

The Diagnostic English Language Tracking Assessment (DELTA) writing project: a case for post-entry assessment policies and practices in Hong Kong universities

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This article describes undergraduate English language support in the context of universities in Hong Kong, with reference to early academic writing needs and support. It focuses specifically on the writing needs of post-entry year 1 students as reported in a series of Hong Kong based studies, and on the recent outcomes of a project funded by an Education Research Grant (ERG): The Diagnostic English Language Tracking Assessment (DELTA) – The Writing Assessment. These studies have revealed that many undergraduate students, whilst obtaining university mandated minimum entry levels for English, are challenged by the demands of academic writing when studying in Hong Kong EMI (English medium instruction) universities.

This article reports on this situation and positions DELTA as a desirable post-entry assessment instrument, arguing that it is a critical part of a multilayered approach to addressing the poor English language levels of novice Hong Kong undergraduate students.

Key words: diagnostic assessment; novice academic writing; post entry language assessment

Introduction

The number of international students enrolling in Western English speaking universities has grown exponentially over the last three decades (Graddol, 2006). In tandem with this trend, there have been a range of studies about university entry and post-entry benchmarking for English language competence to ensure that new undergraduate students can cope with their

studies (see for example, McDowell & Merrylees, 1998; Read & Hayes, 2003). This concern is mirrored in Asian cities and countries like Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and India where there have been legacies of post-colonial governments resulting in education systems that continue to favour English (see for example, Tsui et al., 1999). In Hong Kong, school matriculation scores in English are used by universities to determine minimum entry levels; however questions arise as to how well these scores predict success when studying in a tertiary English medium instruction (EMI) context. These questions are currently amplified in Hong Kong where big changes have been taking place in the secondary and tertiary sectors.

As background to this article, I will first describe the Hong Kong education context focusing on changes in 2012 where schools have lost one year of instruction at the senior secondary level and universities have added an extra year of tertiary education. This has been called the '334' change, or in other words, a move towards 3 years of lower secondary, 3 years of senior secondary and 4 years of tertiary education.

I will then provide an overview of the Hong Kong and international literature on the challenges of academic writing for novice ESL/EFL students enrolled in EMI universities before focusing specifically on a writing project linked to the Diagnostic English Language Tracking Assessment (DELTA), which is described further below. Finally I will discuss implications of the DELTA writing research to date, with particular reference to the need for improved policies for, and practices in, English language support for undergraduate students in Hong Kong.

Changes in the Hong Kong Education University Sector

The Hong Kong university sector is undergoing major curriculum revision due to the fact that from 2012 Hong Kong universities are offering 4-, rather than 3-year degrees, and students are entering tertiary education one year earlier than in previous years; this initiative is known as the '334' as shown below.

Hong Kong Education Reform: 2012		
	Prior to 2012	After 2012
University	3 Year University Degree	4 Year University Degree
Senior Secondary	4 Year Senior Secondary	3 Year Senior Secondary
Lower Secondary	3 Year Lower Secondary	3 Year Lower Secondary

Figure 1. Hong Kong 334 Education reform, 2012

Hong Kong universities have moved towards an American type of university system where degrees are now normally 4 years with year 1 being a liberal arts type of curriculum called 'General Education'. Undergraduate discipline specialisation then commences in year 2.

Secondary school students, from 2012, complete only one new exit level school examination, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), with the phasing out of the old two-level system, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (HKCE) and the Hong Kong Advanced Level of Education (HKALE). English is now one of the 'core' subjects in the new HKDSE examination and is marked according to a standardized rubric on a scale of 1-5 (see Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority [HKEAA], 2013a). It is of note that the new English language curriculum makes no claim to develop academic literacy skills, but rather, claims to expose students to 'real life texts' in their broadest sense. For the 2012 university entry, the minimum requirement for English language at most Hong Kong universities for most degrees was set at a HKDSE overall level 3 for English language. But what does this level mean? In a press release, the HKEAA (2013b) announced the results of a benchmarking study aimed at establishing the equivalence of standards between the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the 2012 HKDSE English Language Examination. They reported:

Candidates with Level 3 in HKDSE English Language, which is the minimum English Language requirement for admission to local universities, achieved an overall IELTS band score of 5.48-5.68 (HKEAA, 2013b, p. 1).

