

Issues in the Hong Kong Applied Learning Trials

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Abstract

This paper presents critical issues in the conceptualisation and positioning of applied learning (APL) in Hong Kong trials. It draws on a critical review of official documentation and interviews with participants involved in the 2003-09 developmental trials of APL policy: policy makers, APL provider leadership personnel, school leadership personnel, APL teachers and course coordinators, and APL students. Analysis of the documentation and interview data revealed five critical limiting issues of the way APL was promulgated in and through the policy development process: (1) its de-vocationalisation; (2) its under-theorisation; (3) its limited academic recognition; (4) its lack of vocational recognition; and (5) its poor standing. Those issues suggested the importance of the following considerations in APL policy development: a clear and consistent prioritisation of vocational and general education goals; a strongly theory-driven approach; academic credit equivalence into general educational qualifications; the dual recognition of APL in both general secondary and vocational education qualifications; and sensitivity to the unintended consequences of policy developments.

Keywords: applied learning, curriculum change, education policy, Hong Kong, senior secondary schooling, vocational education

1. Introduction

The focus of the study reported here was the development by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the Peoples' Republic of China of policy for the provision of what is 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 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 and Sou, 2008). APL policy was developed as a way of making the senior secondary curriculum in Hong Kong more inclusive of student learning interests that are not strictly academic and of using learning contexts and interests of a more vocational nature to engage students in active learning (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006a) – what Schulz (2012) and others have referred to as 'applied learning as pedagogy'.

1.1 *The Context and Provision of APL in the Trials*

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 following the 1997 hand-over of Hong Kong, and which laid the foundation for the subsequent educational reforms at all levels, was 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). It indicated 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 to be given expression in the NSS curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2001), to be 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 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 policy was developed progressively in the course of the six trials. 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.

Two ‘modes of APL delivery’ were used during the trials: Mode 1, where schools arranged for students to attend courses offered by tertiary vocational education providers; and Mode 2, where courses were provided by tertiary providers in secondary schools, with varying degrees of teaching involvement by secondary teachers in the host schools (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b). The lead teachers of APL course during the trials, correspondingly, were largely experienced and variously qualified tertiary vocational education teachers.

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 Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKDSE) (with up to three courses in total). 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 on “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.

Learning assessment was undertaken largely by the teaching staff, although formal external assessment was undertaken by some providers. 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 and Ng, 2008). A system of dual recognition of APL assessment outcomes was initially proposed, with recognition under both the (academic) HKDSE and the (vocational) Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF) (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b).

The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) was involved with the Curriculum Development Institute (the CDI) of the EDB in developing the quality assurance frameworks (QAFs) through the initial trials. The QAFs were used as the set of standards against which course proposals were assessed by the CDI. The HKCAAVQ subsequently established a Quality Assurance Panel for each APL subject area. Once that QA process had been completed for all piloting courses offered in the first three cohorts, it was concluded that the standard of the courses was comparable to a subject *pass* in the HKCEE (Education Bureau, 2008d).

2. Methodology

The interpretive research paradigm adopted in the research involved comparative case studies of different trial contexts using rich description and interpretation of the experiences of key players in the policy development and trialling process, policy being 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.

The data sources were the following:

- 1). Publicly available Hong Kong APL policy documents of all types, obtained from the Education Bureau, its website (<http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?langno=1&nodeID=4350>), APL trial providers, and through document searches. Published research included two doctoral dissertations (K.C.A. Wong, 2004; Y.H.A. Wong, 2004) and two research reports (Cheung and Wong, 2006; Ng and Sou, 2008).
- 2). In-depth, interpretive, narrative-style individual interviews (in the language chosen by the interviewee: either English or Cantonese) of key APL policy makers (three from the EDB, one from the HKCAAVQ and two from the HKEAA) on the purposes of, approach to, impact of, and issues arising in the policy development and the developmental trials.
- 3). Similar interviews of key personnel involved in the developmental trials of APL policy-APL provider leaders, including APL program coordinators, school leaders, and APL teachers and course coordinators – 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. All 21 focus group interviews were conducted in Cantonese.

