporting or elaborative narrative extracts were identified at the same time, with translation into English from Cantonese for those interviews conducted in the latter language. These key points from the individual interviews were then drawn together into emergent concepts under categories appropriate to the aims of the study. The emergent concepts identified sought to capture as much as possible of the range of experience articulated across the interviews, while also quantifying the key points across the interviews as far as possible.

Senior personnel involved in the policy development were interviewed: three from the EDB, one from the HKCAAVQ and two from the HKEAA. These were all individual interviews, except for one interview involving two EDB personnel, at their request. Each of the selected organizations was judged to be an important participant in the policy development process, although the central and dominant role clearly lay with the EDB, the other two organizations having more strictly circumscribed and secondary roles, as noted above. The selection of interviewees was negotiated with the organizations concerned to capture those centrally involved in ApL policy development. The procedures leading up the interviews, their conduct, and their subsequent analysis and reporting followed the procedures articulated immediately above.

Each of the 21 classes from which teachers were interviewed was also selected for a student focus group. Provider, teacher and student consent to the involvement of the students in the focus group was sought, with individual student involvement being voluntary. The purpose of the study, the conduct of the focus group, and the subsequent treatment of the data were explained beforehand to the class, and in a distributed project description in Cantonese, together with the checklist of topics for the focus group discussion. A consent form was used to ensure approval in the case of dependants.

Focus groups were held in each case immediately following a scheduled class of the course involved — allowing those who sought not to be involved to leave.
without embarrassment. Since the focus groups followed a lengthy class meeting — three hours in most cases — refreshments were provided for the participants. The topics on which the discussion focused were: (1) What the students liked about the class; (2) why they selected it; (3) the difficulties and challenges that it presented them; (4) what they planned to do with their learning from it; (5) what should be done to improve classes like it; and (6) how the class had helped them. Twenty-one student focus groups were conducted, encompassing each of the six Areas of Studies. The number of students in the focus groups averaged eight (range: 4-12). The recording, handling and analysis of the focus group interviews followed the procedures noted above, except that contributions from individual students were not linked across the course of a focus group and verification of the transcripts was not sought from the participants. The analytical categories paralleled those used for the other interviews.

Seventeen of the targeted courses were in Mode One and four in Mode Two. This distribution followed that of the trial courses, in which Mode One overwhelmingly predominated.

Throughout the research design, data collection and analysis, and the interpretation of the results, the research team was mindful of the importance of not biasing the findings towards those held by the researchers, through such means as using strictly neutral descriptions of the project, asking only open questions, avoiding any evaluative comments or actions during interviews, and using the actual statements of participants in framing the emergent concepts during analysis. The research team also made a point of thoroughly reviewing its work from this critical perspective at each of its weekly review meetings, and of responding to any concerns that arose. It was aided in this process by the researchers’ professional concern to see the strengths and weaknesses of the ApL initiative fairly presented in the interests of similar such developments in other educational jurisdictions. Clearly, though, no work of this sort can be entirely free of individuality in its findings.

**Lifelong learning in a senior secondary schooling context**

Contemporary lifelong learning theory has its origins, as “lifelong education”, in the adult and community education movement (Edwards, 1997). As such, its focus has traditionally been on non-formal education, understood as being educational engagements outside formal schooling and tertiary education (Wain, 1987). That emphasis on non-formal educational engagement remains, but the core of the concept has now shifted to a focus on deliberative voluntary learning engagements by individuals throughout their life-spans and across different existential contexts,
including work, recreation, leisure, and social service engagements, as well as non-
formal education (Aspin & Chapman, 2012): hence the idea of lifelong learning
being “life-long and life-wide” (Delors, 1996). That focus, in its volitional and
voluntary dimensions tends to background formal schooling and to foreground
individual commitment and autonomy in taking decisions on when, what, and how
to engage in learning and in managing one’s own learning (Wain, 2004).