Whilst a breakdown of the exact numbers of students with HKDSE levels 5, 4 and 3 accepted into the different local universities in 2012 remains unknown, it appears that the majority enter with levels 4 and 3. In one university it was reported that of the HKDSE level 4 entrants, about 37% of these had level 3 writing scores and of the HKDSE level 3 entrants about 18% had level 2 scores. Undoubtedly this would suggest a significant challenge for Hong Kong universities in diagnosing language problems in writing and offering on-going support.

The DELTA Project

The DELTA collaborative project commenced in 2007, when three Hong Kong universities decided to pool their government English language enhancement resources in the development of a common diagnostic assessment instrument. The aim of this project has never been to screen students prior to university admission, but to provide students with a clear post-entry diagnostic profile of their strengths and weaknesses in English so as to enable them to move swiftly ahead with the development of their language and academic literacy skills as they complete their first year of university studies.

The DELTA project to date has developed an on-line assessment of the skills of reading and listening as well as grammar and vocabulary; this is a multiple choice assessment and takes 90 minutes to complete. However, there has been a need to add the productive skills components of speaking and writing. In 2011, I was awarded an Education Research Grant (ERG) from the City University of Hong Kong to explore the writing needs of Hong Kong undergraduate students, to develop pilot assessment instruments and prompts for diagnostic purposes and to test the efficacy of using automated systems in the scoring of undergraduate academic texts. This article reports just on the first phase of the project, on the writing needs of Hong Kong year 1 university students.

I will first provide an overview of the relevant literature, both locally and internationally, of the English language writing needs of novice university students and of the implications these have for assessment and support.

Literature Review

Over the last 30 years, a number of international and local studies have been conducted on the issue of undergraduate student writing in university contexts. These studies have looked at three aspects. The first of these is the relationship of students' writing ability to their academic achievement or career success (Ismail, 2011; Jenkins, Jordan, & Weiland, 1993; Johns, 1991; Leki & Carson, 1994; Santos, 1988; Zhu, 2004); the second is the writing challenges confronting ESL/EFL learners at the tertiary level, considered mainly from three perspectives: the students, the language instructors, and the subject faculty (Flowerdew, 2003; Greasley & Cassidy, 2010; Huang, 2010; Jackson, 2005; Sawir, 2005; Zhu, 2004; Zhu & Flaitz, 2005). A final perspective, pertinent to this study, is the role of assessment and support services for writing in the university sector (Cheng, Myles & Curtis, 2004; Knoch, 2012; Murray, 2010; Read, 2008).

Of particular interest and relevance are the local studies. Evans and Green (2007) surveyed 5000 Hong Kong undergraduate students focusing on their difficulties in undertaking tertiary studies in EMI; they claimed this to be the one of the largest studies in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The findings indicated that student problems related to the productive skills of academic writing and academic speaking, and it was further reported that students said they experienced more difficulty with language (for example, grammar and vocabulary) than the content or organisation when writing academic texts. Evans and Morrison (2011a) also reported on a longitudinal study which tracked 28 undergraduate students from different social and educational backgrounds over their three years at university, revealing that writing was reported to be the most challenging aspect of university study. The more detailed report of the same study (Evans & Morrison, 2011b) showed that among the 15 micro-skills of writing, using appropriate style, using grammar correctly, and linking sentences smoothly were reported by the students to be the most difficult. The students further reported that a lack of vocabulary and syntactic knowledge hindered them in producing academic writing. The findings of these local studies have been echoed in our DELTA writing study where grammar and vocabulary were seen by year 1 students to be the major obstacle to academic writing in English. Unfortunately, there appear to be few other detailed studies in the overseas literature specifically looking at the English language writing needs of novice undergraduate students.

There is also a broad literature on the implications of poor writing levels in English at the undergraduate level, focusing on post-entry assessment practices and the need for support service provision. This literature is particularly rich in

Australia (Dunworth, 2010; Knoch, 2012; Knoch, Elder & McNamara, 2011; Murray, 2010; Oliver, Vanderford & Grote, 2012; Ransom, 2009; Read, 2008) where universities are using a range of post-entry language assessment tools to diagnose and support English as additional language (EAL) students. Of particular interest and relevance to this study are two similar diagnostic assessment instruments that have been developed in Australia, the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA), and in New Zealand, the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA); both were developed in circumstances where students were entering university with low English language levels (Elder & Erlam, 2001; Knoch, 2009; Ransom, 2009; Read, 2008). Interestingly, there are only limited studies on the scale of this problem at Hong Kong universities on entry, and how to address it.

