EVALUATING A SELF-ACCESS CENTRE’S EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY

A thesis presented
by
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To
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
November 2014
Abstract

Self-access centres (SACs) have been established in most of the eight public universities in Hong Kong since the mid-1990s and have evolved in the services they offer, which include; institutional support, language advisory service, workshops, language learning activities and online resources. To date, top management is narrowly defining the success of these programmes by using incomplete data that focuses on frequency of visits as a measure of the efficient use of resources (human resources and facilities). However, they seldom evaluate effectiveness as enhancement of learning nor is consideration given to what the end user (students) and service provider (human and non-human support) deem as effective. Morrison (2011) provides two reasons for developing a framework for evaluation of SALL which is used in this research. Firstly, it is central to the development of SALL as much literature mentions SACs and their future development. Secondly, to demonstrable accountability from a more summative perspective that funding bodies often require. This paper presents a case study that examines the effectiveness and efficiency of a self-access centre within a university in Hong Kong. This study addresses the problem by collecting data from learners, tutors and management in order to have a holistic view of the effectiveness of the support services. The outcome of the study showed that a wider perspective for senior managers and insights for evaluation of the support services is vital to making key decisions in context.

Keywords: effectiveness, evaluation, human support system, learner autonomy, Self-access centre, Self-access language learning.
Acknowledgements

Although I accept full responsibility for any shortcomings in this thesis, its completion and, indeed, the completion of my doctoral program, is an achievement resulting from the support and assistance of so many.

Thank you to Dr. Kimberly Nolan, my adviser, who helped me focus and fine-tuned my initial thoughts, she was very patient and supportive especially during the most dismal of moments. To Dr. Joseph McNabb, who was my second reader and first professor in the Winter 2011 Higher Education Administration cohort. He introduced me to the world of scholarly research and writing and gave me the confidence to continue with the programme. Special thanks to Dr. Leslie Hitch and Dr. Kelly Conn who came out to Hong Kong for the residency week and continued to provide support and encouragement even when I was completing my thesis.

I happily and gratefully acknowledge four people who contributed to the professional path that led to this point. Ms. Fiona Williams, was my first boss (the longest one so far) who led me to the path of Self-access, making sure I was trained as a language adviser and gave me the challenge of running activities and managing the Self-access manager that changed my whole perspective on learning. Dr. David Gardner, the Associate Director and Mr. Peter Voller, the SAC coordinator, who assisted me and provided me information for my research as well as giving me the opportunity to serve in the Self-access team in my current position in the university. And the gratitude for Dr. Elaine Martyn, no words can describe, besides being my external examiner, she was my professor when I did my Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics in
HKU, a decade ago. She is now my colleague, mentor, confidant and friend.

I have been fortunate to have a cadre of supportive classmates through this process, our first cohort of Hong Kong’s Doctors of Education: Holly Chung, Rebecca Ong, Forrest Chan, Edith Leung, David Best, Benz Choklap and last but not least Luis Miguel Dos Santos, who is the only one left in the Higher Education Administration specialism with me. Their support and friendship through our WhatsApp group “NEU Survivors” made it all possible. Of course, I have to thank my family, especially my husband Choy Choong Yew, children Sarika and Gregory who had to bear with me for the past three years. It was not easy working full time and completing a degree, I could not have done this without the support of my family. This is an amazing experience and I would encourage more colleagues to go for it.
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<tr>
<td>CAES</td>
<td>Centre for Applied English Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEDARS</td>
<td>Centre of Development and Resources for Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>CoP</td>
<td>Community of Practice</td>
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<td>ELL</td>
<td>English Language Learners</td>
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<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language Learners</td>
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<td>ELT</td>
<td>English Language Teaching</td>
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<td>HKU</td>
<td>University of Hong Kong</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRB</td>
<td>Institutional Review Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>First Language or mother tongue</td>
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<td>L2</td>
<td>Second Language</td>
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<td>MM</td>
<td>Mixed Method Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>QL</td>
<td>Qualitative Studies</td>
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<td>QT</td>
<td>Quantitative Studies</td>
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<td>SAC</td>
<td>Self-access Centre</td>
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<td>SALL</td>
<td>Self-access Language Learning</td>
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<td>SDL</td>
<td>Self-directed Learning</td>
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<td>UGC</td>
<td>University Grants Committee</td>
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<td>Virtual English</td>
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Chapter One: Introduction

In higher education institutions globally, Self-access language learning (SALL) is a growing trend and of paramount importance as a complement or alternative to more established modes of English language learning and teaching especially in the area of English as a second language (ESL). Self-access Centres (SACs) have been established in most of the eight public universities in Hong Kong since the mid-1990s and have evolved drastically in the services they offer, which include; institutional support, language advisory service, workshops, language learning activities and online resources in the past two decades. Currently, it remains unclear whether students are benefitting from the out-of-class English support. This uncertainty is because some students are using SAC services only because it is a part of their coursework requirement as some courses have an independent learning component, while others are using it as part of their own self-directed learning.

As university managers hone their abilities to be “transformational” leaders, they consistently require reports and data that are summative in nature for decision-making. In particular university management is interested in data that speaks to the effectiveness of the Self-access Centre (SAC). There has not yet been a formal assessment of learning in the centre carried out holistically that is, from users and tutors perspectives as well.

Significance of the Research Problem

To date, managers are narrowly defining the success of these programs by using incomplete data that focuses on frequency of visits as a measure of the efficient use of resources (human resources and facilities). However, university management seldom evaluate effectiveness from other stakeholders’ (tutors’ and students’) perspective, which affects decision-
making in the centre. In view of the recent education reforms, the university has tighter budgets whereas as services expanding SAC’s may require more funding therefore evaluations tend to focus on administrative measures of accountability. Thus human and non-human resources are often compromised to put more emphasis and resources in programs run by the Centre for Applied English Studies rather than English support initiatives.

**Research Question(s)**

The purpose of this case study is to explore the process by which university management evaluate a self-access centre’s (SACs) effectiveness and efficiency in a university in Hong Kong and to describe how students and tutors experience these centres.

Central question: What processes should be employed by stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of a university’s Self-access centre?

Sub-question #1: How do students and tutors experience the centre?

Sub-question #2: What additional learning experiences do students and tutor imagine would further facilitate students’ self-efficacy for becoming independent learners?

**Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this research is to explore the process by which university management evaluate a Self-access centre’s (SACs) effectiveness and efficiency in a university in Hong Kong and to describe how students and tutors experience these centres. In order to better understand how SAC’s support student learning and the choice made by students to achieve self-efficacy in
English, while in the higher education context is mostly accountability-driven, the theoretical framework chosen comprises of activities in context coupled with formative assessment and mapping to make key decisions. Therefore a conceptual framework proposed by Morrison (2011) for the evaluation of self-access language learning is used as a lens to explore the problem of practice.

Origins and Evolution

In English Language Teaching (ELT) with the rise of the Communicative approach in the 1980s there was a paradigm shift from focus on teaching to a more learner-centred approach (Nunan, 1988 & 1997; Oxford, 1990; Benson & Voller, 1997). Therefore there was a need to establish self-access centres (SACs) to support core English programmes and four such centres sprouted in late 1990s in four universities in Hong Kong (the one in HKU started early 1990s). In the same decade “buzz-words” in ELT (Little, 1991: 2) such as; learner autonomy, self-directed learning (SDL), learner independence and self-access was interchangeably used in addition to self-study, self-regulated learning even distance learning that came under the umbrella term self-managed learning. The way that self-access is not synonymous to the rest which focus on learning without a teacher, is that although the ultimate goal may be to encourage the development of learner independence, scaffolding and providing much pedagogical support is essential. Even though the first SACs were well equipped technologically and audio-visually with generous funding and a large range of materials, there are exceptions such as a box of learning materials in the corner of a classroom could be sufficient. Especially now with much ELT materials are online “a centre with a set of language learning facilities and resources (both human and non-human) which provide opportunities for the development and exercise of
independent learning skills” (Morrison 2003), can be referred to as an SAC. Indeed there is an assumption that self-access language learning (SALL) may naturally nurture autonomy among learners but may not be the case (Benson & Voller, 1997; Benson, 2002; Morrison, 2002). The history of self-access language learning has taken root from a resource-based learning approach and technological approach, so both points of view are valid. Benson (2001; p.113) explains that resource-based refers to “the learner’s interaction with learning resources” be they textual (paper or screen), human interactional (teacher, face-to-face or virtual, non-teacher), aural (real-time or recorded). In 1950s and 1960s the development of the language laboratories (Reinders, 2000a; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Kershaw, 1993) can be used to trace the technological roots of SALL. Although the language laboratories allowed individualization in the 1970s, these evolved into development of the “learning resource centres” or “multi-media learning centres” in various institutions that cater for the whole class and traces of the modern-day SAC can be seen.

The term SALL refers to learner’s individual and unique interaction with the various elements of the self-access language learning environment (Gardner & Miller, 1999). This narrows down the term to the learner’s interaction with situated facilities (of whatever type and level of technology) that have been designed with that purpose in mind. At least learners under the guidance of the teacher, take more control of their own learning (Gardner & Miller, 1997) irrespective of whether learners develop the skills and become independent, autonomous or self-directed learners, indeed they are encouraged to do so. Morrison’s study (2003) uses the wide definition of SALL (above) that focuses on the learning process as well as the learning context.

The four centres (now seven) in Hong Kong universities that sprang up in 1990s received generous funding when they were first set up with a wide range of audio-visual equipment and
large collections of materials. Like any educational programme evaluation is important, particularly so for SACs as it is largely unresearched and is a non-traditional approach to language education (Gardner, 1999). Additionally, evaluation has taken a “backseat in the development of SALL” (Gardner, 2002, p.48) and has not been conducted in a systematic manner (Morrison, 2011).

Theory

Morrison (2011) argues there are “two main reasons an informed framework for the evaluation of SACs is needed” (p. 243). Firstly, in any language learning programme evaluation is acentral to its development (e.g. Lynch, 1996) and the role of self-access is implicit in much literature merely describing SACs and their future development based on description rather than more concrete information (Gardner & Miller, 1997; Lee, 1996; Ma, 1994). Secondly, funding bodies often require demonstrable accountability from a more summative perspective rather than simple checks and balances from budget-focused accounting (Morrison, 2011). Thus, on the basis of both reasons, Morrison’s PhD developmental framework (2003) for the evaluation of a self-access language learning centre is used in this study.

Another framework proposed by Tassinari (2010), a dynamic model for evaluating learner autonomy involves a self-assessment of learner’s competencies, attitudes and behaviours in the learning process. There was positive feedback and her model has been validated with experts in France and Berlin, tested by students, advisers and teachers. However, learners’ own reflections may not convince administrators and management. Moreover, there is doubt whether learners understood some of the descriptors such as “I can evaluate my own language competencies”. Ultimately, the dynamic model is a tool for learners to foster awareness,
reflection and decision-making for further learning. Although both Tassinari (2012) and Morrison (2003) used grounded theory and are heads of SACs wanting to come up with a tangible strategy for evaluation, Tassinari’s focus is on language advising and not the centre has a whole.

A quantitative measure of learner autonomy was proposed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010) using a questionnaire with 14 items of the Autonomous Learning Scale. There were positive results when two different samples of students were measured with little cultural diversity, the first group being psychology students and the second in business, law and other disciplines. This study aimed to develop a brief, psychometrically sound measure of autonomous learning. Like the dynamic model the focus is on the students and their self-assessment, for example “my time management is good”. The findings provide information on students’ motivation and interest in autonomous learning, which is not completely relevant to this study. However, Macaskill and Taylor’s study (2010) does bring to light the need for some kind of measure of learner autonomy in higher education, more importantly it has to be brief. As there are constant environmental changes, quick decisions need to be made by SAC managers.

