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Managing self-access language learning: Principles and practice

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Abstract

This paper is based on a research project looking at the management of self-access language learning from the perspective of the managers of self-access centres. It looks at the factors which influence the practice of seven managers of self-access language learning in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. The discussion centres around five themes: how managers interpret key concepts within the field of learner autonomy and self-access learning, the managers' beliefs about self-access language learning and the factors which influenced them, the purpose of a self-access centre, and the factors which influence the implementation of self-access learning. Our conclusion is that managing self-access language learning is a complex process and unique to each context but there are underlying principles for effective management of SALL. We identify five of these principles.

Keywords: self-access centres, self-access language learning, learner autonomy, management, leadership, tertiary education.

1. Introduction

Self-access learning plays an important role in language education in many parts of the world. It is an individualisation of learning in which each learner interacts in a unique way with controlled and/or uncontrolled learning environments (Gardner and Miller, 1999) ranging from self-access centres, through self-access learning integrated into taught courses, to opportunities for authentic language use beyond institutional control. A major goal of the promotion of self-access learning is the fostering of autonomous learning (see for example, Gardner and Miller 1997, 1999; Morrison 2008; Sheerin 1989; Fisher et al 2007), although this is not an inevitable outcome. When successful, SALL also contributes to the development of students as independent thinkers and lifelong learners (Morrison 2008; Mozzon-McPherson, undated).

Self-access centres (SACs) are the most common facilities used in the promotion self-access learning. However, integration of some forms of SALL into taught courses is becoming increasingly popular and the development of virtual resources is blurring the boundaries of self-access environments. The development of SACs led to the emergence of a new role for teachers as SAC managers. This role is increasingly extending beyond the physical confines of the SAC into the management of self-access language learning (SALL) in a broader sense. This role clearly has a potentially wide impact both on the students whose learning is affected by the way SALL is managed and also on the teachers who may be required to implement the integration of SALL into courses they teach. Despite the potential impact of the SAC managers' work, little is known about what influences the ways they implement SALL.

The study reported on here is an attempt to understand better the extended role of SALL managers by looking at the factors which have an important influence on the way they

manage SALL. We base our study on rich qualitative data (questionnaires and interviews) resulting from interactions with seven SALL managers in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. This is a rich data set because these institutions have a long history of commitment to self-access learning and may be considered as representative of good practice in managing SALL. A non-hypothesis-driven, thematic analysis of this data revealed the major factors which influence the managers' approaches to their management of SALL and resulted in the emergence of 5 practice-driven principles for SALL management which are of relevance for all SAC/SALL managers and also for the stakeholders who have to study or work under the umbrella of this management.

The discussion in this paper is grouped according to the following five themes:

Theme 1: Managers' Interpretations of Key Concepts

Theme 2: Managers' Beliefs

Theme 3: Factors Influencing the Managers' Beliefs

Theme 4: The Purpose of the Self-Access Centre

Theme 5: Factors Influencing the Facilitation of SALL

2. Literature Review

2.1 Management

The field of educational management, that is, management at an institutional level, is widely studied and has an extensive literature dealing with issues of importance for institutions as a whole. The first notable issue concerns the debate over management versus leadership, or as Bennis (2003) terms it, doing things the right way versus doing the right thing, this is also seen as position and authority versus vision and influence (Jameson and McNay, 2007). A second, related, issue is the tension between managerialism which is about systems,

monitoring and controls; and professionalism which is about pedagogy, standards and the autonomy of staff (Jameson and McNay, 2007). Middlehurst and Elton (1992) suggest managerialism in education tends to occur in hard economic times and Rayner et al, (2010) indicate that it is currently increasing.

Discipline specific educational management is not well represented in the literature except in the field of English Language Teaching which has a growing literature on ELT management (see for example: Christison and Stoller, 1997; Impey and Underhill, 1994; Kennedy, 1988; White et al., 1991; White et al., 2008),as well as dedicated management-focused professional organisations (e.g. IATEFL ELT Leadership & Management SIG) and specialist conferences (see for example, ELT Management Conference 2010). However, within the literature on ELT management SALL, SACs and independent learning are largely ignored.