Data collection extended over the period December 2007 through October 2008. Analysis extended over that period and beyond. Six of the 13 providers involved in the 2007-09 trial cohort were included in the study. Twenty-one APL classes were included, including both Mode One (17) and Mode Two (4), balanced to reflect their representation in the overall course offerings, over two cohort trials-2006-08 and 2007-09-from which

teachers, course coordinators and student focus groups were interviewed. Those selections were made to ensure that all Areas of Studies were included and to maximize the spread across substantive courses. At all stages of the research, standard protocols were followed to ensure high standards of research integrity and ethical conduct (Bagnall and Wong, 2014).

Each interview (36 individual interviews and 21 student focus groups) followed a checklist of interview topics tailored to the category of interviewee in each case. Each interview lasted in the order of 45 minutes (range: 30-90 minutes). Student focus groups included, on average, eight participants (range: 4-12) and lasted about 30 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded, 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. The 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.

3. The Emergent Issues

The research reported here sought to identify critical issues in the nature and positioning of APL policy over the course of the Hong Kong development trials: issues that may have implications for future APL policy development, not only in Hong Kong, but also internationally. Points of critique identified in the data analysis were, accordingly, interpreted as aspects and expressions of underlying issues. Five critical issues pertaining to the nature and positioning of APL policy in the trials were thus identified in the analysis: (1) its de-vocationalisation; (2) its under-theorisation; (3) its limited academic recognition; (4) its lack of vocational recognition; and (5) its poor standing. Each of these issues is here explained and grounded in the interview and documentary data. Narrative extracts from the interview data are included here as illustrative grounding of points made (Note 1), while avoiding repetition of commonly made points.

3.1 *The De-vocationalisation of APL*

The public documentation of the development and trialling of APL policy made clear the importance of vocational learning and the provision of occupational and vocational education pathways in its curriculum:

“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” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005, p. 57)

This purpose was also articulated by the APL policy makers interviewed:

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

Such pronouncements fostered the impression that APL was an approach to reintroducing vocational education into the senior secondary school curriculum:

I think it's a revival of the old vocational education, ...bringing it back under a different cover. ...Generic skills are something they must mention, but actually they want ...to provide training for people who can work in a specific industry. (APL program coordinator)

The purpose is to let the students explore different types of careers outside the school fences. (school leader)

Discussion in all but one of the student focus groups indicated the importance of APL as a vocational pathway for them:

I think this course helps prepare me for a job in the future, because applied learning courses emphasize skills rather than theory.

The impression of APL as vocational may have been reinforced by locating APL policy development and implementation in a dedicated special unit within the CDI, separate from the rest of the CDI, which latter was concerned with the development and implementation of more traditional school curriculum (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006c) and by the initial intention to see APL learning recognised by the HKCAAVQ within the HKQF.

Vocational education in Hong Kong, though, has a strong cultural history of being constructed as not only separate from, but also of a significantly lower standard of educational attainment than, the academic curriculum at the core of traditional secondary education (Kennedy, 2005):

'Vocational' in Chinese is not a very good word. ...It's quite an issue in Chinese. (EDB policy maker)

And APL policy development was focused strongly on the accreditation of APL outcomes into the new senior secondary academic qualification: the HKDSE.

In that context, the vocational nature of APL was progressively reduced over the course of the trials. One very concrete expression of this shift was made in 2006, mid-way through the trials, when the highly profiled name 'Career-Oriented Studies' (COS), with its 'Career-Oriented Curriculum' (COS) was changed to that of 'Applied Learning' (APL) (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b), to de-emphasise its apparently vocational nature, in being 'career-oriented':

We moved to ...'career-oriented curriculum,' to avoid the word 'vocational, And then even 'career-oriented' we didn't like, so we came up with 'applied.' (EDB policy maker)

The change from COS was a paradigm shift. Applied learning emphasizes training the students' career aspirations and preparing [them] for lifelong learning through a special field, rather than preparing the students for immediate employment. (program coordinator)

Another concrete expression of this de-vocationalisation was the abandonment of the earlier plan for the recognition of APL in the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework HKQF, through which APL was to have been given vocational recognition.