Methodology

The following research questions were posed in the first phase of the project and are reported on in this article:

What are the writing assessment needs of tertiary students in Hong Kong?

1. What are student perceptions of their needs?
2. What are English language instructor perceptions of their needs?
3. What are other internal stakeholder perceptions of their needs?

This study was based on the gathering of quantitative data through the administration of two survey questionnaires, one to English language instructors (n=88) and one to year 1 students (n=620) across 5 of the Hong Kong universities. Qualitative data was also collected through the open-ended responses on the survey instrument, and, in addition, through focus group interviews organised for the instructor and student groups, as well as other stakeholders, listed below, who were seen as central to the study.

Focus group discussions of about one hour were arranged with a sample of volunteer students and English language instructors who had completed the survey. Key stakeholder focus groups were also set up with two General Education (GE) stakeholder groups: first, a GE programme leader group (n=9), most of whom were Chinese academic members of staff at two of the universities; and then a group of American Fulbright scholars (n=3) attached to three different universities in Hong Kong. The American Fulbright scholars had been seconded to Hong Kong for the planning and implementation of the new GE initiative in the local universities. University English Language Centre heads were also brought together for a focus group session. Other senior

management personnel (for example, one quality assurance manager and academic planning manager, both working at the vice presidential level), were interviewed individually about what they perceived to be the English language needs and problems of year 1 students. All focus group discussions and interviews were recorded and then analysed by the DELTA research associate for emerging themes regarding the English language writing needs of year 1 local students.

Findings

Student and language instructor survey and focus group discussions

Despite several postings of the on-line survey through Survey Monkey and requests for responses from year 1 student and English language instructors across all local universities, the response rate was generally disappointing. It is possible that the length of the survey was a deterrent; the research assistant in charge of administering and following up on the survey cited student 'survey fatigue' at the time of the year when we were collecting the data. However, importantly we were able to collect survey data from five universities in Hong Kong.

The results of the student and instructor survey raised concern about the entry English language levels of year 1 students accepted to study in EMI Hong Kong universities, as well as their low levels of confidence in their ability to produce acceptable academic writing. The survey questionnaire probed perceptions of importance and difficulty of academic writing in year 1 and whilst the response was somewhat limited, the results reinforced previous local studies (Evans & Green, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2011a, 2011b) that showed many students enter local universities with concerns that their own levels of English are not adequate for a tertiary education in English. Students and language instructors alike expressed concern in the study about the gulf between entry level language proficiency benchmarks set by the local universities, and the academic literacy skills that these institutions require. As can be seen in Figure 2, instructors and students reported great difficulties in using English, but what is of interest is that whilst the students focused particularly on the importance of 'surface language features' such as grammar accuracy and the mechanics of writing, their instructors appeared to place more importance on academic literacy skills required for their university writing. Interestingly, this finding echoes a similar study carried out on undergraduate students in Canada (Huang, 2010) where English language instructors were much more concerned about aspects of academic literacy features in writing compared to their

students, who expressed more concern about their poor grammar and vocabulary. A legend for the horizontal axis can be found in the Appendix.