Although some attention has been given to describing the characteristics and defining the role(s) of SACs and SALL (see for example: Sheerin, 1989, 1997; Little, 1989; Morrison, 2006, 2008; Cotterall and Reinders, 2001; McCall, 1992; Gardner and Miller, 1999; Sturtridge, 1992) comparatively little has been written about the management or leadership of SACs and SALL (although see Gardner and Miller, 1997, 1999; Ciel Language Support Network, 2000; Lonergan, 1994). While acknowledging that the management of systems, processes and resources are essential to "achieve institutional objectives effectively and efficiently" (Jameson and McNay, 2007, p70) this is not the focus of this paper which concentrates rather on the academic and pedagogical influences on the management of SALL in order to establish a base-line for further discussions about SALL management.

The widespread implementation of SALL

It is difficult to gauge the degree to which SALL has been implemented in institutions except by reports of the establishment of SACS which can be considered as hubs for SALL as well as focal points for its management. The establishment of SACs is a continuing worldwide phenomenon, for example: 80 new SACs were set up in secondary schools by the Thai Ministry of Education in 2004 (Darasawang et al., 2007); over 200 SACs now operate in universities in Mexico (Chávez Sánchez, 1999); and SACs have been included as part of the 35 Peacekeeping English Projects around the world (British Council, 2009). SACs have been established by all tertiary institutions in Hong Kong (Pemberton et al., 2009) and self-access learning has been increasingly promoted within the Hong Kong secondary sector (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Miller et al., 2007).The large amount of money invested in SACs demonstrates the commitment of the global educational community to the promotion of learner autonomy although it might, in some cases, also demonstrate what Foskett and Lumby (2003) warn is the myth that "increasing resource allocation automatically raises levels of … achievement" (p128).

Previous research on the management of SACs

As part of a large-scale (541 learners, 58 language tutors and 5 SAC managers), quantitative and qualitative study (questionnaires, interviews and focus groups) looking at 5 SACs in Hong Kong tertiary institutions Gardner and Miller (1997) found that the management structures were "unnecessarily burdensome" (op cit. p118) and recommended that managers should be given more direct responsibility for the day-to-day running of the SACs. At that time the roles and responsibilities of managers were not clearly defined and SACs were managed in a somewhat ad hoc style (Gardner and Miller, 1997). To our knowledge, no other data-driven research findings specifically concerning the management of SACs or SALL

have been reported on in the literature. Nevertheless, it is clear from observation that the situation has changed since Gardner and Miller's study. In Hong Kong tertiary institutions, for example, all SACs now have clearly identified managers with job descriptions which position them as what Francis and Woodcock (1996) call the "link between strategy and action" (p6). This role includes aspects of line management such as staff appraisal, materials development/acquisition and staff training but not responsibility for recruitment, budgeting and policy-making. This suggests the role is more one of management (systems) than leadership (vision) as it complies with Jameson and McNay's definition of management as "essentially about planning, directing and supervising" in order to implement the priorities set by a leadership team (2007, p69-70) and also with Gardner and Miller's definition of management as being "about operating an organisational unit in a way which makes the best use of its resources in the pursuance of its goals and the goals of any governing body" (1999, p66).

2.2 The research themes:

The five themes discussed in this paper have not previously received much attention in the literature. The first theme deals with the SALL managers' interpretations of key concepts. This is important because undetected differences in individuals' definitions of terminology may obscure comprehension in the ensuing discussion. Definitions of key terminology within the field of autonomous learning have been problematic for many years as has already been noted in the literature (cf Benson, 2009; Gardner and Miller, 1999; Little, 1991; Pemberton, 1996). In the study reported here, managers' interpretations of the terminology were clarified and discussed.

Themes 2 and 3 deal with managers' beliefs and the factors influencing those beliefs. This is important because the managers are in a position to influence the implementation of SALL in ways which have wide implications for learners and teachers. The managers' underlying beliefs might not always be apparent or shared with other colleagues. Gardner (2001), for example, found that among a small group of teachers working closely together to operate a SAC there was considerable diversity of beliefs about autonomous learning and its relationship with SALL but more importantly that those teachers were not aware of each others beliefs or the diversity that existed between them. Toogood and Pemberton (2007) found that the beliefs on which their self-access practice had been established were not always shared by new teachers although this had not been previously evident. Young et al. (2007) also report diversity in teachers' beliefs about autonomous learning but found that given the right support teachers experience a change in beliefs and practices as they gain practical experience. The current study looks at the managers' beliefs and the factors which influence them in an attempt to identify the principles on which SALL is managed.