Earlier mention of APL serving as a pathway to further vocational education was also down-played in favour of its being seen as an educational motivator, as an alternative pedagogic approach to academic achievement.

In this de-vocationalisation, the focus of APL shifted strongly to student generic skills development. Although the development of such skills applied no less to the core (academic) subjects of the NSS than it did to APL, its particular emphasis in APL may be seen as giving APL an important role in student academic development:

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 maker)

[The purpose of APL] is to develop the generic skills and so forth. (EDB policy maker)

The intent of APL is to develop the students' generic skills through work-related experiences. (teacher and course coordinator)

The de-vocationalisation of APL thus came to be seen as a project to emphasise the *academic* credentials of APL:

The content of applied learning has been deepened and made more academic. (school leader)

There's now more theory and less hands-on experiences. (school leader)

The intention of the EDB is to shift away from a career orientation. (course coordinator)

That progressive de-vocationalisation of APL was seen by many stakeholders as a lost opportunity to introduce a more vocational thrust to senior secondary schooling in Hong Kong, and it created disappointment on the part of many students who mistakenly engaged in APL for its vocational outcomes.

3.2 The Under-theorisation of APL

The central idea driving APL policy development and implementation in Hong Kong was that of using student vocational learning interests as a way of re-engaging students who were understood to have become disengaged or marginalised from schooling by its traditional academic curriculum and pedagogy:

"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 (2005, p. 52).

APL was seen as an alternative *approach* to learning, as an alternative *pedagogy*:

"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 (2005, p. 57)

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 maker)

We can say applied learning is an alternative way of learning ...[using] a more practical approach. (non EDB policy maker)

However, the prevailing lack of theorisation of such an approach to education and the lack of public understanding of how it differed from traditional approaches to academic and vocational education meant that it was unavoidably conceptualised and explained in terms of traditional curriculum theory and curriculum concepts:

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

“The proposed COS curriculum framework will ...prepare students for further studies and/or for work as well as life-long learning” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006c, p. iii).

[The purpose of APL] is not to provide a very tight career pathway, which was attempted through an earlier failed policy initiative to provide technical subjects. ...It is not to prepare students for a particular job under any circumstances. (EDB policy maker)

This gave the impression that APL had a diversity of different purposes, expressed in terms of traditional leaning outcomes, rather than, as was intended, a different pedagogy of educational practice. Rather than enriching their understanding of APL as an alternative *approach* to education, as was intended, it tended to create confusion and uncertainty about the purposes APL:

EDB needs to have a clearer idea of APL policy before implementing it. People feel the EDB changes APL all the time. (teacher and course coordinator)

I feel lonely and painful in teaching applied learning, because the purpose and policy of applied learning are not clear and because the courses are not core subjects. (school leader)

The progressive de-vocationalisation of APL contributed to that confusion. While APL was constantly being presented as a bold new initiative in the NSS curricular reforms, the policy statements describing it were seen increasingly as suggesting that its main contribution to student development was through enhancing their success in traditional academic frameworks.

3.3 The Limited Academic Recognition of APL

Achieving academic recognition for APL in the future HKDSE of the NSS Curriculum and, most immediately, also into the HKCEE in place during the trials, was a major focus of policy developer concern and attention:

It is crucial that the community – parents, students, and whoever-thinks that they [APL courses] are equal to a subject, because, ...if that fails, the whole thing will fail. (non EDB policy maker)

I've never seen a system yet that caters for all kids in one common diploma, but Hong Kong has got a couple of very significant advantages. One is very high standards. And two, Chinese students are very diligent [and] teachers are very hard working. ...I think it's possible one diploma can work for all students in Hong Kong, where it couldn't work in Australia, [it] hasn't worked in Australia, hasn't worked in the UK, etc. (EDB policy maker)