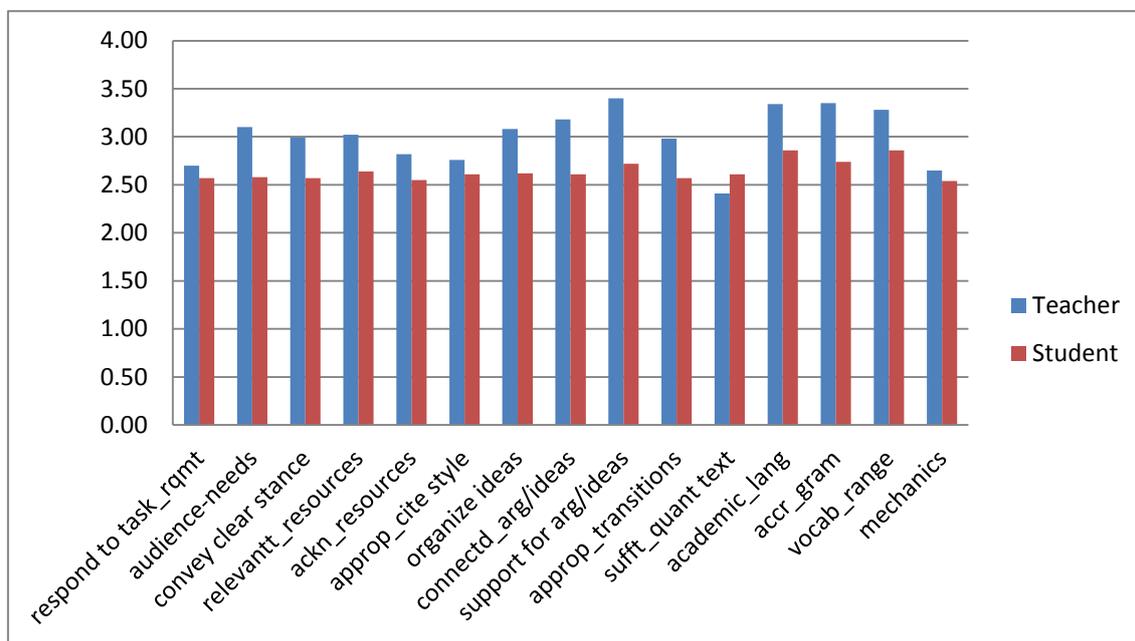


Figure 2. Mean responses by teachers and students to the questionnaire items on writing difficulties

In the follow-up focus group discussion, one language instructor said:

...in fact some teachers say our students cannot think and organize their ideas. I think it's really linked to language ability, they need the grammar to show how they're organizing their thoughts, so the two go completely together. Reading a paragraph that is badly organized in terms of content...you think there is no logic there. It's not necessarily a fault of thoughts, it's more a fault of not knowing what clauses to use and how the clauses go into each other and develop to support the ideas. So it's completely linked to the idea of organization, idea development and grammar, they're just one thing. (Female instructor, American, mid-30s).

Overall, the language instructors and the students agreed that, in order to write successfully in the university context, it is important to structure and develop ideas and arguments, but students felt it was difficult to use accurate grammar and a wide range of vocabulary to put these ideas and arguments into words. It may be surmised that entry level students are not yet fully aware of the academic literacy requirements of the university and therefore do not, as yet see these as 'difficult', or, on the other hand they think that these skills can be taught and modelled as content. One student remarked:

I think citation is least difficult, coz (sic) usually teachers will provide some formats for us to follow, and then I can just imitate. Actually there are a number of database resources on the internet which can help you do the citation. You just need to enter your information, it will create the citation list for you. (Female student, Cantonese speaker, 20 years old).

Another student complained:

I think essays are important, and they are so formal, but I can't write in the same informal way as I did in the secondary school. I don't know what style I should use to write an essay. For example, I find writing clearly is actually very difficult, coz (sic) usually essays are only good if they have a clear opinion. But if you write too much it is redundant, but you don't know how to use the easiest language or verbs to express very complicated ideas...my grammar and vocab is not enough...and we are not taught this kind of language at secondary school. (Female student, Cantonese speaker, 20 years old).

Heads of university English Language Centres

In the focus group session with the heads of the university English Language Centres (ELCs), the DELTA as a diagnostic instrument was viewed as highly desirable given the low levels of the incoming students and the paucity of entry English language proficiency information provided by the secondary school matriculation scores. One head commented:

We don't know what a HKDSE level 3 means and typically our universities just get the overall scores. If we ask the students to reveal their component scores we still only come up with a number...but what does that number mean in terms of how we can profile their writing needs and support them? It's still just a number. (ELC head, male, Chinese, mid-40s).

Some of the heads felt that the DELTA writing assessment should link closely with the English for Academic Purposes programmes and that the diagnostic profiles should also link with the self-access centre services and other facilities (for example, writing support centres, language clinics and on-line materials) in the university ELCs.