Theme 4 looks at why SACs exist and the extent to which their rationale is being communicated to users and colleagues. In their evaluation of SACs, Gardner and Miller identified the need for "managers… to clearly describe the rationale of their SAC and communicate this to users, tutors and other colleagues in the institution" (1997, p117). The need for clear rationales and how to communicate them is not a topic that has featured much in the literature. The current study examines the extent to which rationales are made clear and to whom.

Theme 5 looks at the factors which influence the facilitation of SALL. These may arise from students, teachers or the institution. One such factor is the degree to which teachers are

comfortable with SALL which affects their willingness to participate in its promotion and this, in turn, governs the ways in which SALL can be implemented (Young et al., 2007). Influence on the implementation of SALL can also be felt through policy at institutional, faculty or departmental levels (Ciel Language Support Network, 2000). The current study looks at the managers' perceptions of factors influencing the facilitation of SALL.

It is clear that there is a gap in the literature in terms of looking at the roles played by managers of SALL, how those managers perceive that role and the factors impacting on the successful implementation of SALL. By taking a deeper look at the practice of 7 experienced SALL managers this paper aims to indentify key principles which drive that practice. A clearer understanding of the role of SALL manager will be of importance to other SAC/SALL managers and teachers involved with SALL but will also have a potential impact on the increasingly large number of students who are being encouraged to make use of self-access learning by their institutions.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The data on which this paper is based was collected from 7 managers of self-access learning in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. All the managers were responsible for the activities of at least one SAC and for various non-SAC-based SALL activities (such as virtual resources, additional student activities or integration of SALL into taught courses) although in some cases the managers were not the only ones in their institution involved in managing SALL (for example SALL in some taught courses was organised separately by the course coordinator). They were all qualified and practicing language teachers. All the SACs were housed within a larger teaching unit. In addition to fulfilling their managerial roles in relation

to self-access learning, all the managers had other duties to perform (e.g. teaching, course development, administration).

3.2 Materials

Data was collected using two instruments, an electronically administered questionnaire with closed- and open-ended item and a follow-up face-to-face, semi-structured interview to allow an in-depth exploration of relevant issues emerging from the questionnaire. The questionnaire collected two types of data: 1) descriptive data about the context, the facilities and the day-to-day management of the centres and other SALL provisions; 2) managers' beliefs about self-access language learning, learner autonomy and external influences on the development of the SACs and SALL within their institutions. The questionnaires were distributed and returned as email attachments. The interviews were conducted with both researchers present and were recorded with the consent of the interviewees.

3.3 Procedure

The following procedures were followed for the collection and analysis of data for this paper:

1. An outline of the research project was sent to the 7 SALL managers who consented to participate.
2. The literature was reviewed to identify probable relevant topics.
3. The topics were used as the basis of an open-ended pilot interview with a former SALL manager.
4. The outcome of the pilot interview and the review of the literature were used to develop the questionnaire.

5. The questionnaire was distributed to the 7 managers with a request to provide as much information as they thought relevant.
6. The questionnaire responses were reviewed to identify key topics, issues and problems.
7. The topics for the semi-structured interviews emerged from the questionnaire data and were of two types: 1) common topics relevant to all managers and 2) specific topics relevant to individual managers.
8. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.
9. The data was used to identify principle-practice relationships.

4. Results and Discussion

The discussion in this paper centres around 5 themes. The themes are: how managers interpret key concepts related to self-access learning and learner autonomy, the purpose of a self-access centre, the managers' beliefs about self-access language learning, the factors which influenced the manager's beliefs, and the factors which influence the implementation of self-access learning within the 7 institutions.

4.1 Theme 1: Managers' Interpretations of Key Concepts

As noted earlier, the use of terminology in the field of autonomous learning has not always been consistent. In order to understand better the ways in which the managers interpreted the main concepts in this study and also to look for any consensus in those interpretations, we created summary definitions for the concepts of *Self-access* and *Independent Learning* by summarising comments in the managers' questionnaire responses. Then, during the interviews we showed the managers the summary definitions and asked them to comment on the extent to which they agreed with the definitions. This form of member checking allowed

the verification of the definitions and the degree to which all managers were using the terms in a consistent manner. The summary definitions used were:

*"**Self-access** is about facilities, the focus is on provision of materials, location and support".*

*"**Independent learning** is about approaches, the focus is on learners taking responsibility".*

[insert Table 1 here]

There was almost unanimous agreement on the summary definitions of self-access and independent learning seeing the distinction primarily as provision of resources versus the students' attitude to learning. Two managers partially agreed but qualified their responses. Manager 6 agreed that "self-access" can describe a system for resources but it can also describe other things. Manager 7 believed that "responsibility" is not necessarily an obligatory part of the definition of independent learning.