Under the policy developed, three levels of performance were recognised for APL courses: ‘unattained’, ‘attainment’, and ‘attainment with distinction’ (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006b). ‘Attainment with Distinction’ was deemed to be equivalent to Level 3 of the HKDSE (Curriculum Development Council and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2009). Under the HKDSE, for academic subjects “there will be Levels 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest” (Education Bureau, 2008c). APL learning could thus not be recognised beyond Level 3 in that scale. In the APL trials, even more limited forms of recognition were used to allow APL assessments to be credited to the then HKCEE: one APL course contributing only one credit point. Such recognition was driven by a desire to address the perceived poor standing of APL:

The hope in taking this policy track is to reduce the inevitable second-class status of APL courses. We are trying to reduce any sort of labelling between vocational, academic, and so forth. (EDB policy maker)

Other stakeholders endorsed the imperative:

The recognition problem will be solved when APL is part of the NSS. (course coordinator)

On the positive side is the HKCEE equivalence. (program coordinator)

APL will then be looked on as part of the regular curriculum, rather than as extra-curricular. (teacher)

In all student focus groups, there was expressed the desire to continue with further study-in mainstream academic senior secondary education as the first choice, or in vocational education if they were ineligible for the former:

I will choose to study in Form Six if I get a good result in the HKCEE. However, if I cannot be promoted to Form Six, I will choose to study at the [vocational education institute].

Correspondingly, there was appreciation expressed by students in 10 of the focus groups of the limited credit into the HKCEE:

We can get one point from APL on the HKCEE, otherwise we would get zero.

The one point in the HKCEE is my main reason for taking this course.

However, students in eight of the 21 focus groups voiced their concern at the limited credit available to them for their APL studies:

Most [students] choose not to study applied learning because they can get higher grades in core subjects.

The course should be graded like other subjects in the HKCEE.

If applied learning were worth more points, it would attract more students and motivate them to do better in class.

This assessment was echoed by the other stakeholders in all but one of the schools:

The students deserve more than the one point they get in the HKCEE, because they put more effort into the applied learning courses than in academic subjects. (school leader)

[In the HKDSE] there are different [achievement] levels, from one to five. But for the APL subjects they can only get Level 3 as the maximum. So, it's not equal treatment. ...We should have five levels instead of just three. ...Because of this not very good recognition, APL is always perceived as courses that are not good and are chosen by poor students. (program coordinator)

But the real test of this policy, and another expression of the concern for appropriate academic credit for APL, was suggested to be whether universities would accord APL equal standing to academic subjects in their selection of school leavers:

I think at the moment the schools are ...concerned whether universities will take [APL] as an elective. (EDB policy maker)

Applied learning courses are not recognized by most universities in Hong Kong, and that is the key killer of the development of applied learning. (school leader)

Another dimension of possible disadvantage to APL students may be seen as having arisen from the planned *statistical* moderation of the 'attainment' and 'attainment with distinction' APL grades against other subjects in the HKDSE. Academic credit for APL and the articulation of APL into an academic pathway thus emerged as an issue of major importance to all stakeholder categories surveyed. The issue focused on the need for, yet the limited realization of, credit recognition of APL in the HKCEE (during the trials) and the HKDSE (under the NSS structure), and on the need for, yet uncertainty about, APL recognition by universities in their calculations of competitive entry scores. For the students and largely for the teachers, the focus of concern was on the credit that could be obtained in the HKCEE. The issue for them was a feeling that the possible credit (one point) was too little, but important for many. For the other categories of participants, the concern was more focused on the limitations to the planned extent of APL credit into the HKDSE. Clearly, if APL courses were to be accepted by any stake-holding party as anything other than a second-rate option for those students who stood not to be disadvantaged by studying in them, a stronger credit regime was needed.

3.4 The Lack of Vocational Recognition of APL

Consistent with what may be regarded as best practice in other educational jurisdictions, the early APL policy was to develop an APL assessment framework that would provide for dual recognition of APL learning outcomes-credit both into the HKDSE and into the Qualifications Framework of vocational qualifications:

Students who meet the requirements of the threshold exit level in a COS course will have attained the competency standard and will receive the QF credit points for that achievement” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006c, p. 22).