Though Morrison’s framework has not been tested (Morrison, 2013 personal communication), the four key elements illustrated in Figure 1.1 are:

- **Context** shown at the top that directly affects the key questions.
- **Decisions** those that need to be made at various stages of the evaluation process
- **Actions** with four boxes (mapping, planning, evaluating and meta evaluation plan), which propose the evaluation process.
Key questions on the left focus on why, what and how, and are entirely context dependent, that is, based on what is being evaluated.

The evaluation framework might be said to simply reflect different aspects of existing, recognized evaluation practice. This is examined in terms of: what is to be evaluated; and how it is to be evaluated. In terms of what is to be evaluated; the complexity and uniqueness of self-
access systems makes it difficult to evaluate (Gardner, 1999). It cannot be evaluated as a homogeneous course nor is there a certain model that makes SACs similar. Gardner and Miller (1997) attempted to study five SACs in Hong Kong by examining the perceptions of SAC users, tutors and managers but each SAC serves individual learners in various ways catering to their learning style, goals, needs and expectations. However, this framework was first developed in 2005, so technological context may have played a minimal role and the author also questions its relevance today (Morrison 2011).

The model was developed for one particular SAC but in theory is generative enough to be applied to other self-access language learning contexts and sufficiently dynamic to cope with the ongoing changes within the field. To apply the framework context determines the three key questions (why, what and how) significantly which has an indirect effect on the two decisions (the mapping) and actions element. Moreover, Morrison (personal communication 2013)
commented that his framework’s section on evaluation process was based on another study, ‘plan, evaluation and meta-evaluation’ (see Figure 1.3) could be simplified in practice. The metaphor of mapping was chosen by Morrison (2002) as a more positivistic research framework that was necessary instead of qualitative, naturalistic study where outcomes are not easy to identify or measure. Mapping assists planners to identify the elements that are components of the centre to be evaluated, the list is not exhaustive (see Figure 1.4). The learner may not simply be a component rather it is what the whole operation supports. Some of these components are inseparable, for example, resources and environment are all part of the non-human support system which will be discussed in the findings and discussion in Chapters Four and Five.

In terms of context, to illustrate this, currently evaluation is based on data submitted to management in the annual report. Therefore, efficiency may be viewed from the perspective of the number of students that visit the SAC for one-to-one consultation each hour. Because students are given twenty minutes for each time slot, if there are three visits then it is considered optimum. Context does not have to be the physical space only, various contexts such as; students’ perception or satisfaction, online resources, especially current learning spaces include; virtual space such as Virtual English (VE) and other out-of-class activities that students do on their own initiative need to be evaluated for further development of the services that are provided. As to how this is to be evaluated; it seems that a multi-dimensional approach is required because of the inherent complexity is appropriate. Morrison (2002) suggests a responsive approach, as SACs do not have fixed set of activities or a syllabus unlike a language programme. There should not be a pre-determined evaluation design as there needs to be some degree of subjectivity and is partially qualitative. Also given the individualist approach of such centres to evaluate the efficiency of it operations may be deemed unwise. Rather it would be
Figure 1.4 Hong Kong SAC Mapping (Source: A Framework for the evaluation of a SAC (Morrison, 2003)).
more appropriate to focus on the developmental aspects that is, acceptance of the evaluation outcomes as stimuli for further development (Morrison, 2002). Morrison’s developmental framework (2003) for the evaluation of a self-access language learning centre is applied, even though the SAC in his study may offer different services, the close proximity in which centres in the Hong Kong context are evaluated is worth exploring and appropriate for this case study.

**Organization and Contents of the Study**

This thesis presents the problem under study, its significance in the field of Self-access language learning (SALL) especially for second language learners. A theoretical framework: A Framework for the Evaluation of a Self-Access Language Learning Centre (Morrison, 2003) is chosen to serve as a lens through which to view the problem of practice. The review of literature (Chapter Two) on both access and impacts of remediation, a Self-access centre’s best practice and effectiveness will be drawn on to show the gap that exists in formal assessment of such learner support programmes. The various considerations made in designing the proposal for the protection of human subjects in practical aspects of the research can be seen in Chapter Three. Last but not least, the interpretation of the study’s findings and discussions of how informed data analysis could become alternative ways to go about mapping, a proposed revised evaluation framework and documentation relevant to the study is provided in Chapters Four and Five.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Self-access Centres (SACs) have been established in most of the eight public universities in Hong Kong since the mid-1990s and have evolved considerably in the services they offer such as institutional support and online resources in the past two decades. Currently, it remains
unclear whether students are benefitting from the out-of-class English support and whether some students go to the SAC only because it is a part of coursework requirement and not self-motivation. In other words, are the services and activities able to truly engage these students in meaningful learning processes, if so, how? If not, how worthwhile, and sustainable, are such programs baring a proper evaluation of the startup plan for alternatives and enhancement of student learning?

Because of the evolving and transformative nature of self-access language learning (SALL) in the last ten years, there is relatively little research of relevance prior to the year 2000. Therefore, for the purposes of this study the literature review include studies mostly conducted within the last decade. While the common focus of these studies is the impact of self-directed learning programs in transforming classroom environments, the research sites vary from college to the university level including in-service teachers, domestic to international and large to small sample sizes. By investigating a variety of research studies and approaches, it is hoped that this researcher will acquire a better understanding of current theory and gaps in self-access language learning (SALL) and be better prepared to appropriately integrate this knowledge into her proposed research study of the evaluation of an independent learning environment.

Overview

for self-directed learning (SDL) and self-regulated learning (SRL) similar to learner autonomy, were excluded as both are regarded as the ultimate goal of SALL, so that students would become independent and life-long learners in accordance with the university’s mission. Gardner and Miller (1997) refer to a self-access centre as a pedagogical system that is designed to allow learners direct access to learning resources that is in a “dedicated facility in which users can study independently with varying degrees of guidance” (Gardner & Miller, 1997: xvii). If learner autonomy and self-directed (or regulated) learning were included in the research the number of publications would also have increased massively. Moreover, the focus would go off in another tangent as they apply more to adult learners and may not require resources in the SAC as well as tutor support.

Following the lead of key players in the field of self-access language learning such as Gardner and Miller (1994, 1997, 2010, 2011), Morrison (2005, 2008), Reinders (2000, 2007), Riley (1996), Sheerin (1997) and Sturtridge (1997), many new personalities are emerging in the field of self-access language learning. This is appropriate considering the emergent nature of the topic itself. Three main bodies of work are included in this review. The first two include studies which focus on external factors: 1) studies that focus on the learning environment that supports independent learning, 2) relationships with tutors, language advisers and parents that are conducive to learning effectively. The third body of work focuses on intrinsic motivation in SALL which covers metacognitive, cognitive, social strategies and last but not least the ideal L2 self (Dornyei 2009). There may be some studies that overlap in these three bodies of research; however, reviewing the literature helps the researcher understand the issues associated with self-access language learning and would support the research questions that appear at the conclusion of this chapter.
Learning Environment

Several studies have been done in Hong Kong that cover aspects of the changes in SALL over the last 15 years. According to Gardner and Miller (2010), these alterations include; materials being paper-based to soft copy and easily accessible resources; the role of the self-access manager from managing a physical space to managing the virtual learning environment. Additionally, the increased number of tutors that organize workshops, out-of-class activities and writing support in recent years has expanded the manager’s role. More recently in SAC’s the “physical boundaries have been blurred” (Gardner, 2011 p.186) not only because of the development of technology but also self-access learning has been integrated into taught courses. In fact it is only in this study where the complexity of the SAC manager’s role is discussed, especially the role of reporting to senior managers who have much control over the existence of an SAC and its funding (Gardner, 2011). Three ways suggested by the author to measure effectiveness of SACs are to run regular user surveys, secondly to measure learning gain and finally to have a longitudinal study say after 10 years to determine whether they are still independent learners. With the advancement of technology, self-access centres and out-of-class learning methods are changing as noticed in self-access centres in Hong Kong from hard copies of resources such as learning pathways and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs to numerous online web links of ready-made English as a Second Language (ESL) materials (Gardner & Miller, 2010).

In the United States there is also a trend in the growing population of ESL. According to a literature review of 50 peer-reviewed journals by Barr, Eslami and Joshi (2012) English language learners (ELL or ESL) Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islanders in the United States is an increasing population. With reference to the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment
ELLs are unable to meet the standard on the state English reading assessment and the percentage that met the standard was 59% at grade 5 and dropped to 42% at grade 9 another 2% drop by the exit level (graduation). The researchers suggest that teachers acquire and implement effective strategies for ELLs to gain greater reading skills, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension as well as to encourage independent learning, in order to for ELLs to master English and become lifelong learners. The question then arises whether learners are at the same level and if class time is sufficient to do such things. In another study, Cruickshank, Newell and Cole (2003) observed over one hundred ESL teachers that were trained in Australia and found that self-directed learning was a very effective strategy in English language support but was not administered properly in the teacher training programme. The reason being learners’ needs and learning style had to be addressed in the initial stages in order for them to have an effective study plan. Effective strategies include support systems and whether students acquire transferable skills (Barr, et.al, 2012, Cruickshank, et.al, 2003).

Morrison (2011) acknowledges that the world of self-access language learning has been revolutionized, especially many aspects of pedagogy and learning have been transformed under the technological context. In terms of self-directed learning, several studies have also found that provision and effectiveness of student support in higher education will result in self-efficacy and learning gain. In Wichadee (2011) and Chu and Tsai (2009) both studies about reading resulted in positive effects on learners’ self-directed learning (SDL) ability. In Wichadee’s study of ESL learners in Bangkok, the author suggests that grouping students according to their learning style and needs could significantly improve SDL, while Chu and Tsai’s study on adult education in Taiwan notes that Internet self-efficacy could strengthen Internet-based learning environments. Although Dhillon, McGowan and Wang (2008) found that learners who take up the support and
guidance services in higher education in the United Kingdom there is a high take-up and positive experiences of departmental support but low awareness and less take-up of institutional support services. They recommend three ways to become more effective, that is; 1) consistent and equitable support as more final year students are aware of the services 2) quality of support may be the lack of tutor training and 3) allocating less tutees to personal tutors and providing consistent support throughout students’ university life. The increased awareness of and need to replace disjointed support with a comprehensive and cohesive system of learning support and a learning environment which provides social spaces for staff and students to mix informally outside of classroom time is an interesting point to be noted in the environment of SACs.

On the other hand, these changes increase the complexity of measuring the effectiveness of SALL as it is not clear whether students are making use of the resources as part of the development process to become independent learners or simply to fulfill coursework requirements. Moreover, learners may not need to be physically present in the SACs since much guidance is available online. Unless every click into a Virtual English (VE) website, like the one in HKU, is counted and a survey of the most popular virtual resources that students use is monitored, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of non-physical SALL activity. It appears that improvement and types of services offered in SACs over the last two decades have gone through significant changes but the evaluation method used by senior managers, that is, depending on the annual report by the SAC manager has remained unchanged.