The high level of agreement with the summary definitions is not surprising because they were generated from the managers' own initial questionnaire responses. The data does confirm a common usage of the terminology among practitioners in Hong Kong.

Once managers had expressed their opinions about the summary definitions, we then asked them which of those definitions was closest to their own concept of autonomous learning. All managers believed that the summary definition of independent learning represented their own perception of autonomous learning. However, other comments made by the managers during the interviews suggest that their concepts of learner autonomy are less precisely defined as

the managers also tended to link autonomous learning to some need for self-access facilities and guidance. For example:

> M4 [interview]: Without good resources and guidance I don't think people can be very successful in autonomous learning. They need resources and they need help sometimes.

> M5 [interview]: Autonomous learning is clearly more in the theoretical area… but … to be fully activated… the facilities, resources and provision of support are not just a nice bonus, they're absolutely essential.

4.2 Theme 2: The Managers' Beliefs

Theme 2 looks at the managers' perceptions of the importance of learner autonomy/independence. This is important because the managers are teachers and teachers' beliefs have a strong influence on the learning environment (Richards and Lockhart, 1994) which also includes SALL.

Managers were asked to express in their own words their views about the importance of the concepts of autonomy and independence to them, to their departments and to their institutions. A numerical value was assigned to key words used by the managers in order to rank their impressions of the importance of the concepts discussed (Table 2).

[insert Table 2 here]

The data in Table 3 shows that all managers placed high importance on the concept of autonomy/independence. However, there was much more variety in the managers'

perceptions of the importance of autonomy/independence to their departments and institutions. Generally, they think their institutions and departments place a lower level of importance on it. For example, Manager 6 said about institutional perceptions, "One of the problems is quite a lot of the people perhaps don't have a very good understanding of how learners learn autonomously". This is noteworthy because all of these institutions invest considerable resources in the development and maintenance of SACs and because the departments host the SACs, allocating staff to work in them and encouraging students to use them.

[insert Table 3 here]

To gain more in-depth insights we asked the managers to describe in the questionnaire what they believe is important for the development of learner autonomy and/or SALL. We then investigated these comments further during the interviews. We specifically chose not to present managers with a tick list which might have influenced their responses because we wanted to discover what was uppermost in their minds as an indication of immediate importance to them. Data from both the questionnaires and interviews was then summarised to produce the overview of managers' beliefs shown in Table 4.

[insert Table 4 here]

According to the literature all of the items in Table 4 are of importance to the concepts of autonomy and SALL. However, it is clear from the data that what was uppermost in most managers' minds was teacher involvement in SALL and flexibility/freedom of student

learning which were consistently mentioned. This suggests that these two items are more important to SALL managers.

4.3 Theme 3: Factors Influencing the Managers' Beliefs

The importance of theme 4 is that it looks in more detail at the specific beliefs of the managers in relation to managing self-access learning (SALL).

We gave the participants a list of factors and asked them to indicate which ones had influenced their beliefs and how. Table 5 shows the extent to which these factors influenced the managers. The data suggests that every manager is familiar with the literature, has interacted with relevant other people, has experimented with SALL (activities and materials), and has responded to users' needs and wants. It is perhaps not surprising that the managers have been influenced by the literature and other people (items b and c) because they are all members of the local interest group for self-access learning (HASALD: the Hong Kong Association for Self-access Learning and Development), regularly attend focused conferences and seminars and share ideas amongst each other. It is also not surprising that the managers are influenced by the ongoing needs of students (items d and e) because the managers are also language teachers who are trained to respond to student needs and try innovative solutions.

[insert Table 5 here]

Three of the factors in Table 5 had a less common influence on the managers. The influence of institutional practice was not felt by all managers but for different reasons. For example:

> M1 [interview]: I think we [the department] are very very autonomous, we are very very independent… in terms of staffing, in terms of how resources are allocated, there is almost zero interference. And so, …institutional practice doesn't constrain us.

> M3[questionnaire]: "I think it's more the other way around. I believe… that we have led in this area ourselves."

From their responses it was apparent that all managers were aware of curriculum initiatives at secondary level as well as curriculum developments within their own institutions but not all of them felt that these initiatives had a direct influence on their beliefs although most commented on the practical effects that such initiatives produced.