Interestingly, this group also saw a need for DELTA to track proficiency gain year-on-year; this is a feature of the larger DELTA assessment and will ultimately need to be addressed for writing. They reported that, in general, their centres were making greater provision for English language development due to the introduction of the new 4-year degree through the addition of English language credits, and this inevitably would mean more accountability

for the extra funding received. As well, some heads reported that formal English language support might well be extended beyond year 1. The proposed year-on-year 'tracking' function of a DELTA writing component, which, on an annual basis would provide information about English language proficiency gains (and losses), would aim to provide new and valid accountability measures called for by the funding authorities such as the Hong Kong Universities Grants Committee (UGC). The heads saw this as a highly desirable feature for DELTA writing as it would not only provide an accountability measure but would also focus on-going attention on English language levels of undergraduate students throughout their 4 years of study.

One head complained:

It seems that our language centres carry the can for low entry levels to university with academic departments putting their heads in the sand regarding this serious problem...the DELTA can certainly tell us much more about the problem, but without there being a university policy to reveal the problem and practices that allow for better resourcing of the centres, we'll only continue to scratch the surface. Everyone agrees at our university that language across the curriculum is a good idea, but no one wants to own it at senior management level. (Female expatriate head, mid-50s; 15 years in Hong Kong).

General Education (GE) stakeholders

In most Hong Kong universities, new GE programmes have been implemented as part of the new 4-year curriculum. In the focus group discussion with GE programme leaders from 2 of the universities surveyed, there appeared to be reluctance on their part to tackle the issue of supporting English language writing skills as part of the new GE programmes. Whilst they acknowledged students' English skills were poor, and academic writing skills in particular, the programme leaders generally felt that they did not have the required skills to assist the students in improving their writing skills as part of the GE curriculum, nor did some of them entirely feel it was their role to do so.

One GE programme leader said:

I wouldn't feel confident myself in correcting and feeding back on their English writing...I mean English Centres have the specialists, so this is their job to do this. (Chinese GE teacher, female, 40s).

To avoid getting students to write, some reported that they asked students to complete class quizzes and short answer tests; another strategy was the 'group' assignment, where the strong writers inevitably took a bigger role in the

production of the final assessed text, thus masking the difficulties of the weaker writers. Students were therefore currently passing their courses in GE programmes without demonstrating requisite academic literacy skills. Another participant reported:

I give a final group assignment to the students and they construct it together but they need to fill out a form saying how they have divided the work so the scoring is fair. They help each other, but I'm not sure how effective it is in learning how to write at university level...sometimes the stronger ones complain that they have a lot of work to do to get a good group score. (Chinese GE teacher, female, 30s).

This all suggests there is much work to be done in year 1 to get GE teachers able to support student English, perhaps through such initiatives as 'writing across the curriculum' programmes.

The GE American Fulbright scholars, on the other hand, were vocal about the need for all teachers to attend to the quality of student writing. They suggested that there was a high level of complicity in the way Hong Kong students manage to pass their GE courses and that all year 1 GE teachers should be encouraged to take more responsibility in developing writing skills. As well, this group proposed the up-skilling of the GE programme leader and teacher groups as an approach to the problem.

There are good models of language across the curriculum initiatives in American universities and I know they exist elsewhere as well. We do something called a 'linkage' programme where subject teachers work together with language and literacy teacher over a period of time...the aim is to transfer skills across to all our subject teachers in supporting the development of these skills but it takes time and it takes modeling. (American professor, female, late 40s).

They further suggested that the DELTA writing rubrics should not only be developed for English language specialists to use in the English language centres, but should also target, by developing different versions, students, GE colleagues and all academic staff across the local campuses.

Senior management stakeholders

Senior management at Hong Kong universities, as well as employer groups, also voiced concerns not only about entry levels of English, but also about the need for exit assessments. The interviews revealed that some universities have, over the years, been considering an exit benchmark test in English in order for

students to graduate. In employer surveys completed within Hong Kong, English communication skills emerge regularly as a key barrier to employment and promotion. In one of the largest Hong Kong universities it was reported in the employment surveys (2009-2011) that Hong Kong-based companies consistently say that Written English has the highest importance compared to Spoken English and Written Chinese and Putonghua; however, the level of satisfaction is the lowest. Professional associations similarly bemoan the lack of productive English skills in speaking and writing among local graduates. In an interview, a senior vice president of a well-known professional body, who was also external advisor to one of the local university engineering departments, reported that there were plans to mandate benchmark levels of English as determined by an international examination before local graduates would be able to qualify for professional accreditation. He said:

We are constantly dismayed by the level of English our engineers in Hong Kong graduate with, and we see them not competing for the jobs they are qualified for. As well, there are constant complaints from international companies about local university language levels. To deal with this problem we are thinking of mandating all graduates to show an IELTS 7 in order to become registered. (Local retired engineer, vice president of a local professional association for engineers, Chinese, mid-60s).