However, the in-built provision for HKQF recognition in the initial policy was subsequently scrapped – as the development process defined the need for a move away from vocational content and assessment, so too the opportunity for structured vocational recognition faded, to the point that the recognition depended entirely on the provider accreditation of each particular APL course. Nevertheless, APL policy makers indicated that such recognition was still a consideration and was a factor in their approval of APL providers and courses:

One of the criteria in course selection is that the provider is able to say that they [students] will get credit into a [vocational] course. (EDB policy maker)

A number of stakeholders, including school leaders in six of the schools, commented on the limited or uncertain articulation of APL into vocational education, recognising this was an issue calling for further attention:

The articulation of applied learning courses is not clear and the students don't know the pathways to further study or work.

No one is sure whether industries will recognize applied learning courses.

It was also noted that the absence of external vocational qualifications meant the APL had quite limited workplace recognition:

Not a lot of people in industry recognize APL. (teacher)

The situation, then, with the reformed nature of APL, was one of the vocational recognition of APL being at the discretion and opportunity of the providers. That opportunity depended on the provider having vocational accreditation of the APL course within the qualifications framework from the HKCAAVQ. It also depended on the APL course having sufficient occupationally specific (as distinct from ‘generic’) skills learning and assessment for it to warrant such recognition. Since APL policy was directed to developing generic, rather than occupationally specific, skill learning and assessment, the likelihood of there being many, if any, APL courses that could offer vocational recognition was slight.

In spite of the limited availability of HKQF recognition, where it or lesser forms of articulation existed, they were appreciated and utilized by the students:

After the students have successfully passed the whole course, they can get a certificate. ...For this qualification, they are granted a paper exemption in our own examination. (Program Coordinator)

Each year, two or three students will go on to study with us in [this vocational field]. Those students are more confident than those who have not taken this course. They become leaders in group projects. (course coordinator)

Our APL students are advantaged regardless of whether universities recognize it or not ...because it ...includes a [vocational] certificate [and it] articulates with [further study in the vocational field]. (teacher)

And some participants also observed the use of APL for enhancing pathways directly into employment in the field:

Some students even found jobs while they were still taking this course. (course coordinator)

The students could work as clerk in [the field] after this course. (teacher)

Students who either wanted to take a vocational education pathway or saw it as their only option for tertiary education considered appropriate recognition of their APL studies in the HKQF to be important:

I will study further. Otherwise it would waste what I've learnt from this class.

I will further my study at the VTC, because traditional education is very boring to me.

If I cannot be promoted to Form Six, I will choose to study at the [vocational education institution].

Correspondingly, Students in all but one of the focus groups noted their commitment to using their APL experience to inform their future work or other life engagements:

I want to do something with [the field]. Otherwise I wouldn't be here.

If I pass the [vocational] exams after finishing this course, I can work in a

Responding to the predominantly vocational interests of the category of students for whom APL is primarily intended (Education Bureau, 2008a) other jurisdictions where APL has been introduced into secondary schooling—including Australia (Karmel, 2007), the United Kingdom (Smithers, 2002) and the USA (Lewis and Cheng, 2006)—have commonly adopted a stronger focus on ensuring its appropriate vocational recognition: the first imperative commonly having been an assessment structure for APL that delivers vocational recognition and credit. The very low importance given in the development of APL policy in Hong Kong to its recognition in the QF is unusual internationally. It may be seen, perhaps, as an overly timid response to the poor public standing of vocational education and learning in the Territory and to the correspondingly higher priority accorded the academic recognition of APL, with which it was constructed as being in opposition.

3.5 *The Poor Standing of APL*

The public standing, status, or valuing of APL relative to general, academic learning and education was recognised as being the single issue of greatest concern across all participant groups. It was raised in most of the individual interviews and in eight of the 21 student focus groups:

Some teachers perceive APL courses as being for low academic achievers (teacher).