A commitment to lifelong learning, then, demands of schooling — as formal
education directed to preparing students for adult futures — that it not only
contribute to learners’ knowledge of particular fields of study, whether these
be constructed as academic disciplines, as vocations, or otherwise (Chapman
& Aspin, 1997). It also demands of schooling that it contribute to developing
learners’ commitment to live their lives as lifelong learners, to developing their
capabilities to engage fruitfully as lifelong learners, and to broadening their
horizons of understanding of what might fruitfully be engaged with educationally

A commitment to live one’s life as a lifelong learner involves seeing life’s
challenges, interests, joys, disappointments, failures, and successes as creating
learning opportunities, and it involves seeing those opportunities as engagements
to be identified, created, and lived (Faure et al., 1972). That commitment is both
logically and evidentially enhanced through engagement in satisfying, rewarding,
and successful educational experiences (Evans, Schoon, & Weale, 2012).

The capabilities to engage fruitfully as a lifelong learner include the skills
and knowledge to translate a learning need into a learning engagement, through
either searching out and evaluating educational opportunities, or through working,
individually or collaboratively, to generate appropriate learning opportunities
(Smith, 1990).

The broadening of one’s horizons as to what might be engaged with
educationally involves, not only immersing learners in a wider range of educational
engagements, but also their engaging with a wide range of accounts of lived learning
events, through such means as written or dramatized biographical accounts and
historiographies (Bagnall, 2012).

That framework, then, may be used to evaluate the extent to which and the
ways in which any school educational initiative — such as the ApL policy in
Hong Kong — may reasonably be seen as contributing to the lifelong learning
development of its participants. The framework, to summarise, identifies lifelong
learning in schooling as addressing the following four goals of:

1. Contributing to deepening students’ knowledge of particular fields of study
   (here, “field-specific knowledge”)
2. Increasing students’ commitment to living their lives as lifelong learners (“lifelong learning commitment”).

3. Enhancing students’ capabilities to engage fruitfully as lifelong learners (“lifelong learning capabilities”). And

4. Broadening students’ horizons of understanding as to what fruitfully might be engaged with educationally (“lifelong learning horizons”).

These four goals were used, then, as criteria to evaluate ApL policy in Hong Kong, as it unfolded in the policy trials.

ApL as lifelong learning

The following analysis of ApL policy as a contributor to lifelong learning in Hong Kong uses the foregoing four criteria to draw, from the documentary material and the interviews of key stakeholders involved in the developmental trials, a picture of the extent to which and the ways in which the policy may be seen as contributing to the development of lifelong learning. The analysis is presented using each of the criteria in turn, in the order of their articulation above. Narrative extracts and document quotations here have been selected as being representative and illustrative in each case.

ApL as a contributor to deepening students’ field-specific knowledge

Documentary material from the EDB made it clear that ApL was intended to contribute to students’ field-specific knowledge:

“The proposed COS curriculum framework will emphasise ... career-related competencies.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. iii)

“ApL aims at ...providing students with the opportunities to explore their orientation for life-long learning and career aspirations in specific areas [and to] ...understand the workplace requirement of a particular professional or vocational area.” (Education Bureau, 2008a)
This purpose was acknowledged in the interviews with ApL policy-developers:

*ApL is to better prepare [senior secondary students] for understanding the world of work and other post-school work-related pathways.* (EDB policy-developer)

*Applied learning is a type of learning which can let you have more opportunities to think of how you can make use of what you learn.* (EDB policy-developer)

And it was reflected in the EDB’s choice of ApL providers:

*Schools are not being accepted as a matter of course as sole providers because this is a deliberate attempt to draw in more people with real practical experience.* (EDB policy-developer)

*It is also the case that a tertiary provider’s capacity to offer such an articulation is one of the criteria used by the CDI for selecting ApL providers.* (Non-EDB policy-developer)

The policy intention, though, was to use specific vocational fields of knowledge as contexts for the learning of generic skills that were common across the whole curriculum:

*The purpose of ApL is to focus on more generic skills …using the vocational situations as a learning context for more generic learning outcomes. …It is not vocational in its focus, but more general.* (Non-EDB policy-developer)

*“ApL aims to enabling students to understand fundamental theories and concepts through application and practice, and to develop their generic skills in authentic context[s].* (Education Bureau, 2007)”

The development of students’ field-specific knowledge was also acknowledged as a purpose and outcome of ApL in the stakeholder interviews:

*Applied learning emphasizes training the students’ career aspirations and preparing [them] for lifelong learning through a special field.* (Program Coordinator)

*The intent of ApL is not to lead to a professional qualification or for the students to be able to find work in a field after the class. The ApL class is a more broad approach, because we hope the students will grasp broad knowledge about this field.* (Teacher-coordinator)
ApL courses are great. Students come in not knowing what they are doing. ...After taking the course some students find their direction in life. (Course Coordinator)

Students learned that they needed to be professional in [the field]. (Teacher)

All 21 of the student focus groups identified this as an attraction of ApL:

[The class] is very ...useful.

The class is recognised by the American professional body. That is really important.

I want to do something in [the field]. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.

I want to learn how to be a [practitioner], but, besides that, we learn how to manage [other specified associated roles].

On the evidence available, this criterion of lifelong learning at senior secondary level had clearly been satisfied in ApL policy and its implementation. While the development of field-specific knowledge is the traditionally dominant contribution of senior secondary schooling to lifelong learning, the vocational focus of ApL courses ensured that this contribution was significantly different in the Hong Kong school context, where the focus has traditionally been on academic disciplines, rather than vocational fields of practice. It is the latter type of field that ApL was directed, successfully, to drawing into the senior secondary curriculum, albeit only as an elective option, and an option selected by a relatively small proportion of students.

ApL as a contributor to students’ commitment to lifelong learning

Contributing to the development of students’ commitment to lifelong learning through giving them a sense of achievement was implied, but not explicitly developed, in the policy documents:

“COS has been introduced into the senior secondary schooling to diversify the learning opportunities available to students. It is intended that students of varying abilities, particularly those who will benefit from a strong practical orientation to their learning, should gain from COS to enrich their learning experiences.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. 5)
“COS is [being] introduced in response to the fact that many students feel constrained by the study of the existing subjects at the senior secondary level, since their individual learning, personal development and needs cannot be fully met by the current learning approaches and their achievements outside these subjects are under recognized.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005a, p. 52)

This contribution was, though, acknowledged more directly by the policy-developers in the interviews:

*Basically, it’s [the purpose of ApL is] to broaden the curriculum choices for kids, and it’s a deliberate effort to give kids the opportunity to take on something that might interest them more, motivate them.* (EDB policy-developer)

*At the beginning, and still, …it has quite a heavy vocational orientation, although we say [that] this is actually about helping particular students to learn better.* (EDB policy-developer)

From the EDB’s interviews of students in the early trials, it was noted that *there’s a wash-back effect of their studies*, in which success in ApL study can develop a feeling of capacity to succeed in other studies. (EDB policy-developer)

The contribution was also acknowledged by other stakeholders involved in the trials:

*The purpose of ApL was to motivate the students to learn.* (Provider)

*We don’t make a lot of money from ApL. The greatest success is in seeing the change in the students.* (Program Coordinator)

*We hope …to build up their [students’] confidence, open up their horizons, to experience the joy of learning.* (Teacher-coordinator)

*ApL gives the students an alternative route to learn. …EDB wants to motivate the students to learn through new experience.* (Teacher-coordinator)

*It is to boost their motivation in learning through an alternative curriculum.* (Teacher-coordinator)

*Some students are good at academic subjects, while others are good at something else. Applied learning was to boost [the latter students’] self-confidence.* (School Leadership Personnel)
For a number of academically weaker students, participation in ApL provided a rewarding educational engagement to an extent not otherwise experienced in their schooling:

*I learnt self-confidence.*

*It has boosted my self-confidence, because I had to present.*

Although it was raised by students in only three of the 21 focus groups, there was also comment on the immediate positive impact that ApL had on their commitment to education in general, including their work in academic subjects they were studying:

*It helped me with my other classes.*

*This class motivates me to study harder in [the vocational field].*

*This class motivates me to study harder and to do well at school, so that I can have a better future.*

*The course helped me study harder in my other subjects.*

*What I’ve learned here has helped me with some of my school subjects.*

Other stakeholders also noted such outcomes:

*It helps them to build confidence.* (Teacher-coordinator)

*They are taking something that they like and in general they have better results in these courses.* (Teacher-coordinator)

*The courses have helped to raise the students’ self esteem. ...They have helped strengthen the students’ knowledge in related school subjects. The students are doing better academically. ...They have more positive attitudes to learning.* (School Leadership Personnel)

The school leadership personnel, however, tended to be sceptical of the depth or persistence of such outcomes:

*The courses have not changed the students’ self-concept. ...One course could not have such an impact on a student.*

*The students had a good attitude to learning in the applied learning courses, but they showed no obvious change in their attitude to learning in other subjects.*
Applied learning students don’t show obvious changes in terms of their generic skills or self-confidence.

And this impact was denied by a small number of students in three of the focus groups:

This course has not motivated me to study harder in other subjects.

The course has not helped me, because it took away some of my study time.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that ApL was making at least some small contribution to lifelong learning on this criterion, through building at least weaker students’ sense of educational achievement and hence their commitment to engaging in learning. What was lacking in the policy and its implementation guidelines, though, was any articulation of how ApL teachers and managers may work to develop this dimension of ApL as a contributor to the development of lifelong learning.

ApL as a contributor to enhancing students’ lifelong learning capabilities

ApL was seen in its policy development as contributing to students’ lifelong learning capabilities in two ways: through what Schulz (2012) and others have referred to as “Applied Learning as pedagogy”, and through its contribution to the development of generic skills.

The notion of ApL as pedagogy sees the vocational context of the learning as presenting ways of teaching and learning that are different from those used in academic contexts:

“The COC currently being piloted in schools lays heavy emphasis on enabling students to develop skills that will help them adapt to or link studies to a certain profession or vocation, and from there, knowledge and concepts (theoretical learning) required for understanding the practice can be acquired (learning by doing).” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005a, p. 57)

“COS courses offer specific applied contexts and content and they are designed to engage and motivate students who learn best by doing rather than conceptualising.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. 5)
ApL responds to an awareness that “learning is more profound if we experience, apply or do. [Responding to] those students …who learn better by moving from the application/practical to the underlying theory of the subject.” (Wardlaw, 2007a)

This purpose was also identified in the interviews with policy-developers:

- We can say applied learning is an alternative way of learning … [using] a more practical approach. (Non-EDB policy-developer)
- It’s a different learning style, different place to learn, and different teachers and experts. (EDB policy-developer)

However, just what ApL as pedagogy amounts to and what educators might do to develop that dimension of ApL’s contribution to students’ lifelong learning capabilities were not articulated in the policy or its implementation guidelines, beyond expressions such as “learning by doing” and learning “by doing rather than conceptualising”. Correspondingly, this aspect of ApL policy and learning outcomes did not emerge explicitly in the interviews with other stakeholders or in the student focus groups.