A vice president of quality assurance in one of the local universities stated that he thought that students in year 1 were probably missing about half of their input in listening and reading because of poor English language skills.

...we found out then if a student has a level E (HKALE) their vocabulary is only about 40-50%, that means they miss every second word of what the instructor says...you need a writing rubric that discourages the student's writing bullet points...this is a favourite strategy when they can't write...they've never engaged in language and deeper language learning.

Later he said:

Many students are just using coping strategies, they cut and paste and many don't believe this is a life skill they will need in the future...but employers want these skills in HK...so the development of the DELTA writing rubric for employers as well is very important, particularly given the fact that they're going to phase out the voluntary exit test (IELTS) in the triennium, we are concerned that there is a systematic measure across universities...we need something that is diagnostic at the beginning of university and can be reported

on in the end. (Vice president, quality assurance at a local university; male expatriate academic, mid-50s).

Whilst the support for the DELTA initiative was evident in the focus group discussions and individual interviews, a policy to implement this as part of a multilayered approach will be needed to ensure its success.

In a consideration of the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) scores for local university entry, many tertiary institutions weight evidence of English language competence positively; some universities even give English language scores a 'double weighting' for entry compared to the student's subject specific score. This general practice, in itself, is evidence of concern in the tertiary sector of the importance of threshold English proficiency for undergraduate EMI study. One university senior manager of admissions reported:

The current situation where our entry level students are so low in English language can only be addressed by upping the entry requirement, so we'll ask all deans to ensure they 'double weight' English language secondary school results for this coming year(2012). I know they (the deans) won't like it because they might miss out on the best Maths or Science results, but if students can't follow their lectures and write an essay they'll fail and what kind of graduates are we putting out in the workforce? (American senior manager at a local university, mid-50s; 3 years in Hong Kong).

Another senior manager interviewed talked about the increased resource implications for the English Language Centres in their universities if they do not 'double weight'. She said:

In the US, UK and Australia, students at the level we are currently accepting are required to complete extra English before they start their university studies....are we to provide that service for free? And what happens if they fail and don't reach the benchmark? And what happens anyway in the meantime...they are accepted into our university and they are doing first year courses; how do they pass these? (Chinese senior manager, mid-40s; 10 years back in Hong Kong).

Discussion and Implications

Although the research findings in the DELTA Phase 1 study from students and language instructor perspectives are not surprising nor very different from those of previous studies (Evans & Green, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2011), the

issue of just how low the academic writing ability of incoming students is, was clearly reiterated. However, in the DELTA study, other stakeholder views were sought and it seems there is a general concern about the lack of policy at the government and university levels about this problem. The stakeholders also reported a need for improved resources for language learning support in early undergraduate study.

There are a number of implications that flow from this and previous studies regarding this problem. These include the introduction of post-entry language assessment practices, the provision of multilayered resourcing for language support and the development of appropriate policies at government and university levels. Each of these is discussed below.

DELTA as a post-entry language assessment tool in Hong Kong

The HKDSE summative scores provide no information regarding the specific strengths and weaknesses of incoming local university students in Hong Kong. There is therefore a clear need for a formative post-entry assessment tool, of a low stakes nature, that provides diagnostic information and feedback for new students on their language ability. DELTA is not just another test, but is a diagnostic assessment tool designed to support language learning, and in this regard it is very similar to the DELA and DELNA initiatives in Australia and New Zealand respectively. However there are differences in the target groups. Whilst it is certainly the case that most Hong Kong undergraduate students share a common culture and language (although universities now recruit up to 20% of their undergraduate students from the mainland), this fact does not negate the need for comprehensive diagnostic information and English language support services for this group of novice students at risk.