Applied learning courses are for low academic achievers. (student)

The a priori association of APL with vocational learning and education underpinned its generally poor educational standing, but that evaluation was compounded by the purpose of APL being that of providing, at senior secondary level, educational opportunities appealing to students who might otherwise disengage from senior secondary schooling because they had performed poorly in general education and who were judged to be uninterested in general educational engagement.

The issue was publicly acknowledged by the EDB; for example, “COS is a form of vocational training that is commonly regarded as suitable only for less able students. Such labeling might deter schools from offering COS” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005, p. 54). From the consultation associated with the above-mentioned reports, the Bureau noted that “Observation to date suggests that only a few schools have vigorously promoted COS as a programme suitable for all students. Instead, many schools have viewed COS as an alternative for lower ability students” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006c, p. 19). And also that “Most stakeholders ...agree that it is important to avoid labeling COS as an option only for inferior students” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006c, p. 11). However, in spite of the wisdom of that advice, the Bureau clearly ignored it in its own reporting. It did, though, suggest that “The effect of negative labelling will be addressed by ensuring that COS courses can meet the full range of student abilities” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006c, p. 11).

The policy development response to the poor standing of APL was not to construct it as a problem of prejudice against vocational education that might be the focus of corrective action, but as an unfortunate association of APL with vocational learning:

The adoption of the term ‘applied learning’ has served to raise the status of these courses – *the labelling effect is going away ...[and] we actually have a mix of students coming from different school backgrounds.* (EDB policy maker).

The solution to the problem was thus seen to be that of minimizing the association of APL with vocational learning—of shifting the emphasis of APL away from vocational learning towards the learning of generic skills, constructing occupations or vocations as merely the *context* and *motivator* for learning skills, rather than the *curriculum* and the *teleology*, as is the case in vocational education. The focus was, in other words, on strengthening the standing of APL.

That agenda became a substantial focus of the APL policy developments undertaken since the 2006 review. Those developments included particularly:

- 1). Changing the name from ‘COC’ and ‘COS’ to ‘APL’.
- 2). Expanding the range of courses to include more intellectually demanding fields.
- 3). Expanding the number of providers to include more prestigious institutions.
- 4). Using English-language as the ‘medium of instruction’ (MOI) wherever possible.
- 5). Shifting the curricular and assessment emphasis away from vocational learning and certification towards the use of APL as a vocational context for the learning of generic skills. This shift included the above-noted shelving of earlier plans for the dual recognition of APL learning outcomes.

- 6). Developing a quality assessment framework that ensured the academic standing of APL courses as being comparable to that of academic subjects.
- 7). Developing a curriculum and assessment framework that saw APL learning outcomes being credited into the HKDSE under the NSS structure. And
- 8). Running publicity emphasizing the foregoing features of APL and its suitability for students of all abilities.

The issue was exacerbated by the action on the part of the EDB to link the place of APL in the NSS structure with the provision of learning opportunities for students with special learning needs and learning disabilities. This was done most demonstratively in the two reports in 2006 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006a and 2006c), which stood as the most comprehensive public policy statements about the nature of APL. Those reports articulated the nature of APL policy itself and how that policy was to be made responsive to the learning needs of students with special learning needs and learning disabilities. They were confusingly sub-titled as *career-oriented studies and the new senior secondary academic structure for special schools*, thereby suggesting that special schools were the singular focus of the document and of APL policy.

The issue was also exacerbated for higher achieving students by the mid-range credit cap of grade Level 3 that was placed on the academic recognition in the HKDSE of a maximum ‘attained with distinction’ result for an APL course. Higher-achieving students would arguably have been unlikely to sacrifice any opportunity to obtain an additional grade over Level 3 by studying an APL course.

Uncertainty as to the extent to which universities would recognize APL grades on an equal footing with those for academic subjects, and the extent to which an APL ‘pass’ grade would be considered at all, added further at that stage to this issue:

It is still not known whether APL will be accepted by the universities. (teacher and course coordinator)

Understandably, then, in spite of the corrective actions taken by the EDB, the issue remained:

However, the focus of applied learning remains vocational and people therefore continue to perceive it as a second-class education. (school leader)

It's hard to attract students with good academic records to take applied learning because of the labelling effect. (school leader)

The ‘second-class’ status of APL remained a prominent feature of stakeholder evaluations of it. APL was seen as being still too tarred by the vocational brush to be attractive to a significant proportion of the higher-achieving students.