**Tutor or Adviser Practices and Relationships**

In this section literature reviewed covers relationships with tutors, language advisers, peers and parents that have been conducive to students learning effectively. Researchers seem to be pulled into all directions of out-of-class learning and teaching, as well as a wide variety of
support initiatives, Mozzon-McPherson (2000) introduces the rise of a new profession “the language learning adviser” or “language counsellor” and identified specific strategies used in self-access centres to encourage independent learning. A similar study focuses on language advisers who create specific learning spaces and their roles in relation to the development of successful learner self-management (Mozzon-McPherson, 2007). With reference to feedback received from language advisers and students, advising sessions were known to have impacted on a change of learning behavior among language learners and more effective use of time and resources Mozzon-McPherson (2000). The author recommends that further research based on a longitudinal study should be carried out in order to better comprehend the effectiveness of language advising sessions, especially to map those learners who visit SACs once only. In her earlier study, Mozzon-McPherson (2000) refers to language advisers as counsellors as they able to help learners attitude adjust and overcome fear in learning a foreign language. Karlsson, Kjisik and Nordlund (2007) also acknowledged the importance of language counsellors in their study of the Autonomous Learning Modules that are alternative courses to English offered by Helsinki University in fulfilling foreign language study requirements for undergraduates. Though it seems like taking another course students are given much choice in goal setting, study plan, skills and activities that they join, emphasis is also placed on the social aspect of autonomous learning where learners collaborate with others and make use of their SAC. Language counsellors not only go through teacher training but are also encouraged to consider it as a developmental process of professional growth in becoming learners themselves as participants in dialogue looking for answers and carrying out action research at the same time. Other studies also covering language advising have found that with proper guidance and support learners are able to feel less anxiety (Huang, et al. 2010, Park, 2012). In a study of international
students acculturative stress in a large urban university in the northeastern part of the United States found that English language fluency was a significant predictor of such stress as many potential barriers are created by linguistic challenges (Yeh & Inose, 2003). The implication for counselling was to develop a less formal manner of such services, to help students in social connectedness by emphasis on group interdependence and counselors to help students not only focus on individual goals and needs but also to be aware the importance of learners being satisfied with existing social networks and feeling socially connected. Silen and Uhlin (2008) conducted a study based on problem-based learning and discovered that considering the complex nature of SDL, the importance both for the learners and teachers to take part in the learning process is crucial. On a similar topic Loyens and Magda (2008) found when SDL is compared to problem-based learning and how it relates to self-regulated learning it was noted that SDL encompasses self-regulated learning in problem based learning merely because SDL gives students a broader perspective on the selection and evaluation of learning materials, so both teachers and learners can use problem-based learning to bring forth self-directed learners. Therefore, language advising is more than just about English support, the role of the adviser cannot be undermined.

In an attempt to be more efficient some higher education institutions are seeking alternatives such as peer support or writing conferences with teaching assistants. English language learners’ anxiety was studied in relation to preference for peer or teacher support for a number of Taiwanese English-language learners (Huang, Eslami, & Hu, 2010). Even though peer academic, personal support and student comfort with English learning were positively correlated, it was concluded that learners were less anxious with more teacher support, thus English learning would be facilitated. Parental involvement in the autonomy development
process of 21,000 students in Southern State University of which two-thirds are undergraduate
students revealed that when the student-parent relationship is close there is a positive
development in students becoming autonomous learners (Cullaty 2011). These parents are able
to foster self-efficacy in students more evidently in decision-making for academic as well as
career choices.

This section highlights the relationships that cause learners to become more effective in
self-access language learning with parents’, peers’ and more importantly language advisers’
support. Parent-student relationship was also found to affect students’ confidence in intrinsic
motivation as will be discussed in the next section. Peer tutors or advisers not only need to be
aware of students’ background and learning style but also some kind of mechanism to evaluate
this sort of support and whether adequate training is provided to peer and language advisers’ or if
a forum available for them to discuss issues encountered in the frontier serving students would
be necessary.

**Learner Motivation and Perception**

The way that learners view the importance of learning English and understand their own
needs does have an influence on whether learners find SALL effective. Many studies that
mention the effectiveness of second language learning touch on extrinsic (earlier sections on the
learning environment and tutor or adviser relationships) and intrinsic motivation (Dornyei, 1994,
2009; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2009). Murray (2011) for instance sets the stage for research in the
metacognition and imagination of the L2 self and explores SALL as a means for learners
imaginative self in their targeted language communities, the support that helps them understand
themselves as a language learner as they expand their vision for the future (Murray 2011, p. 8).
Their mother tongue would be L1 and their ideal language such as English in our case study
would be L2. Some non-native speakers of English would like to become ‘native speaker’, for instance, some who study abroad and immerse themselves in the environment are not able to develop English levels expected by employers (Benzie, 2010). The author claims even though academic instruction is important, however, social inclusion both inside and outside the university is crucial and suggests finding opportunities for the international students in Australia to interact in an English language environment such as in volunteer work.

It can be argued that even with the best equipped SAC or most experienced language advisers, if learners do not have the attitude or feel that learning English is important they may not take-up any of the services. Navarro and Thornton (2011) investigated the interplay between ‘belief’ and ‘actions’ in the development of language skills in SDL. The longitudinal study found that only through learners’ action would researchers be able to gain insight into the true nature of learners’ beliefs. Figura and Jarvis’s (2007) study of non-native speakers of English enrolled in a summer course prior to university in the United Kingdom showed that participants had positive attitudes toward computer-based material in the SAC for learning in L2 but still used L1 frequently especially in social strategies rather than the target language, that is, English. On the other hand, Yamaguchi’s (2011) study showed that twenty four student staff members working at the SAC, once immersed in an English speaking environment with lots of opportunities, this did have an impact on their identities. This study concludes that learners involvement in SACs does not only benefit them but also for other users to provide opportunities to activate both autonomy and agency as these student staff members became examples from sociocultural and poststructuralist perspectives. In an interesting study to motivate faculty, a workshop was organised in which they learned how to communicate effectively with their ESL learners (Henderson 2009). The result was increased collaboration across departments, faculty
sought creative solutions when faced with challenges and the realisation that ESL students’ potential when given proper guidance to enhance learning. Similarly, there were challenges faced by vocational trainers in the Netherlands training learners effectively to become competent in the workplace in which autonomous identity is crucial (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011). Problems with implementation of new teaching methods, accountability and teachers’ perceptions were of concern. The authors recommended a design-based research to support teachers to make the concept work in daily practice.

From the literature reviewed in this section, we realise that both motivation of learners and teachers are essential in self-access language learning as well as students’ self-identity which would affect their attitude towards becoming competent English learners. To understand learners’ perceptions, as sociocultural issues and how they see themselves can help managers decide what kind of support will assist them in becoming independent learners and cause SALL to become more effective.

**Other evaluative measures**

Due to the rapid evolving nature of self-directed learning and technological innovations in its pedagogy and learning, tutors relinquish control of the learning to allow students to be more independent in the learning process. Tassinari (2012) has developed a *dynamic model of learner autonomy* which shows the interrelationships among components and/or the descriptors that are represented by hyper-textual links. This model shows “managing my own learning” on the top of the framework (visual presentation), then planning, completing tasks, evaluating with structuring knowledge, dealing with feelings and self-motivation as the foundation. But this model which may be more suitable for self-directed learners, does not cover the support that institutions provide in terms of resources, materials, peers and tutors.
Morrison’s (2011) framework was developed in 2005 and published again in 2011 but “context” in self-access centres is continuously changing. Both models are evaluative, Tassinari’s is evaluating learner autonomy while Morrison’s is evaluating the Self-access Centre. Owing to the complexity involved in the effectiveness of self-access language learning it is difficult to understand and these theoretical models hardly cover the tip of the iceberg.

A number of theories were identified in this review, two based on grounded theory (Cullaty, 2011; Morrison, 2008) but the most common is the constructivist and interpretivist approach. As Butin (2010) explains the world is not simply “out there” to be discovered but rather continuous and reshaped by particular individuals, cultures and groups involved. As a researcher, being part of the truth, it is necessary to examine the ongoing story and describe every group or culture that privileges the truth from their particular perspective. There is a need to thoroughly investigate the case rather than to adjudicate between competing truths in order to find the best answer (p. 60). It is evident that most studies in this literature review are phenomenological because they study a group of subjects that have some similarities, such as English as a second language learners, a group of Taiwan students in an ESL class, in-service ESL teachers in Australia or a group of students taking a particular course with a self-directed component. Other studies also cover the sociocultural aspects becoming competent while immersed in an environment (Benzie, 2010; Figura & Jarvis, 2007; Henderson, 2009, Yamaguchi 2011).

Methods and Instruments in Previous Studies

Researchers of self-access language learning environments approach their studies using a variety of methods and instruments. Reviewing the different methods and instruments applied to this topic, including an assessment of which methods and questions and methods seem most
fruitful or compelling will follow. It will be helpful at this point (see Table 2.1) to separate out which of the reviewed studies focused on support in terms of the learning environment, resources and the effectiveness of running Self-access centres. The next set of studies in the second column focus on the relationships that were investigated in the studies between the tutor and the learner, their peers and parents. Last column shows studies about learners’ motivation, especially on the perception of L2-self and meta-cognitive strategies. There was a near-even division of quantitative and mixed method approach to studies was about a handful but qualitative studies were much more (twenty two out of 30 studies about 73%). This representation of current methodological approaches to studying self-directed learning shows that the sensitivity of the topic and its nature may not be conducive to quantitative study. Indicated below is Qualitative (QL), Quantitative (QT) or Mixed Methods (MM) for studies that were explored in this literature review.

**Quantitative studies**

Several quantitative studies are driven by hypotheses. Wichadee (2011) examines a certain skill that is; reading in self-directed learning. Yeh and Inose (2003) focuses on the acculturative stress in relation to students’ proficiency, social network and the background of the international students. Chu and Tsai (2009) aim to establish a theoretical model to explain the use of constructivist Internet-based learning environments that influence adult learners’ preferences. Macaskill and Taylor (2010), in the development of a brief measure of learner autonomy in university students, uses survey design based on Self-directed Learning Readiness (1977) and one for Nursing (2001) believed to develop a psychometrically sound measure of autonomous learning. There are a number of studies in this literature review that entail questionnaires but they are used to select a focus group or target subjects for interview therefore do not qualify as quantitative studies, which is the method used in this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support (Learning environment, effectiveness)</th>
<th>Both tutor/adviser practices and student perceptions and outcomes (Relationships)</th>
<th>Learning (Motivation, L2 self, metacognition)</th>
<th>Other Evaluating measures:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Journal</td>
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Table 2.1 A summary of the topics and methods of study in the literature review
Mixed methods studies

The mixed-methods approach is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study. It can be observed that validity is often increased in mixed-methods studies. For example in Gardner and Miller (2010) investigation of beliefs and self-access language learning, it was necessary not only to get information from the SALL managers’ and tutors’ perspectives, students had to be involved in the study. Murray’s (2011) study is about the learners sense of self and its construction from a course that has a self-directed learning component; in order to do that a questionnaire would have been insufficient, as there had to be triangulation through learning histories, portfolios, interviews and focus groups. Similarly, Figura and Jarvis (2007) looked at learners metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies that were applied when using computer-based materials out-of-class.