Although not commenting specifically on the influence of the status of English in Hong Kong on their beliefs, two managers saw a connection between the provision of SALL and the importance of English in the wider context of Hong Kong society (where it has the status of a second official language, is acknowledged as of importance in the job market, has preferential status in most legal contracts, is attractive as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, plays a central role in tertiary education, and has an acknowledged role as a lingua franca in the world of trade). For example:

> M2 [questionnaire]: This is probably the hidden agenda behind why most teachers and students find English so important, and this is why we are trying so hard to provide SALL to students, to help them learn English and better prepare them for the workplace where English is so often used.

Most managers, on the other hand, saw no connection. For example

> M5 [questionnaire]: the local status of English is mostly uncontested, therefore irrelevant.

4.4 Theme 4: The Purpose of the Self-Access Centre

It is common for all units within tertiary institutions to have clearly written mission statements which they communicate to their stakeholders. To investigate this theme we asked managers whether there was such a mission statement (which we refer to as the rationale to distinguish it from any over-arching institutional or departmental mission statement) for their SAC, how that rationale is communicated to the users (Table 6), any specific reasons the SAC was established (Table 7) and the characteristics of learner autonomy, as present in the literature, which influenced the development of their SAC's rationale (Table 8).

[insert Table 6 here]

As can be seen from Table 6 only three of the SACs have a clear rationale that is available to users. In the other four SACs the rationale either does not exist, for example:

> M2 [interview]: I don't even know if…our boss knows what exactly he wants by setting up this [SAC]. It was set up [by] the previous SALL coordinator…and I was her assistant and I don't know what the rationale was for setting it up either.

or it is not easily accessible to users, for example:

> M1[interview]: [talking about the rationale] where is it? I know we've got one somewhere, but I can't find it.

> M7 [interview]: The rationale that we have is accessible to the users but it's not… clearly displayed on the wall. But it is there. If you go into the centre there are leaflets which say this is the rationale. But in terms of whether or not the students actually understand what the rationale is, I think we could probably do a better job of promoting that.

This suggests that in some cases at least the rationale was either not the driving force for establishing a SAC or, perhaps, that with changes in staff the original rationale has become less important.

In giving specific reasons for the establishment of their SAC, some managers gave detailed lists of reasons, others only mentioned helping students with English. This may indicate varying levels of awareness about the rationale which might be related to the amount of time individual managers have been involved with SAC management. The reasons managers gave fall into three main categories as shown in Table 7.

[insert Table 7 here]

In asking the managers about the characteristics of learner autonomy which have had an influence on the development of their SAC's rationale, a list was provided which summarised into four main categories the characteristics mentioned in the literature. The categories are: 1) Personal characteristics: learner autonomy is not only the freedom to learn, but the opportunity to become a person; 2) Political concept: learner autonomy is the recognition that learners have rights within the educational systems; 3) Educational necessity: learner autonomy has to be a recognized goal in all educational contexts; 4) Other non-philosophical reasons: eg: needs-driven; funding-driven; prestige-driven; inter-institutional competition. Managers were asked to respond in relation to the existing rationale of the SAC not to their own personal views of autonomy. It is apparent from Table 8 that there is general agreement about three of the characteristics whereas the learner autonomy as a political concept has been less widely influential.

[insert Table 8 here]

4.5 Theme 5: Factors Influencing the Facilitation of SALL

We asked the managers to indicate which of the following groups had influenced the implementation of SALL in their institution:

1. The institution itself
2. Colleagues
3. Students

We also asked them to indicate whether influences from these groups had made implementation of SALL easier or more difficult.

A striking feature of managers' responses is that all three groups were highly influential in the implementation of SALL in the institutions. Colleagues and students were seen as influential in every institution; and the influence of the institution itself was also felt in the majority of cases (Table 9). Despite consistency in the managers' perceptions of the influence of these factors, there is less consistency in their perceptions of whether the influences were positive, negative or, in some cases, both.

[insert Table 9 here]

The lack of consistency between managers in describing influences from these groups may have been shaped by: the extent of their individual experience as managers; the lack of data on which to base their perceptions due to a dearth of studies about the factors influencing implementation of SALL; and, perhaps, no previous experience of being asked to think about

these issues. As a result the managers may have needed to rely on memory and may also have been influenced by recent events within their institutions.