The notion of ApL as a contributor to the development of students’ generic skills was developed more strongly in ApL policy and was profiled highly in the implementation documents:

- “The proposed COS curriculum framework will emphasise foundations skills, thinking skills, people skills, values and attitudes.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. iii)
- “COS courses are designed to achieve as many of the five essential learning experiences …as possible, and will include the generic skills (communication skills, critical thinking skills, creativity, collaboration skills, information technology skills, numeracy skills, problem-solving skills, self-management skills and study skills) that underpin Hong Kong’s curriculum framework.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b, p. iii)

Correspondingly, the stakeholder interviews reinforced the importance of ApL in developing generic skills:

- ApL is to focus on more generic skills …using the vocational situations as a learning context for more generic learning outcomes. (Non-EDB policy-developer)
[The purpose is] to cultivate not only the students’ job skills, but more to equip them with generic skills. (Program Coordinator)

ApL helps students cultivate generic skills. (Course Coordinator)

The intent of ApL is to develop the students’ generic skills through work-related experiences. (Teacher-coordinator)

ApL courses emphasize basic skills, teaching the students how to think, how to adapt, and …to give them skills that will help them in their study. (Teacher)

A number of such generic skills may be seen as contributing directly to students’ capabilities to engage fruitfully as lifelong learners. Seventeen of the 21 student focus groups included a prompt question pertaining to any generic skills gained or enhanced through the participants’ ApL engagement. That question elicited a positive response in each of the 17 groups. The following generic skills and aptitudes are those that may be seen as contributing to lifelong learning capability and which were specifically mentioned in the student focus groups as being developed through their ApL engagement: calmness, communication, courage, critical thinking, gentleness, patience, perseverance, punctuality, responsibility, self-confidence, self-reflection, strength, teamwork, and working with others.

This outcome of generic skills learning was also observed by other stakeholders:

After one-and-a-half years, the students …also developed generic skills. (Program Coordinator)

The courses help a little bit in cultivating students’ generic skills. (School Leadership Personnel)

About half the students have changed because of their applied learning courses. …They have learned generic skills through their experiences. (School Leadership Personnel)

The students have learned communications skills and practical things from the projects. (School Leadership Personnel)

The concept of ApL as pedagogy thus emerges as a potentially valuable idea that was not sufficiently developed in ApL policy or its implementation to contribute overtly to the development of students’ lifelong learning capabilities. It may, of course, have made an important contribution in this way, but not one that was identified or articulated by the ApL stakeholders interviewed in this study.
Conversely, the prominence of generic skills learning in the ApL policy statements and information to prospective providers, schools, students and their parents, evidently raised the profile of this aspect of ApL policy in the minds of those interviewed. Specific questioning about generic skills was, correspondingly, included in the interview schedules. The foregoing importance of generic skill learning through ApL may thus be seen as somewhat of an artefact of the policy context. The extent to which the skills noted actually contributed to students’ capabilities to engage fruitfully as lifelong learners is also an open question. The point remains that the skills articulated in ApL policy statements were the skills that were articulated for all senior secondary subjects. Their application to ApL was merely by extension. Most significantly, no specific lifelong learning skills were articulated in the policy and no articulation was offered as to how the listed generic skills might be related to lifelong learning engagement or taught as generic skills of lifelong learning.

ApL as a contributor to broadening students’ lifelong learning horizons

The contribution of ApL in Hong Kong to senior secondary students’ field-specific knowledge was achieved, not through academic disciplines, but through fields of vocational practice: fields traditionally marginalised in Hong Kong secondary schooling. This contribution may thus be seen as broadening participating students’ horizons of understanding as to what might fruitfully be engaged with educationally.

This purpose of ApL was acknowledged in policy statements:

“COS will enable students to explore their career aspirations that match their interests and strengths in areas such as design, creative industries, entertainment, performing arts, financial planning, health care, food industry and services industry.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005a, p. 57)

“COS is designed to widen the learning opportunities for students in the last two years of their senior secondary schooling …[by] offering diverse learning programmes that are relevant to the social and economic development of Hong Kong but are not traditionally taught in schools.” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006a, p. 5)

And in the interviews with ApL policy-developers:

Basically, it’s [purpose is] to broaden the curriculum choices for kids, and it’s a deliberate effort to give kids the opportunity to take on
something that might interest them more. (EDB policy-developer)