Qualitative studies

A qualitative approach provides a more holistic, complete picture of what happens in self-access language learning. These studies are helpful when the researcher wants to investigate a topic fully and deeply; the cornerstone of qualitative research, then, is much rich data collection. Twenty-two studies employ the qualitative approach as shown in Table 2.1. Interestingly, several of these studies are follow-up or strands of other studies, such as Gardner’s (2011) two studies were strands from his studies in 1997 and 1999 regarding SACs and SALL. Morrison’s (2005, 2008, 2011) and Mozzon-McPherson’s (2000, 2007). Navarro and Thorton (2011) and Morrison & Navarro (2012) a study from belief and action of SDL to shifting roles from language teachers to learning advisers. These studies indicate the evolving nature of the topic and that there is a much deeper understanding of issues in qualitative study.
SUMMATION

It seems that a number of studies mention the effectiveness of self-access language learning in various contexts, but institutional management is concerned with the evaluation of learning as well as accountability, which is realistically the efficiency of such out-of-class support. According to Mozzon McPherson (2000), often efficiency is confused with effectiveness. She cited a study of the Teaching and Quality Assessment Exercise in England and Northern Ireland in the mid 1990s, which showed that when learning centres are well-equipped and resources with state-of-the-art technology, they may not be fully utilized. Although there was a rich learning environment in those cases, due to the lack of qualified personnel and training, approximately 30% of such centres were not fully exploited. Dhillon et al. (2008) bring to light the question of whether support and guidance services are localized departmental effort to provide tutors or study skills or whether they are institution-wide and should provide consistent and equitable support for all students and accessible across all campuses of a university. Certainly, when resources are scarce, “decision-making systems are another structural source of potential power” (Bess & Dee, 2008, p.549). However, according to strategic contingencies theory in terms of horizontal power, subunits are most powerful when they are least dependent on other subunits, especially in times of uncertainty (Bess & Dee, 2008). English support systems in various universities do serve in both ways during uncertainty, as the level of English proficiency and the reliability of the new assessment (the first Diploma of Secondary Examination (DSE) in Hong Kong took place in 2013) after the education reforms are questionable. Moreover, English support holds ‘centrality to the workflow’ of universities as a whole, due to English being the medium of instruction of HEIs in Hong Kong. When this subunit serves two of the four key contingencies described by Hickson et al. cited in Bess & Dee
(2008), it is quite powerful. Therefore, may not be necessary to evaluate SACs effectiveness at all like any other academic programme but to examine in context to show management insights in decision-making process. It is my intention to conduct a process evaluation of Self-access language learning in the University of Hong Kong (HKU). The intent of this study is to view SALL not as an end-result, but as a process. To this end, I propose to conduct a qualitative study to answer the three following questions:

Central question: What processes should be employed by stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of a university’s self-access centre?

Sub-question #1: How do students and tutors experience the centre?

Sub-question #2: What additional learning experiences do students and tutors imagine would further facilitate students’ self-efficacy for becoming independent learners?

The study addresses the problem by collecting data from students, tutors and the SAC manager to have a holistic view. The overriding goal of this investigation, then, will be to explore, probe and reveal the learning processes of students that reflects on the effectiveness of SAC. At this stage of the research, these learning processes will be generally defined as student engagement and achievement in the context of the school’s learning activities, support system and language advising. Qualitative study will be used as it resonates more to my work in the area of self-access language learning and enhancing its effect on students so that they can become independent learners. It is expected the outcomes of the study will have a wider perspective for senior managers and insights for developing an evaluation framework which is appropriate in certain context.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The purpose of this case study was to explore the process by which university higher management evaluate a self-access centre’s (SACs) effectiveness and efficiency in HKU and to describe students’ and tutors’ experiences in the centre. The reason why qualitative research was appropriate for addressing the central research question in this research is that the inductive reasoning, which is usually practiced in qualitative research, allows the researcher to draw conclusions from observing the research participants’ that is, the stakeholders; management, students’ and tutors’ experiences in the centre and detecting patterns and regularities from their experiences (Trochim, 2006). Quantitative research was unlikely because of the different perspective of the stakeholders that view “effectiveness” variably. Therefore, this qualitative study draws on the interpretive/constructivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) which “seeks explanation within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the participant” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p.28). The consciousness and subjectivity of various stakeholders in the research emerged through observation of how they described their experiences in the self-access centre (SAC), especially their attitude towards independent learning or self-directed learning further allowed for a focus on meaning and experiences.

Case Study Method

According to Creswell (2012), “for a case study, the researcher needs to select a site or sites to study, such as programs, events, process, activities, individuals, or several individuals” (p.150). Moreover, Merriam (2001) recommends that insights gained from a case study can
directly influence policy, procedures, and future research. From the management perspective it is hoped that policies and procedures would be explored from a broader view instead of the numbers of people using the resources to show the effectiveness of self-access language learning.

**Key Theorists**

One of the earlier works in case study, Stake (1995) demonstrates qualitative mode of inquiry into a single case from various perspectives: naturalistic, holistic, ethnographical, phenomenological, and biographical methods of inquiry. He provides comprehensive guidance from developing research questions, collecting, analyzing and interpreting data, researcher role, triangulation and reporting all in a single case study. Stake’s full case study and its focus with concrete examples is a good introduction to case study research.

A few years later, Bassey (1999) helps reconstruct the concept of educational case study as a main strategy for developing educational theory and enhances educational practice as well as illuminates educational policy. Various kinds of educational case study are presented by Bassey such as: theory-seeking, storytelling, picture-drawing, evaluative and theory-testing case study. The examples provided in the text demonstrate the potential of case study approach and practicalities involved in the execution and setting up of this method.

More recently, Yin (2003, 2009, 2011, 2013) provides a comprehensive guide to researchers and students who wish to do case studies as a rigorous method of research. He presents very detailed design and analysis for case studies that differentiates from traditional case study approach. The fact that references is made to case studies in various fields, makes it interesting yet challenging. Yin also illustrates more concrete examples of case studies that
show the process and procedures from research design to reporting. In his latest work he also
explains techniques and principles in application in a variety of topics and fields that use case
studies to develop or investigate a phenomenon and points out common problems encountered
when doing case studies. While Stake’s view of case study is more simplistic but that was over
two decades and since then Yin has provided more detailed application to various scenarios and
fields using this approach. Both Yin and Stakes approaches were adopted in this case study.

In Creswell (2013) a glossary of term define case study as a type of research involves the
study of a case within a real life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2009). Stake (1995)
refers to the context of the case – in analyzing and describing a case, the researcher sets the case
within its setting. This setting maybe broadly conceptualized (e.g. large historical, social
political issues) or narrowly conceptualized (e.g. the immediate family, the physical location, the
time period in which the study occurred). Both seek to ensure that the topic of interest is well
explored within its context using a variety of data sources so that the essence of the phenomenon
could be revealed therefore, case study is based on a constructivist paradigm. There should be
close collaboration between the researcher and participant and constructivism is built upon the
premise of social construction reality (Miller & Crabtree, 1999 and Searle, 1995 as cited in

Once the case boundaries have been determined as Miles and Huberman (1994) explains
“a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context, the case being the unit of analysis”
(p.25), it is necessary to determine the type of case study. Yin (2003) identifies case studies as
explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive as well as single, holistic and multiple-case studies.
Merriam (2001) suggests that they may be found in ethnographic, historical, psychological or
sociological orientations. Indeed many studies as seen in Chapter 2, related to self-access or self-directed learning focus on the cognitive or sociological aspects, such as motivation, a conducive learning environment (both physical and virtual) and relationships with tutors as well as peers. Stake (1995) also categorizes case studies as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective. For a single case study like this, Yin (2003) explains “is to explore those situations in which intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes” which is what self-access language learning is to English learners in the university and every student’s experience and outcome is different. Having said that as Stake (1995) uses the term intrinsic because the researcher who uses this approach has a genuine interest and not undertaken to understand some phenomenon or theory or to illustrate a particular trait or a problem. This term can be applied to this research as the author has a genuine interest being involved in the self-access centre and how to best evaluate its effectiveness. Both Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) advocate placing boundaries on a case such as; a) by time and place (Creswell, 2003); b) time and activity (Stake) c) by definition and context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although the general inductive approach is evident in several types of qualitative data analyses, it does not have definitions and boundaries in traditional approaches such as a case study. Inductive approach allows the researcher to understand complex data and its meaning through developing categories and themes in the “data reduction” process (Thomas, 2003 p.3). Binding the case can prevent explosion from occurring (Yin, 2003 and Stake, 1995), in this case it is necessary to bind it by time and place (Creswell, 2003) within students’ university life and while they are still able to access resources in the self-access centre. But in terms of place, things have changed drastically with the resources on the internet and “boundaries are blurred” in Self-access. Having said that, it should be made clear that Self-access learning is not the same as blended learning or out-of class learning in the
context of this case study. The latter ones include much curriculum design, IT infrastructure and planning as in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which are of a very different nature.

**Contrasting Perspectives**

Other components for implementing and designing a case study include: a) propositions; b) application of a conceptual framework; c) development of research questions (the “how” and “why” questions); d) linking data to propositions logically and e) criteria for interpreting findings (Yin, 2003). This researcher had several propositions to guide the study, which is evident in the research questions set out in the beginning. They had a distinct focus and purpose that align with the data collection and discussion. However, propositions generally may not be present in exploratory holistic or intrinsic case studies and they have to be based on the literature and the researchers’ experience in knowledge, therefore this case study is exceptional. Indeed not all case studies have a proposition (Yin, 2003, Miles & Huberman, 1994). Stake (1995) uses the term “issues” instead of propositions but both lead to the development of a conceptual framework that guides the research, although neither theorists provides a model of it. Miles and Huberman (1994) provide a conceptual framework which serves several purposes; a) identifying who will and will not be included in the study; b) describing what relationships may be present based on logic, theory and/or experience; and c) providing the researcher with the opportunity to gather general constructs into intellectual “bins” (Miles & Huberman, p.18). A framework for the evaluation of a self-access language learning centre (Morrison, 2005 & 2011) was used as the anchor in the present case study, especially at the stage of data interpretation, it continued to develop and progress as themes emerged from the data analysis. A disadvantage of having a conceptual framework is that it limits the inductive approach when exploring a phenomenon, but
in this case the framework was incomplete as it was never tried nor tested (personal communication, Morrison, 2013) and was not the driving force of this research. Another concern according to Stake (1995) is if the researcher has an intrinsic interest in the subject, he/she should be aware that the results have limited transferability but that is not the case. The findings in this case study are likely to be transferable to other Self-access centres in Hong Kong and other countries because the ‘best model’ has to be flexible and responsive to the ‘context’. Yet an instrumental case study approach was not applicable to the current research as this study was neither multiple nor a collective case study.

**Site and Participants**

For purposes of this study, the Centre for Applied English Studies and the University of Hong Kong will be referred to CAES and HKU respectively. The use of multiple data sources is vital in a case study as this strategy enhances data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). As set out in the research sub-questions, participants included various stakeholders, including both tutors and students. An online questionnaire (see Appendix B) was administered in Spring 2014 (end of second semester of academic year 2013-14). The questionnaire was sent via email to a wide range of student-users, undergraduate or postgraduate, part-time or full-time students, in order to have a complete vision of students’ perception of the Self-access centre of the CAES in HKU. Then students were asked to volunteer for semi-structured interviews. From the literature review in the last chapter it was found that a number of studies used this approach to select participants for interview for a qualitative case study. Therefore this approach is not considered as mixed-method.
HKU is considered to be the top university in Hong Kong with all subject content (even Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics - STEM) taught in English (except Chinese language and translation). The CAES runs English courses for all undergraduate students in the university and a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics as well as Postgraduate Diploma in English Studies programme (last offered in 2012-13), Figure 3.1 shows HKU’s student population in comparison with that of CAES. However, users of the SAC can be any staff, research and taught postgraduate students and undergraduates in HKU, they do not have to be a studying CAES courses concurrently.