Nevertheless, there was also observed a progressively increasing popularity of APL courses, both generally and among higher-achieving students, and the number of higher-banded schools contributing students to APL courses was seen to be increasing across the trials, which, in itself, had a positive effect on public attitudes:

The labelling effect of applied learning courses has gone. The name ‘applied learning’ sounds better, yet the nature of COC or APL remains the same. (school leader)

On the positive side, [APL] is gaining popularity among students and parents. (program coordinator)

There was also a suggestion, though, that the policy changes had created in the eyes of a number of stakeholders-especially among school leadership personnel-a view that APL was becoming too academic to be attractive to and manageable by the students for whom it was originally intended (those not attracted to and not succeeding through the general education curriculum):

Applied learning courses now require students to have high academic skill development, ...so some students could not handle them. (school leader)

Applied learning courses now benefit Band One, rather than Band Three students, because they've been up-graded and because the courses with more technical elements have been cut. ...The lower academic achievers can no longer handle applied learning courses. (school leader)

Applied learning courses [now] neither meet the needs of lower academic achievers nor meet the requirements of those students who perform relatively better academically. (school leader)

4. Recommendations for APL Policy Development

Given the particularities of the Hong Kong educational context within an increasingly globalised world of education, those issues variously resonate or contrast with, and stand to inform experience and intentions in other educational jurisdictions. This final section of the paper seeks, then, to briefly draw out from each of the

emergent issues a key recommendation that may be of pertinence in APL policy development and implementation within educational jurisdictions where factors impacting significantly on APL are considered to be sufficiently similar to those pertaining in Hong Kong.

The de-vocationalisation of APL in the Hong Kong trials in response to the poor public standing of vocational education and learning in the local culture suggests a policy development process that had lost sight of the driving purpose and nature of APL. It points to the importance of developing policy according to a clear prioritisation of vocational and general education goals in APL policy development.

The under-theorisation of APL in the Hong Kong trials left the central purposes of APL vulnerable to diminution in the face of concerns identified among significant categories of stakeholders. A stronger theorisation of APL may have provided a framework in which such concerns could better have been addressed to ensure the maintenance of the intended reform trajectory. The issue points to the need for a strongly theory-driven approach to the development of APL policy: one sufficient to provide protection from a tendency for free-flowing pragmatism and expediency to compromise the reform agenda in the face of challenges arising in the course of policy development and implementation.

Academic recognition of APL in the Hong Kong trials was, from the start of the policy initiative, a matter of high priority, but the levels of grade equivalence suggested were not sufficient to reflect either that goal or the public perception of what would be expected of APL were it to become an attractive option for high achieving students. As a result, APL failed to achieve the public recognition that it both sought and needed to become part of a mainstream senior secondary education curriculum. The limited academic recognition of APL in the Hong Kong trials thus points to the importance of credit equivalence in the awarding of credit for APL into general educational qualifications.

In the trials, the attempt by the policy makers to ensure a high level of academic recognition of APL by side-lining its recognition in the QF meant that APL fell into the cracks between the twin planks that it was intended to bring into prominence: 1) vocational learning as a pedagogy to facilitate achieving 2) enhanced future educational options for students who would otherwise struggle for educational recognition and achievement. That issue points to the importance of the dual recognition of APL in both general secondary and vocational education qualifications. The possibility of such recognition emerged in this study as a major driver of public and student recognition of the standing and attractiveness of APL as valued curriculum choice.

In avoiding tackling the public poor standing of vocational education in Hong Kong, but de-vocationalising APL instead, the policy makers created a form of APL that was strongly academic and significantly unattractive to or unmanageable by those students for whom it was intended. That issue points to the importance of policy sensitivity to the unintended consequences of APL policy developments.

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Note

Note 1. Italicizing in this section indicates interview narrative, translated from Cantonese in most cases.

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