[Among those students who] just don’t like physics, history, geography and so on, the [extra] choice — that’s good. (non-EDB policy-developer)

It was also recognised in the other stakeholder interviews:

[ApL allows students] to explore their talents, interests and careers. (Program Coordinator)

Applied learning courses provide opportunities for students to explore different fields. (School Leadership Personnel)

They give an alternative to students who are not interested in academic subjects to explore their interests. (School Leadership Personnel)

Because many students are not interested in traditional subjects, they need these courses. (School Leadership Personnel)

Eleven of the 21 student focus groups commented on this aspect of their ApL engagement:

This course expands my horizons.

This course helps me to find out my interests and develop my talents through exploring different things.

The students get to explore many things to find out what they like and what they’re good at.

The contribution of ApL to broadening student horizons of understanding as to what may fruitfully be engaged with educationally thus emerges as being a significant feature of the policy and its implementation. However, the failure of the policy and its implementation in the trials to develop any practical details of this dimension of ApL’s potential contribution to lifelong learning is a significant oversight.

Reflection

This paper has been drawn together in the knowledge that the ApL policy initiative in Hong Kong — the focus of the paper — is of international interest to lifelong learning policy-makers, scholars and practitioners. The policy was developed
explicitly within a lifelong learning framework, its over-arching purpose being that of contributing to the lifelong learning of senior secondary pupils. The research into that initiative has, accordingly, been reported here with the intention of focusing on those aspects of the Hong Kong initiative that may be expected to be of interest to an international readership. The analytical framework developed for the study and the findings here presented within the context of the policy itself, are thus both seen as having pertinence to lifelong learning policy development and implementation in other educational jurisdictions.

The analytical framework informing this analysis is that, at the secondary school level, education that is seriously intended to be for lifelong learning may be expected to contribute significantly, not just to deepening students’ field-specific knowledge, but also to increasing their commitment to lifelong learning, to enhancing their lifelong learning capabilities (including their skills), enabling them to realise that commitment efficaciously, and to broadening their horizons of educational understanding as to what might be engaged in educationally.

The foregoing analysis of the documentation and interview data may be seen as indicating that ApL in the developmental trials provided the opportunity for a limited but significant contribution to lifelong learning for those students who engaged in it. While ApL maintained a traditional schooling focus on fields of knowledge, that focus was on vocational rather than academic fields and, to that extent, it provided a broadening of participant educational horizons. For academically weaker participants, it also served to build their commitment to lifelong learning, through providing them with a rewarding educational engagement within a broader context that embraces vocational learning and vocational learning contexts. ApL also contributed to the development of a range of generic skills of value to enhancing participants’ capabilities to engage fruitfully in lifelong learning. Those contributions, though, were collectively quite limited in extent, and there was no recognition of the need for a structured approach to developing lifelong learning commitment or capability through ApL policy.

In spite of the educational reform rhetoric, which sees ApL as being framed by the over-arching concept of lifelong learning, there has thus been scant attention paid to this aspect of the policy. From a lifelong learning perspective, ApL policy is solidly grounded in traditional conceptions of schooling.

If ApL policy, either in Hong Kong or in other educational jurisdictions, is to make a significant contribution to lifelong learning, much more explicit attention is needed as to how the development of commitment to lifelong learning and the development of lifelong learning capabilities may be achieved through such policy. In other words, from a lifelong learning perspective, the development of ApL policy in Hong Kong provides a policy model that goes some way to contributing to
lifelong learning, but which also falls well short of its potential to do so, through its failure to develop and articulate crucial features of what is needed.

These findings, while specific to the Hong Kong initiative, clearly have implications for the development, implementation and evaluation of similar policy initiatives in other educational jurisdictions. In responding to the findings, through undertaking more systematic reforms of secondary schooling to enhance its contribution to lifelong learning, the analytical framework used in this study may also serve as a useful framework to structure, not only policy reforms and their implementation, but also their evaluation.

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References


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