### Research Design – Site and Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HKU Student population</th>
<th>CAES students served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total 27,005</strong>&lt;br&gt;(over 9,000 non-local students from 80 countries 2/3 from China)</td>
<td><strong>Students Taught</strong>&lt;br&gt;Total 12,052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught &amp; Research&lt;br&gt;Postgraduates 11,778&lt;br&gt;(43.6%)</td>
<td>Self-access&lt;br&gt;Consultations 2436 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates 15,227 (56.4%)</td>
<td>Summer English Support Programme 737 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1 HKU student population and CAES student numbers 2013-4
The participants in this research were selected by purposeful sampling as not only are most university students English as a second language learners (even those from Europe and other Asian countries such as; Malaysia, Singapore and Bangladesh) are considered ESL), but also the managers and tutors are chosen purposefully as only those involved in decision-making and self-access centre work are subjects of the case study. In this study, the term ‘tutors’ and ‘teachers’ are used interchangeably as only those that do SALL work will be included. There is an assumption that teachers (language consultants or advisers) have gone through teacher training while peer tutors (student volunteers) and writing support tutors (mostly full time research postgraduates of CAES who have had a scholarship) have not been teacher trained. However, the SAC coordinator and teachers do teach undergraduate English courses and/or postgraduate courses run by the CAES. Only a few hours per week are assigned on the timetable for self-access work, that is, there are no full time staff in the SAC. In fact, the SAC coordinator was also the Master’s degree programme coordinator and had a full teaching load including teaching undergraduate courses: he got three hours a week off (72 hours per year) for SAC work like the rest of the programme coordinators.

The online questionnaire included 21 questions about students’ experiences in services and support offered by CAES. This questionnaire was adapted from Reinders’ (2000, 2007) studies, that had 16 questions about a Language Resource Centre (LRC) and 13 questions about the advisery sessions. The gatekeeper, actually the SAC coordinator had access to the database of students who had attended activities, workshops, discussion group (log in registration through the Virtual English (VE) website) and accessed the Internet Resources (through the VE or directly). He was consulted about whether to send the questionnaire to the students on that
database but that would have excluded students who walked into the resource centre, poked around, picked up a book, newspaper or magazine or borrowed a book or DVD, as such visits were not recorded. It was concluded that all student users of the SAC including those who browsed the online resources (the gatekeeper has the authority to do this) irrespective of whether they are undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time of full-time were sent an email inviting them to fill in the questionnaire. This ensured a maximum variation of participants. The last item on the questionnaire asked for volunteers for a semi-structured interview for a more in-depth understanding of their self-access centre experience. After careful consideration of whether to offer monetary or coffee coupons as incentives, it was decided to offer them a chance to attend a tea party in which students could engage in an English speaking environment which would be more beneficial to them. This offer was included in the consent form. Two important factors that were taken into account prior to the interview. If the undergraduates were less than 18 years, in which case old parental consent would have been required, they were excluded. Therefore on the questionnaire and at the interview it was ascertained that participants were above 18 years of age. In addition, participants were coded S1 to S15 in order to protect their identity to ensure compliance to research ethics and protection of human subjects.

To identify the teachers’ perspective a mini focus group with six self-access centre tutors was conducted. Through purposeful sampling, that is only those teachers involved in Self-access work, were asked to participate in the focus group as it was necessary to interview those directly involved to inquire about their experiences serving in the frontier as language consultants and /or workshop and discussion group facilitators. There were 12 tutors including the SAC coordinator and the researcher for the current semester. However, these two could not participate due to
conflict of interest. An email was sent to 10 tutors at the end of the semester (end of April 2014) and six tutors agreed to participate in the first week of May 2014. It was anticipated that maximum variation would be possible if there were enough volunteers to include experienced and novice teachers as there could be different perspectives with regard to the effectiveness of their experiences in the self-access centre work. However, as it turned out all tutors were new to the SAC work except T5 and T6 (see Table 3.4). The tutors consented verbally when audio-recorded and codes were used to ensure that their position at work will not be affected by participating in the research. The summary of the transcript of the focus group discussion was sent to each participant for confirmation of the contents and member checking if any omissions or errors had occurred.

The SAC coordinator of the Self-access centre and the Associate Director were interviewed on 28 May and 4 June 2014, respectively. Information from Internal Reports about CAES Self-access Support in 2011-12, 12-13 and 13-14 (see summary of SAC Reports Table 4.1 in Chapter Four) and other university documents were extracted to further probe into the criteria for evaluation of the self-access centre was carried out. The data from various stakeholders were triangulated and findings applied to the framework for further research and recommendations (see Chapters Four and Five).

**Positionality**

The researcher’s role in the interpretive paradigm was engaged in an interactive dialogue with each student participant through semi-structured interviews (Ponterotto, 2005). As further suggested by Ponterotto (2005), the interaction allowed a joint creation of deeper meanings by
both the researcher and the participants. The primary strategy used and supported the principle in this case study research is triangulation, thus allowing the phenomenon to be explored and viewed from multiple perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.556). To achieve triangulation and, as suggested by Ponterotto (2005), to ensure that my own expectations and biases were bracketed, collection of multiple kinds of data was vital, so that the “multiple, apprehendable, and equally valid realities” (Schwandt, 1998, as cited in Ponterotto, 2005, p.129) emerged. Moreover, to extract meaningful utterances for data analysis an inductive approach was applied, especially to discover things that would further lead to students’ self-efficacy.

**Data Collection**

An online questionnaire of students’ experience in the self-access centre of the site under study was administered online using Survey Monkey and students’ campus email addresses. To ensure a maximum variation of participation, all student-users in the campus irrespective of whether they were undergraduate, postgraduate, part-time of full-time received an email (see Appendix A) inviting them to fill in the questionnaire. There were 1230 emails (excluding the 50 emails returned as ‘error’) sent on 30 April, 2014 and a reminder sent a week later. It consisted of 21 questions of which seven were general closed questions (to do with demographics and ranking), three questions using 5-point Likert-Type Scale and the rest were open-ended questions on their experiences. The open-ended questions were analyzed and coded using a general inductive approach with an aim to find themes and categories that were included in the interviews. The response rate was 5.3%. The advantage of using an online questionnaire is that the data collected (especially the closed and Likert-Type Scale questions) can be easily collated and it also serves as generating an awareness of the SAC’s users in the campus. The
disadvantage of using an online questionnaire is that students were under no obligation to fill it and may have deleted it, as an overwhelming number of mass emails are sent out to students on campus every day. According to (Baxter & Jack, 2008) when compared to other qualitative approaches, researchers can collect and integrate quantitative survey data more effectively as this approach gives a more holistic view of the phenomenon being studied.

Figure 3.2 Questionnaire responses Q1 and Q2 demographics of users

The last item on the questionnaire asked for volunteers for a semi-structured interview for a more in-depth understanding of their self-access centre experience. There were 15 students that volunteered to be interviewed among 65 students that completed the online questionnaire (23%). It was decided to interview all those who volunteered; as it was revision period, it was anticipated that some of them might not attend. However, all 15 students came and they
represented undergraduates (8), taught postgraduates (5) and research postgraduates (2) students. 

These figures are very similar to the questionnaire response ratios (see Figure 3.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Discussion Groups (DGs)</th>
<th>One-to-one Lang. Consultant</th>
<th>Workshops</th>
<th>Writing Support</th>
<th>Peer Tutoring</th>
<th>Virtual English</th>
<th>Books</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S₁</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>S₂</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>S₃</td>
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<tr>
<td>S₄</td>
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<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>S₇</td>
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<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S₈</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>√₅</td>
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<tr>
<td>S₉</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√₄</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
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<td>S₁₀</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√₄</td>
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<tr>
<td>S₁₁</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>S₁₂</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>S₁₃</td>
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<td>√₇</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Interviewees profile – activities they participated in SAC

The volunteers for the semi-structured interviews were contacted by the researcher directly to ensure that this was done entirely voluntarily and to ensure they were under no pressure from their tutors or peers. The advantage of focusing on a homogenous group is that it simplifies the research and facilitates group interviewing (Creswell, 2012). It was anticipated that there might be more Mainland China students when compared to local Hong Kong students that use the support services and resources offered by CAES. Having said that, the preference
was still for maximum variation, which increased the possibility of finding different perspectives (Creswell, 2012). Almost half of the students were from Mainland, which was ideal for this study, as it was a likely scenario in practice. The individual face-to-face semi-structured interview of 15 participants lasted approximately 45 minutes each and was audio-taped using a digital voice recorder with an iPhone as backup. There were two recording devices in case one did not work. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, together with the permission for the researcher to use a recording device to audio-tape the interviews. The audio transcription was done by the researcher personally to ensure confidentiality and to inscribe partial notes. The interview site was in the Language Consultant’s room in the Chi Wah Learning Commons where students felt more comfortable as it is their area for group work and self-study. Data collection and interviews were scheduled as shown in Table 3.2. Because

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring academic year 2013/14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 13 (First week of May 2014)</td>
<td>Tutors mini-focus groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 12 (30 April, 2014)</td>
<td>Administered students’ online questionnaire via email to SAC users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revision Period (9 to 30 May, 2014)</td>
<td>Semi-structured students’ interviews 15 volunteers 30-45 minute interview individually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| SAC Management interviews      | SAC Coordinator interview 28 May 2014  
Associate Director interview 4 June 2014  
SAC Coordinator retiring end May, review and seek clarification prior to his departure |
| Review reports, documentation (End May to June 2014) | End May to June 2014 | Follow up questions (if any) data analysis, member check |

Table 3.2 Data collection time frame
ethics application of IRB was approved on 16 April 2014 (week 11 in a 12-week semester) it was deemed inappropriate to send out the questionnaire as students were busy with meeting projects and assignment deadlines and presentations. Therefore, the questionnaire was sent out on 30 April, 2014 (the last teaching day of Week 12) and a reminder sent a week later (the last day of the semester, usually a week was assigned for make-up classes). The interview had to be scheduled within revision the period in May 2014 when there were no classes and students would go on exchanges or internships in June 2014. The data analysis and transcription were done immediately after each interview by the researcher so that if necessary they could have been contacted for follow-up questions during the revision period and not during exams. After arriving at the interview site participants signed a consent form and interview procedures were clearly explained including the right to withdraw at any time should the participants have felt any discomfort, there were none. The length of the interview was specified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Instruments</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
<th>Type of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student questionnaires sent to 1230 SAC users in the last week of Semester 2 2013-4 (End of Apr. 2014)</td>
<td>65 students</td>
<td>21 Questions Quantitative: Likert scale items Qualitative: Open-ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interviews of Volunteers (during exam / revision period, May 2014)</td>
<td>15 students</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutors’ Focus Group (End of Apr. 2014) End of Semester (emailed 11 Tutors)</td>
<td>6 Tutors</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview of Associate Director on 28 May 2014</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview SAC coordinator on 4 June 2014</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAC Annual Report (2011 to 2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Documentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 Data collection instruments and participants in the case study
As mentioned earlier, a focus group of six self-access centre tutors were recruited as a pre-existing group via email. Based on purposeful sampling, the group of tutors were asked to participate in the focus group as it was necessary to interview those directly involved to inquire about their experiences serving in the frontline as language consultants and/or workshop and discussion group facilitators. There were 12 tutors including the SAC coordinator and the researcher for the current semester, however these two could not participate for conflict of interest. An email was sent to 10 tutors end of the semester (end April 2014) and six tutors agreed to participate in the first week of May 2014 (for details of participants, see Table 3.4). The tutors consented verbally when being audio-recorded and were coded by number to ensure that their position at work would not be affected by participating in the research (for focus group questions see, Appendix C). The focus group transcript was sent to each participant for confirmation of the contents and member checking if any omissions or errors were incurred. The focus group meeting was held in a meeting room in the CAES and was administered by the researcher as a moderator. To allow for thick description, the mini focus group included emerging themes from students’ interviews because some of the findings were useful in creating a deeper understanding of the students’ perception and experiences among teachers in the focus group.
Table 3.4 Tutors’ Focus Group – T5 and T6 are more experienced in SAC work

The data from various stakeholders was triangulated and applied to the framework for further research and recommendations. Data (interviews and mini focus group) were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded by the researcher.