The variability of institutional influence (Table 9) is, perhaps, not surprising as institutions have to balance many demands on resources. One reason for this is changes in levels of funding. The most obvious example of this in Hong Kong is the contrast between the early 1990s when all tertiary institutions received substantial funding to establish SACs and then later years when some institutions maintained a high level of funding whereas others diverted some of the funding to other projects. A second reason may have been the impact of the institutions' large-scale introduction of technology which has been utilised to extend self-access learning more effectively in some cases than others. A third possible reason is varying priorities within the mission of different universities. Some SALL managers perceive institutional senior managers as more supportive of fostering autonomous learning than others.

> M4 [interview]: [talking about the influence of institutional culture] Easier, easier. People are more aware of the importance of being trilingual: Putonghua, Cantonese and English.

> M6 [interview]: …[institutional practice is] the art of the possible. … from the early nineties until the early two thousands there was plenty of support for trying things out. So we did try things out.

> M6 [questionnaire]: Desire of bureaucrats to control knowledge makes for difficulties.

> M7 [questionnaire]: The institutional culture is supportive.

One of the most variable influences on the implementation of autonomous learning and SALL perceived by managers is that of their colleagues (Table 9). All managers reported

some influence from colleagues. One manager felt all influence from colleagues was negative while five others gave a more complicated picture of influences which made implementation sometimes easier and sometimes more difficult. This is not surprising given the large number of language teaching staff employed in the institutions with wide variability in terms of training; culture; teaching and learning experience; and, perhaps, personal beliefs and values.

> M1 [questionnaire]: We have a group of staff who teach… in the SAC and this group tends to be more supportive as a result of their involvement.

> M5 [interview]: I had a very close relationship with [previous SAC Manager] so he inspired me a lot, taught me a lot.

In managers' perceptions, students always have an influence on the implementation of SALL but the influence varies among the institutions in terms of whether it is positive or negative (Table 9). This variation may relate to the extent to which managers are willing to adapt the model to meet the wants and needs of the users. In particular, managers comment on the struggle to involve students in the learning process:

> M3 [interview]: …they're focused on the results rather than on the process of learning [which makes it harder] to instil the skills required for independent learning. To make them step back and think about… "What are your needs?" To go through that process.

> M7 [interview]: the local culture in terms of requiring quite structured learning that has been something that has impacted on the Self-access Centre…. Generally… our students… want something timetabled

5. Conclusion

The research reported on here has not been an attempt to map the management of SALL to theories of management offered in the literature and briefly summarised earlier in this paper although the data does offer hints of both management and leadership in SALL; and most particularly there are signs of a coexistence of managerialism (systems, monitoring and controls) and professionalism (pedagogy, standards and staff autonomy) despite suggestions in the literature that these are contrary positions. It seems likely in general that the management of SALL although not immune to the ongoing debates will, because of its position within middle management, conform largely to whichever form of educational management is preferred within the institution in which it is situated.

The outcome of this study is to demonstrate that the SALL managers in seven tertiary institutions in Hong Kong have multifarious roles which vary from one institution to another and within which managers manage in unique ways. However, it is also clear from the data that there are certain principles which are essential to good practice in the SALL management role. We identify below some of these principles for effective SALL management, summarise how they have been implemented in practice as shown in the data and comment on their importance.

Principle 1: Clarify working definitions

Practice: The managers largely agreed on definitions of self-access, learner independence and the connection with learner autonomy. This suggests they are well aligned with the literature and each other.

Importance: Clear working definitions, and the clear communication of them, are important to ensure effective management.

Principle 2: Be aware of beliefs about SALL (own and others')

Practice: The managers in this study held strong beliefs about the importance of commonly accepted characteristics of learner autonomy and SALL although a smaller sub-set of beliefs appear to dominate their thinking.

Importance: Managers need to beware of operating from too limited a set of beliefs. They also need to be aware of colleagues' beliefs about SALL and how these might influence its implementation and development.

Principle 3: Be well informed from a range of sources

Practice: Managers were influenced by a range of sources but more by those within the field, such as the literature and other practitioners, than by other sources such as their home institution, the curriculum or society.

Importance: The sources from which managers inform themselves should be diverse to ensure a balanced view. They should include academic/professional sources such as literature and knowledgeable colleagues but should also include sources of practical information like institutional and cultural beliefs/practices; and the beliefs of colleagues.