Such a tool will not only offer important diagnostic information for the Hong Kong student but equally it will provide direction for language teachers and other academic staff in supporting their students in language development. It will also provide, we hope, valuable input into the design of well-targeted support services for academic studies.

Language support resourcing in Hong Kong

Hong Kong universities receive recurrent funding called Language Enhancement Grants (LEGS) from the UGC for the provision of language courses and ancillary services in the tertiary sector. These funds are currently applied to the support of self-access and writing development centres as well as suites of English enhancement courses designed for different levels and skills within language centres at the universities. Whilst these units appear to be well-

resourced, there are two main problems with the current provision. First, typically students with minimum English entry levels are unrealistically expected to make vast improvements by attending English courses for only 3-9 hours per week, especially where these students are concurrently doing a full year 1 academic load. Secondly, the funds are, in the main, directed to the University English language centres, which are seen as 'remedial' destinations for students with very poor English, and thus they do not cater to all incoming students, or to students in their later years of undergraduate studies.

In a UGC review of Language Enhancement Grant provision in Hong Kong universities, Bachman (2010) reported that there was a fragmented approach to collaborative work across the universities in the design of English for Academic and Specific Purposes courses, and in the development of summative and formative language assessment instruments. He reported a particular concern regarding assessment:

While there is some collaboration among LE providers at different institutions, there is, in my view, far too little of this...there are far too many resources being allocated to 'inventing or reinventing the wheel' so as to speak. There are many areas of common need but in my view language assessment most likely requires more resources than any one institution can provide...because it requires, in addition to professional expertise in language and learning, specialized expertise in measurement...such expertise is scarce consisting of an individual here and there, dispersed among the universities (Bachman, 2010, p. 4).

Whilst a collaborative model such as the DELTA may be desirable in the Hong Kong university context, as suggested by his report, this is by no means a model that may work in other countries where there may be differences in the backgrounds of the student population, for example. Even within the Hong Kong group of tertiary institutions, particularly those elite institutions, there are key decision makers who believe the English language needs, and therefore the assessment needs, of their student population to be different.

However, the prospect for on-going collaboration between the current participating Hong Kong universities remains strong given the positive response of the UGC to the DELTA initiative. This response, it is hoped, will mean further funding support.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings to date, there appears to be no doubt that the Hong Kong tertiary sector, apart from the university collaborative projects,

would benefit from a systematic set of policies and practices relating to post-entry language assessment and resourcing for dealing with the very low levels of writing ability among many of the in-coming undergraduate students. However, such an initiative requires not only policy statements but also commitments to resourcing at both the government and university levels to ensure success. Interestingly, assessment initiatives in Hong Kong, such as the Graduating Student Language Proficiency Assessment (GSLPA) at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the territory-wide voluntary IELTS assessment called CEPAS (Common English Proficiency Assessment Scheme; see www.ugccepa.com) have focused, over the last decade, on exit testing of university graduates rather than on the formative assessment needs of incoming students.

This study has been limited to an investigation of the perceptions of key stakeholders at Hong Kong universities about the extent and nature of the low level of writing ability in our in-coming students, with a view to expanding the collaborative DELTA project to include a low-stakes formative assessment of academic writing . Over the coming year, a DELTA formative writing assessment scale will be trialled, together with a series of prompts aimed at probing levels of academic writing. These will be the subject of further reported studies.

A tantalising question that remains unanswered for DELTA as yet, and one that will also require further study, is whether the 'T' for tracking function in the DELTA project can be extended to yield summative information as students progress from year to year. As suggested in this study, university and governmental accountability pressures make this desirable, but whether a low-stakes diagnostic assessment tool can also function as an annual tracking event, with the scores being reported to internal stakeholders, remains an open question.

The Author

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Appendix: Legend for Figure 2 – Horizontal axis from left to right

Respond to task requirement

Meets audience needs

Conveys clear stance

Uses relevant resources

Acknowledges resources

Uses appropriate citation style

Organises ideas

Connects arguments and ideas

Supports arguments and ideas

Uses appropriate transitions

Writes sufficient quantity of text

Uses academic language

Uses accurate grammar

Uses a vocabulary range

Has appropriate mechanics of writing e.g. punctuation and spelling