**Data Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, the SAC coordinator of the Self-access Centre and the Associate Director were interviewed and information from reports and documents extracted to further probe into the criteria for evaluation of the self-access centre but this was done after learners’ interview and tutors’ focus group. There was concern from the SAC coordinator that the evidence produced would be only perceptions of SALL (learners’ and teachers’ perceptions) not concrete evidence for the effectiveness of SALL, therefore data analysis had to be done with caution. Data analysis was similar to case study and inductive approaches. As noted by Yin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>Discussion Group</th>
<th>One-to-one consultation</th>
<th>Workshops</th>
<th>Writing Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Sem 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>Sem 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Sem 1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Sem 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>Sem 1</td>
<td>Sem 1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Sem2 (6 wks)</td>
<td>Sem 2 (6wks)</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2003) five techniques were used: pattern matching, linking data to propositions, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models and cross-case synthesis in addition to what Stake (1995) describes as categorical aggregation and direct interpretation. For this study first the round of coding patterns and superordinate themes and sub themes emerged (see Appendix G); then they were divided into categories with a second round of coding meaningful data as well as identifying links or connections to the research questions. This served two purposes, to ensure that the information gathered was correct and also included member checking which validates the data. The first review of the transcription using the ‘track changes’ function on Word documents enabled me to look at common categories and themes that emerged from the analysis. Themes were then color-coded and ‘track changes’ coded according to the central research question and sub-questions: this approach was more deductive rather than inductive. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), coding and analysis is able to dissect field notes, transcription and synthesis meaningfully (p. 56). They contended that the most ideal situation is to ask a few people to participate in this process of data analysis, but for this research it was not possible because of ethical concerns and the fact that the researcher preferred to work closely with the data collected. One of the most helpful inductive coding techniques cited in Miles and Huberman (1994) is that of Strauss (1987) which is similar to the one used in this case study, that is, to collect data and review the written up transcription line by line in order to categorize and label them to generate a list. He suggested also rereading field notes of contrasting groups to note similarities and differences (p. 58). There were some inconsistent categories after the review so the researcher re-categorised and collapsed some of them. Coding is a complicated process as Creswell noted (2012 pp.184-5) and suggested assigning codes ‘lean coding’ of five or six categories and then after review and re-viewing he developed not more than 30 categories.
which covered five to six themes which he claimed is ideal. In this research, there were ‘lean coding’ of four categories: objectives, self-perception, interaction and learning culture; and then further sub categorised to three each (see Table 3.5). Codes were *invivo codes*, words exactly used by participants, using Weft QDA software, exact statements were marked and categorised. Caution was taken not to immediately code according to the research questions or sub-questions as that could have caused the meaning to be lost in transition by skipping a step in the data analysis process. As Miles and Huberman (1994) cautioned “there will be instances of missing or unclear data, and of unanswered research questions; these provide targets for the next round of data collection” (p. 84).
Table 3.5 Using Weft QDA software to analyse *invivo codes* and categorise themes.

Creswell (2013) suggests an analysis that consists of making a detailed description of the case and its setting, like chronological order or multiple sources of data to gather evidence for each step in the evolution of the case (p. 199). Moreover, Stake (1995) proposes four forms of interpretation and data analysis. In categorical aggregation, that the researcher sought instances
of meaning from the data that emerged in semi-structured interviews in this case study. In direct interpretation, meaning was drawn from a single instance pulling the data apart and putting them back together in more meaningful ways; this was done with the annual reports and documentation from the Self-access coordinator. It is also important to look for patterns that correspond to form a table of relationships between two categories (Stake, 1995), for example this was done when categories from tutors’ mini focus group, students’ interviews, the SAC coordinator’s and the Associate Director’s transcripts were compared using the Weft QDA software in one file (see Table 3.5).

Data storage

Data collected was stored in a password protected computer, the record of which will be disposed of two years after publication of the relevant research results. Both Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) note the importance of effectively organising data as various sources of data are extremely useful because of the rigor associated with the case study approach. Although it may be overwhelming to manage and analyse large amounts of data and as cited in Baxter and Jack (2008), it is important to develop a case study database (Wickham & Woods, 2005). In this case, it was not appropriate to have another researcher interpret the data as that would have resulted the researcher’s distance from the data.

Trustworthiness

There are a number of ways to describe terminology and procedures for validation in qualitative analysis according to Creswell (2012, p. 244). Some employ postmodern and interpretive perspectives or synthesise several perspectives and metaphorically visualize them as a crystal. He explained that over the course of data collection and analysis, to ensure that the
findings and analysis are accurate there should be “at least two” techniques (Creswell, 2013, p. 253). For this case study a variety of strategies, consisting mainly of triangulation, member checking and thick description were employed (see Table 3.6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credibility</strong></td>
<td>• <em>Prolonged engagement and persistent observation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Triangulation</em> of multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Peer debriefing</em> to provide an external check of the research process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Negative case analysis</em> to refine working hypotheses as the inquiry advances in light of negative or disconfirming evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Member checking</em> to solicit participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transferability</strong></td>
<td>• <em>Rich, thick description</em> of participants profiles, their work context and study findings and interpretation to allow readers to make decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependability</strong></td>
<td>• <em>Triangulation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “<em>Stepwise reproduction</em>” (Lincoln &amp; Guba, 1985, p. 317) that the researcher and a peer coder independently coded data to achieve consensual validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>External audits</em> by a third party to examine the process and the product of the account, assessing their accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confirmability</strong></td>
<td>• <em>Triangulation</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Clarifying research bias from the outset</em> of the study to allow the reader understand the researcher’s position and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Use of a reflective journal</em> to allow the researcher to reflect and review the process of deriving findings and interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>Audit trail</em> to document the raw data, audio tapes, research notes, reflective journals, correspondences with participants, peer coders, and external auditor, and iterations of coding and data analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.6 Source: Creswell (2013). At least two techniques need to be employed to ensure reliability of findings. Graphics by: Daya Datwani Choy

The data from various stakeholders were triangulated and applied to the framework for further research and recommendations (see Chapter Five). Data from various stakeholders, students’ semi-structured interviews, the teachers’ mini-focus group and reports as well as information from management of the self-access centre, were collected by the researcher.
personally, which formed the main data sources for triangulation. The participants in the interviews (the SAC coordinator and Associate Director) and teachers’ mini-focus group were emailed transcripts for confirmation. This not only constituted member checking but allowed them to be more directly involved in the research to ensure they could see the benefit of being involved in the study.

To employ thick description it is necessary “to make decisions regarding transferability”. Creswell (2013, p. 252). Because of the restriction of time (ethical approval obtained in Week 12), findings from students’ interviews were planned as a starting point to integrate them into the tutors’ focus group’s data, to make connections and bring the discussion to a deeper level of understanding with tutors. However, it was still possible to use findings that emerged from tutors’ focus group (this was done first because of timing), to make connections and bring the semi-structured interviews to a deeper level of understanding with the learners’. The shared characteristics of viewing effectiveness from the two groups of stakeholders’ perspectives ultimately narrowed down the findings to more quantifiable and meaningful results as can be seen in Chapter 4.

Regarding the potential threats to internal validity such as mortality is a threat to a study’s internal validity (Creswell 2012), it did not happen in this research. Because for students’ interviews a wide variation was included in the 15 interviews which included both Mainland Chinese and local students. Taught Postgraduate students were to graduate soon as they had only one year of study in HKU and thus it was not possible to examine one homogeneous group of learners. Besides mortality, the attitude or culture of participants may affect their interview as many of the Mainland Chinese students might not openly talk about their
weakness in English in a focus group; therefore semi-structured interviews were ideal to elicit meaningful data.

As for the tutors, a small number of six for the mini focus group was ideal, since they were all involved in the Self-access centre and constituted a homogenous group for data collection. I am conscious of possible researcher bias because being familiar with the self-access work and having had successful interrelationships with students, I am aware that there are teachers who may be new to this and may have been unsuccessful. Therefore awareness to have an open mind when moderating the focus group and accepting all comments was necessary. Out-of-class support services are expanding in the university on a much larger scale because more new courses require this kind of support for students to account for the coursework hours. It should be noted that since the data collection covered one semester from January to April 2014 (approximately 4 months), subject maturation was unlikely.

Due to the complex nature of this approach, reporting the case study findings in a concise and reader friendly format is most difficult. Yin (2003) suggested several methods including linear, comparative, chronological, theory building, suspense and unsequenced (pp. 153-155). Thus a chronological approach was applied in this research as can be seen in Chapter Four.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

In the Institutional Review Board (IRB) training, the three ethical principles for research in the Belmont Report (1979), namely respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, was adhered to in this study. On the research site of this case study, currently a younger (17 years of age instead of 18 years old) cohort of freshmen were admitted, due to the educational reforms (4-year
university instead of 3-year). Therefore, most of the first year undergraduates were 17 years old and any research involving them would have needed parental consent. A mass email was sent out to student users of SAC inviting them to participate in the online questionnaire. Not only should there be justice but also the research should be beneficial to the participants as well. On the online questionnaire, an “opt out” option for those under the age of 18 was included.

The researcher had completed the IRB certification and gained a better understanding of the issues which detailed basic concepts, principles, and issues regarding human subject protection in research and the significance of demonstrating respect for research participants. To respect the research participants, their participation for the interview was entirely voluntary as it was included in the last item of the online questionnaire to provide details should they wish to be contacted for the interview. They were also given the right to withdraw at any time. As a researcher, an understanding of the obligation to protect the confidentiality and rights of subjects in research is vital. The strategies to ensure human protection of human subjects include respecting participants’ autonomy, preserving the anonymity of participants by coding all the participants in the study. The researcher ensured that those who were studied owned the facts of their lived experience and have the right to withhold data that could it lead to potential harmful physical or psychological impact on and risk to participants’ privacy or employment. The procedure in this study had no known risks and would not pose any threats to the safety of the participants as the researcher is in no position of authority not being their course teacher.

The research informed consent form (Appendix D) was used an official document to invite participants to take part in the research study as a subject on a voluntary basis. The consent provided details including rationale and purpose of the study, involvement of study participants,
inconvenience and loss of time incurred in the study process, risks as well as benefits of participating in this study, protection of privacy and welfare. The participants were informed of the time commitment: no more than 45-minutes of their time was requested and an outline of all activities they were engaged in during the process, as well as the method of dissemination of the findings were provided. Through a risk-benefit analysis, the researcher made every effort to maximize the benefits and minimize the risk to convince participants that the benefits of being subjects of the current research outweighed the drawbacks. Participants not only gained valuable learning opportunities of experiencing qualitative research, but also meaningfully contributed to the advancement of generalizable knowledge (Creswell, 2012). The benefit included realisation of one’s own potential in becoming not only English learners more effectively but also in becoming independent learners, which was spelled out in the consent form. The reward for participation usually monetary or coffee coupons (the usual practice in HKU), was rejected and a chance to speak English in a tea party with native-speakers of English was offered, which most participants rarely had an opportunity to do. In other words, the study was of minimal risk and possible discomfort and risk did not cause bigger problems than those faced by participants under normal circumstances.