Principle 4: Tailor the rationale (mission statement) to the needs of stakeholders and make it accessible

Practice: There is some variation in the degree of detail of rationales for SACs and SALL and in the degree to which characteristics of learner autonomy are made explicit and relevant. In some cases rationales were less accessible However, all managers acknowledged the importance of clear easily accessible rationales.

Importance: Clear, user-tailored, accessible rationales inform users and set standards for performance.

Principle 5: Understand the competing factors influencing facilitation of SALL

Practice: There was a large amount of variation in the degree to which the facilitation of SALL in the different institutions were influenced by competing factors and the approaches managers had to dealing with them. Overall an appropriate balance was achieved.

Importance: In reality the institution, the students and colleagues are all stakeholders and their views have to be understood. It is important for SALL managers to be able to balance the competing factors in a way which benefits the learners.

The five principles stated above emerged from an analysis of the practice of seven experienced SALL managers operating within institutional contexts which have a long history and well documented commitment to SALL. Once established, principles should inform future practice. Where they do not, practice becomes less effective. The principles stated here demonstrate good practice in informed management of SALL. Although this paper reports on the SAC managers' in Hong Kong, we believe that these findings and the principles that have emerged are of use in any context where decisions about the implementation of self-access learning are made.

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Table 1: Managers' Agreement with Definitions

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Definition of Self-access	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	½	✓
Definition of Independent Learning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	½

Table 2: Ranking of Key Words Used in Describing the Importance of Autonomy/Independence

Ranking	Category	Key Words Used by Managers
5	Very high	fundamental, vital, fully support, very important, extremely
4	High	support
3	Medium	recognized, theoretical support only, important to some/a few
2	Low	superficial
1	Very low	not important, not much action
0	Don't know	[Not used]
?	response unclear	[No relevant key words used]

Table 3: Managers' Expressions of the Importance of Autonomy/ Independence

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Importance to manager	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Importance to department	3	3	5	?	3	2	5
Importance to institution	3	2	5	?	3	3	4

(See Table 2 for Ranking)

Table 4: What Managers Believe is Important for the Development of Learner Autonomy and/or SALL

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Motivation			✓			✓	
Skills development		✓	✓				
Strategies development	✓	✓					
Teacher guidance/support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Individualization/tailoring	✓	✓					
Integration into courses		✓				✓	
Flexibility/freedom/learners' right	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Learner control/choice		✓				✓	✓

Table 5: Factors Influencing Managers' Beliefs about SALL Management

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
a) Institutional practice	×	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	×
b) The literature	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
c) Particular people (in person or in writing)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
d) Trial and error	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
e) Student needs/wants/demands	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
f) Curriculum initiatives in Hong Kong (secondary and/or tertiary)	✓	×	×	✓	✓	×	✓
g) The status of English in Hong Kong (past, present, future)	×	✓	×	✓	×	×	×

Table 6: Existence of a Rationale for the SAC

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
There is a clearly written rationale for the SAC	✓	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓
The rationale is accessible to all the users	×	×	×	✓	✓	✓	×

Table 7: Specific Reasons for Establishing the SACs

Category	**Reasons**
1. General English improvement	• to improve students' English • to motivate students who want to improve their English
2. Autonomy related	• to provide more learner-centred education and life-long learning • to promote a degree of learner autonomy
3. Practical implementation	• to integrate SALL into some courses (a supportive role) • to serve as a student resource

Table 8: Characteristics of Learner Autonomy Relevant to the Rationale

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
a) Personal characteristics	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓
b) Political concept	✓	×	✓	×	✓	×	✓
c) Educational necessity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
d) Other non-philosophical reasons	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 9: Groups Influencing the Implementation of SALL within the Institution

		Institution	Colleagues	Students
M1	*-influence*	×	✓	✓
	-effect	no comment	↑↓	↓
M2	*-influence*	✓	✓	✓
	-effect	↑↓	↓	↓
M3	*-influence*	✓	✓	✓
	-effect	↑	↑↓	↓
M4	*-influence*	✓	✓	✓
	-effect	↑	no comment	no comment
M5	*-influence*	✓	✓	✓
	-effect	↓	↑↓	↑
M6	*-influence*	✓	✓	✓
	-effect	↑↓	↑↓	↑↓
M7	*-influence*	✓	✓	✓
	-effect	↑	↑↓	↑

Key: ✓ = influence, × = no influence, ↑ = easier, ↓ = more difficult, ↑↓ = sometimes easier, sometimes more difficult