All participants, students, tutors and the self-access coordinator clearly comprehended that their participation would not affect their present student or employment status. After signing the forms, their personal information was not disclosed and was kept confidential. Participants were entitled to change their minds and withdraw from the study at any time throughout the study since enrollment was in accordance with their own goals and values. There were also channels provided for participants to obtain further information, make enquires about their rights
as research participants, and report if they felt that they had been harmed in the course of the study.

The evaluation of Self-access Centres has been the same for the past two decades, even though the services offered and managing out-of-class support services went through a lot of changes. Much of the literature focuses on effectiveness based on the resources, learners’ motivation and their relationship with tutors but these are often unreported when accountability is considered by senior management. Morrison’s (2011) framework for the evaluation of a self-access language learning centre is used in this case study. The anticipated outcome was that effectiveness would be evaluated from a more formative perspective rather than a summative reporting format that the management often requires. Moreover, information derived from collecting data from various stakeholders provided a more holistic view in addressing issues and decision-making not only for the day to day of SAC, but also in decision making in the development of such support systems. Finally, the researcher analysed and synthesised data, and was aware of risks of personal bias impacting interpretation of materials or language use to achieve an intellectual or practical goal, even though having had seven years of experience as a language consultant and second language learning experiences: thus I was aware of the need to be objective. Data from this study will be destroyed and safeguarded against improper future use. This study could be replicated by others in order to ensure validity.

**Chapter Four: Research Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the process by which university management evaluate a self-access centre’s (SACs) effectiveness and efficiency in a university in Hong Kong
and to describe how students and tutors experience these centres. The research consisted of three components. It included a study of key documents on the origin, development, annual report and outcomes of the Self-access support services presented in the Centre of Applied English Studies (CAES) reports to stakeholders on campus. Research also included interviews with key managers, a teachers’ focus group and learners that volunteered through the online questionnaire. The intention was for the participants to reveal not just their perceptions, but also to the characteristics of the SAC support services that shape its development and implementation.

For purposes of this study, the Centre for Applied English Studies and the University of Hong Kong will be referred to CAES and HKU respectively. It was necessary to provide findings from senior management, the Associate Director (AD) and the SAC coordinator to provide some background and to give a complete picture of the development of Self-access English support in the centre.

The Need, the Opportunity and the SAC Response

English support came into being in 1992 with the conversion of an existing language laboratory on the main campus under the Language Centre (CAES former name) into a practice laboratory. The AD became the coordinator of that which he described as “a rudimentary SAC” more of an “open access centre” where resources had to be used in the centre and could not be borrowed out. With addition of more resources such as books, audio and video tapes, and removing illegal copies, as copyright issue was not taken seriously until then, the coordinator looked into the needs of the learners and what services they required. At that time ‘consultations’ were offered as a form of language advising in order to “make it more visible, more useful and more used” the AD describes. He inherited the self-access team and encouraged
teachers whom he thought could make a useful contribution to join it. As the campus expanded and each faculty was located in one building, it was then decided to have three centres collectively known as ‘SACs’, two Language Resource Centres one in Meng Wah Building in which the faculty focus was Social Science, another in Old Library Building and the original ‘Practice Lab’ in K.K. Leung Building (see Figure 4.1). Of course it became impractical, as any of the resources purchased had to come in three sets and managing these centres was another big problem. When the opportunity arose the AD explained “two centres were gotten rid of - K.K. Leung still had Putonghua and other languages while other complications came about as the

![Figure 4.1 CAES Self-access English support since 1992](image)

English Language Centre (now CAES) split from the Language Centre (now known as School of Modern Languages and Cultures) keeping the Resource Centre in Meng Wah Building as the primary focus of the English support services”. 

More English activities sprung up besides language advising; there were workshops, discussion groups, as well as Computer Assisted Learning Materials (see Appendix H Development of English Support Services 1991 to 2013). The AD suggested that management of self-access was at the level of middle management and at some point though still having a keen interest in Self-access, it was handed over to another colleague the SAC coordinator (who retired at the end of semester 2013-2014). The AD mentioned “I was also a founding member of the Hong Kong Association of Self-Access Language Development (HASALD which is regarded the Community of Practice - CoP)” I was necessary to have a CoP because other Hong Kong universities (polytechnics at the time) were establishing SACs and the Universities Grant Committee (UGC) put a lot of money into requiring institutions to provide English support to students. For example Enhancing the Use of English @ HKU Programme was funded by recurring grants since 2002. The Self-access centre and its services was quite unique until a state-of-the-art SAC was established in the University of Science and Technology in 1996. HKU was way ahead in the field of self-access, learner autonomy and self-directed learning in the early 1990s when other institutions were still operating language laboratories.

**Language Consultants and Advisers**

There was a certain period when David Nunan was the Director of CAES, all teachers had to take up some self-access hours on duty. However that turned out to be unsatisfactory for neither did all teachers had counselling or advising skills nor interest. There was an urgent need to train and have teachers committed to the idea of self-access. In 1995 the SAC Coordinator and a few colleagues turned some innovative ideas about the “counsellor” or “consultant” into reality and obtained a Teachers’ Development Grant and produced a video and booklet package
based on previous research (Voller, Martyn & Pickard, 1997) called “One to One Consultation” in 1998. This video with training exercise is still kept to this date online for tutors to access when necessary.

Shortly after the AD took over running the Science English for the Discipline (ED) course. There was more collaboration as a self-access component was built into several courses and at some point over 500 students visited the centre because they had to use the SAC at least once (a discovery tour activity), while other forms of on-line learning were permitted or required throughout the semester in several courses. The Associate Director of CAES continued his support for the SAC and its new coordinator in 2003.

**New Initiatives 2012-14**

In 2012, the HKU campus expanded further because of the education reforms with the double cohort of 3-year and 4-year curriculum students. The new millennium campus was built and the Meng Wah Language Resource Centre was moved to a new building (as part of the Arts faculty) with CAES staff (50 staff) on one floor and was renamed ‘English Language Resource Centre’ (ELRC). The AD had many opportunities of collaboration with various faculties. With the two-fold student population there was a chance of a Teaching Development Grant to hire four English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) and also a ‘peer-tutoring’ project with Centre of Development and Resource for Students (CEDARS). These turned into resources that allowed the SAC to provide more speaking activities to students especially since the current Y1 students are one year younger.
English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) 2012-13

According to the AD “we suddenly had four people full-time conducting self-access activities in residential colleges…some odd things here and there, stuff in Global Lounge, etc. Yeah fairly successful, lots of different things …that demonstrated with a relatively small budget to employ staff of that kind, the sort of people that we used there, that we could make a massive contribution to self-access provision in HKU…there has been a bit of a backlash because students who enjoyed it last year have been vocal this year in saying what’s going on why is everything booked up!” As a result of further funding, the SAC was running at a much lower capacity than before. In addition, the SAC coordinator did not get approval to buy out his time spent on the project from the grant itself. The project of ETAs was only possible because of a one off Teaching Development Grant for one year.

Peer Tutoring

As mentioned in the earlier section the AD had opportunities of collaboration with other university subunits such as Centre of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS). They also have a reward system for students’ activities under their Counselling and People Enrichment section (COPE). Since they already had a system it was easy to set up a ‘peer tutoring’ system with overseas exchange students and L1 equivalent students to volunteer chatting to students who want to improve their English. “The peer tutoring system drew in students very quickly; since then it’s been snowballing. I was involved in the interviewing and the SAC coordinator evolved an online system to help peer tutors keep track of what they are doing. This round of interview they went ahead and did it without me,” explained the AD. This activity was found to be most popular as a result of the students’ questionnaire (Figure 3.2) and interviews (Table 3.1).
Chi Wah Learning Commons (Students’ Space)

The SAC coordinator was also successful in getting space in the learning commons. In the beginning of academic year 2013 the ELRC no longer existed as the physical space was integrated with Chi Wah Learning Commons in Zone R, resources such as books, DVDs, and magazines were moved into a larger space which is for students to work independently. This is another effort to step up SAC support services and become more visible. But then it was not necessary to have any name such as SAC or English Language Resource Centre. It has been transferred by name as part of the Learning Commons Advisory Service.

Writing support

There was also a need for academic writing support as CAES had to run a new Core University English course for all Y1 students (because of the 4-year curriculum instead of 3 years university). However, there were not enough resources nor staff so it was decided to have the research postgraduates (RPGs) of CAES, who had obtained a scholarship, to work three hours a week in the Learning Commons for a new Writing Support service from 2013 first semester. When asked about RPGs training for Writing Support, the SAC coordinator assumed that they should be as good as the ETAs were supporting mostly undergraduates and this lot were doing their PhD thesis, so only a briefing was provided. The SAC coordinator mentioned, “this is only first year so this may come up, we’ve given to people who should know how to write EAP (English for Academic Purpose), but we do not give them training cause we assume they’ve been undergraduates they’ve probably been taught master students and now they are PhD students, so we assume they are capable of writing assignments in English.” The time slot offered is 20 minutes and what language consultants in writing support should do is not
proofreading but rather detect common errors to discuss whether they are just editing errors. Otherwise they give students advise on fossilized errors.

**Cost-effectiveness**

In terms of cost, self-access support services from the coordinator’s perspective should actually be less due to the fact that many more online resources are freely available, the physical space is smaller and published books are not purchased as often they are probably available in the Main Library. The most expensive resource is the human support services. “Language advising was cost-effective with 20 minutes back in the 1990s; we could just about justify that it was cost effective in terms of teachers’ time. It would be 12 minutes now,” claimed the SAC coordinator. The Internal CAES Self-access support stated every year (2011-14) that the need for Self-access consultations services was demonstrated by students uptake of the services, since it was entirely voluntary. But there are many reasons students were not able to book the services as discussed in the findings and because of costs the human support services were kept at a minimum. Moreover, as the CAES annual report shows 2,436 Self-access consultations were held in 2012-13 (Table 4.1). This does not reflect the number of students served as consultations are offered to 3 students each hour. Also peer tutoring service was not included and neither were counter duties. As seen in the table in 2013-14 when more services were offered, like Writing Support and Peer Tutoring, there was more uptake. Therefore depending only on summative data is insufficient.
Table 4.1 Source: Annual Reports 2011-14 of Human Support Services provided and uptake – a summary. Graphics by Daya Datwani Choy

Virtual English (VE) website

The VE website provides information about resources in the SAC, online booking of consultations and groups, and other online services, including organized links to online resources. The tutors successfully relocated old links from the EL Wiki website and updated these pages with new links. Tasks in lieu of marking for tutors were updating the website, inventory, packing and unpacking resources (when moved to new location). The number of
unique visitors to the VE pages has averaged 215 per day (See Table 4.2 for more details). The statistical software no longer supplies information about length of visit.

It is logical that the figures (Table 4.2 and 4.3) in 2012-13 shot up for VE use and Internet Resources because of the higher number of learners (the double cohort year), but according to the figures the number of visits has dropped significantly, since 2011-12. As the interviewer S14 said, “I think all those resources CAES has listed on the VE website all this kind of information represents about less than 1% of the resources that you can find online… I mean as far as language learning goes”. Learners may require more guidance on using internet sources to match their goals or acquire certain sub skills instead of a tool for searching English information. Most frequently viewed pages (see Table 4.4) may be not be justified by figures alone, for instance Oral Presentations dropped from first ranking in 2011-12 to fifth in 2012-13 and disappeared in 2013-14. It could be that Presentation workshops were offered or more CAES courses taught Presentation skills or merely that the websites were not useful at all. All this is unknown.
### Table 4.2: General Statistics for VE Use 2011-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Per day</th>
<th>13-14</th>
<th>12-13</th>
<th>11-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Hits</td>
<td>2,859*</td>
<td>4,915</td>
<td>6,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Page Views</td>
<td>2,298*</td>
<td>3,540</td>
<td>4,629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Visits</td>
<td>215*</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Visitor Session Length</td>
<td>N/A*</td>
<td>00.06.50</td>
<td>00.12.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4.3: General Statistics for VE (formerly Wiki) Internet Resources 2011-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2013-14</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Hits Per Day</td>
<td>1,411*</td>
<td>2,233</td>
<td>3,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Page Views Per Day</td>
<td>633*</td>
<td>1,930</td>
<td>3,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Visits Per Day</td>
<td>175*</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Visitor Session Length</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>00.06.28</td>
<td>00.11.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4.4: Most Frequently Viewed Pages in Wiki/Internet Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Oral Presentations</td>
<td>2229</td>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>3487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>1632</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>3420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fine Art discussions</td>
<td>1406</td>
<td>Fine Art discussions</td>
<td>3345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>1284</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>2810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>1251</td>
<td>Oral Presentations</td>
<td>2420</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* New Linux platform for our servers meant that statistical software about usage could not provide comparable data for 2010-11 or for 2013-14 with the introduction of VE internet resources.

Source: Annual Reports 2011-14 A summary – VE website views and resources accessed. Graphics by Daya Datwani Choy
Objectives and training

From the SAC coordinator and Associate Director interviews, it was noted that the SAC report is done every year and this is combined with a report of all the CAES courses which is very wide ranging. The UGC representatives arrived Mid May 2014 and interviewed some students besides looking at documentation and reports of CAES; however, none of the students were Self-access users. The AD explained “we do have information about every single course we teach, what the objectives are, what the basic parts of the course are, for example, courses which have a self-access component will be clear in the report and courses…that is relatively rare…but that would be even clearer because every course states the learning outcomes.” The SAC coordinator in contrast said that the issue is fudged “here we call it out-of-class learning, lots and lots of our courses now have this component. They’re often written and designed by the course team and they’re often available only to students taking that course.” At this point, the opportunity arose to inquire about the Mission or Vision of CAES and the objectives of Self-access. It seems that there was something previously but it may have been misplaced. The Associate Director added that “I haven’t looked at the website for some time…I do know it’s been reshaped a lot over the last year, so perhaps that’s just something that went missing and ought to be put back there.” On the other hand, when the same was asked of the SAC coordinator he exclaimed and said that it was old fashioned, “what do you mean they’re not clear! So they don’t read that thing that’s in front of every course booklet then. What am I supposed to do! As a manager I’m supposed to do a little lecture at the start of every semester for every new member of the team!” From his perspective it was perfectly clear what is on VE website, how to make bookings and adds that, “I don’t think mission statements say anything; they are designed not to say anything!”. He does agree that there needs to be a core team of
teachers who do have common beliefs in Self-access. Language consultants were told to look at the one-to-one online training videos produced in 1998 as mentioned earlier, whether they do or not is not questioned. The SAC coordinator knew a few tutors take the easy option because Self-access does not involve marking: “there’re always the people who find excuses not to come to post course and mid-term meetings. They are also those ones who most likely not to do those extra duties? What am I supposed to do? All I can say is no, I don’t want that person on the team again!” By ‘extra duties’ he meant in lieu of marking, SAC tutors are asked to upgrade VE website sources like pronunciation, writing or grammar and so on, check on the links, help with inventory and re-arranging books on the book shelves. It even included packing the books and DVDs so that they could be moved to the new location (twice in year 2013 from Meng Wah to ELRC and then to Learning Commons), as well as unpacking and shelving them. This led to a staffing issue where there is now not a single full time helper or at least more hours for coordinating. The SAC coordinator even had to do the cataloguing and labelling of resources, a lower priority in the Centre now. Figure 4.2 shows a complete picture of the English Support Services and the complexity of the role of the SAC coordinator.
Feedback

Besides the administrative work there was no one available in Self-access to man the resources, let alone answer students’ queries. The most popular books and resources, the coordinator said, was when he knew they were the ones that were stolen. There is a telephone at the front desk of the Self-access centre, a clerical staff from Information Technology Services (ITS) helps students check out DVDs (only 10am to 4pm though the Chi Wah Learning Commons is actually open till 9:30 p.m. in term time). But when it’s non-office hours or exam
time, strangely phone calls at the front desk are forwarded to ITS and not CAES. The SAC coordinator concluded that “what would be ideal would be if we had a clerical assistant here who spends half the time down there and who is good friends with the ITS clerk and we could have people down there from 9 am to 6pm…This is the one issues I’ve been fighting for…For two years.” Students’ feedback was not collected annually. It was done “a few years ago…we probably should do it every year…Our rationale is the uptake of the services and attendance demonstrates the need, which it does. I mean also don’t forget we keep a record of the consultations, whatever the adviser just writes then students record can be seen. Of course we do get complimentary emails sometimes”. He suggested that the monkey survey questionnaire that was done in this research be a basis for collecting feedback annually.

**Students’ and Tutors’ perceptions**

The SAC coordinator for almost two decades has just retired: it is an opportune moment for the new coordinator to evaluate the SACs support services to make recommendations and/or changes. There were a number of themes from students’ interviews and those that were mentioned by 8 or more students (see Appendix G those highlighted in Yellow) were adapted for further classification. The superordinate themes and patterns that emerged from students’ semi-structured interviews and tutors’ focus group were triangulated, using Weft QDA (see Table 3.5) four categories: objectives (subcategory: information), self-perception and evaluation (subcategory: confidence and motivation), interaction and learning culture (subcategory: culture and accent) are presented in following sections.
Objectives

While over 50% of SAC users had a clear sense of purpose or goal when they came to the self-access centre, some of them just wanted to ‘try it out’ and chose the shortest duration which was language advising in 20-minute sessions. Their goals were mostly related to speaking. The SAC coordinator is well aware of the phenomenon, “they come to us well…the courses have a set agenda which is very much genre analysis and writing now…That’s very much the way it has gone. When the pendulum swings on things. Needless to say in language advising we get many more people saying “I need to improve my speaking”. Now when we had courses where there was a huge amount of speaking going on via oral presentations. Guess what we used to get? ‘I need to improve my writing.’ It’s really sort of counter balancing everything, which is also why it’s important to have self-access. Cause it can reach the bits that the courses don’t reach”.

Information

The online booking system is cumbersome, as eleven (73%) of the students said that even though they managed to login in to the HKU Portal for Virtual English (VE) after watching a video demonstrating how to add ‘My Link’, they commented that still some students may not know or do not have the patience to watch the video. Regarding booking peer tutoring sessions, one student found it difficult to book the same peer tutor and one asserted that she had to ‘grab’ the time slot as they were being released each day of the week.

Over 50% (8 out of 15) of the students needed more clarification of the various support services that were offered and several interviewees were given an introduction of the VE website
even during the interview as they asked for clarification. A few could not tell the difference between the services and even went to the wrong ones which was not their intention.

Most tutors and students did not know the existence of a ‘Self Directed English Programme: Study Plan and SDEP Record’ designed by Gardner and Voller (2008). The SAC coordinator expressed, “What is a very curious about this thing is that what it may well have done is students will get and fill the plan and then it says “book a consultation”. They book a consultation and don’t bring the plan or tell us…so we don’t push it anymore cause it was a bit self-defeating…We could bring it back another way.” How it was found out, that it was through another grant which was an online project, so the coordinator could tell students were filling them without telling the language consultant. Only two tutors from the seven in the focus group knew about the plan, T2 commented, “it is intimidating for the students. Those who have brought it in have generally completed the first page, then the other 19 pages they don’t complete. It’s just about awareness of learning styles and awareness of yourself as a learner rather than your specific strength and weaknesses.”

**Self-perception and evaluation**

When students were asked the reason for coming to the SAC and using its services, 73% said that their English was not as good as others or that someone was always better. One even heard a comment from the tutor that his/her presentation skills needed improvement. S13 said “I typed speaking tutorial in HKU on google and this service came up. Just because I think my self-confidence in speaking is not enough and during some other courses, the tutor said my presentation skills are not so good so I just want to improve it.” In the tutors’ focus group most of the advisers found it disheartening that learners came to advising sessions with a negative
feeling about themselves. On the same topic, it is interesting that tutors found themselves inadequate as well.

**Confidence**

A number of learners, 14 out of 15 that were interviewed, found that their self-efficacy had improved since they arrived at HKU because of the English medium of instruction. It is not certain whether it is directly or indirectly related to Self-access language learning but most of them appreciate the Self-access Centre’s support and services offered. One student however mentioned that his/her confidence level had decreased, mainly being one of the high achievers from China recruited to HKU even before the public exam results came through. S1 said “I think I have less confidence in speaking because there are so many students that speak better than me but in Mainland China actually, if I spoke there like this, I was always admired by most of the students. But I will try to catch up.”

Tutors found that when students learned something from the consultation or when they do not want to leave a discussion group and would like to continue discussing, that is a success from tutors’ perspective. Some tutors believe that it is more fulfilling working with PhD students as they have clearer sense of purpose when they come to language advising sessions.

**Motivation**

For this section, motivation is simplified to be the thing that triggered learners to look into Self-access support services. Only two students said they used the services prompted by email and one searched on google, while seven were introduced by their CAES teachers. Interestingly, four out of five taught postgraduate students were told by their friends. They are often in Hong Kong for a one year Master’s degree and have an urgent need to get as much English support as they can. On the other hand, tutors believed that students received a
promotional email stating ‘English for Free’ which was their incentive (a native-speaker private session in Hong Kong would be in the range of US$50-80 depending on the qualifications and experience of tutors), but that is not the case for students who use the support services.

Interaction

Communication in English is still a problem as there is a lack of opportunities where students can interact outside of class with native-speakers of English (80% of interviewees expressed this). Several students who live in campus residences have said that the Mainland Chinese or local Chinese and foreign students are usually isolated and hardly mix. The only opportunity to speak in English is at the High Table Dinner (an annual event). One student attended a ‘British Night’ event at the hall. A couple of others who went to the Global Lounge activities (Korean night or Indonesian night), activities organised by exchange students, found that they spoke too fast, so they never went to those events again. Other learners who shared and rented an apartment find it weird to talk to their peers in English at home and resort to Putonghua which is more comfortable for them. Taught postgraduate, S12, goes to the British Council three times a week and S11 joined a network group on the internet, then meets strangers in a bar with that group to make friends and speak in English. It seems they have a shorter period in Hong Kong (taught postgraduate programmes are usually one year only) and they are quite desperate to find people to interact with but then with these two formats learners will have to spend a lot of money which not all can afford to do.

One of the tutors, T2, expressed, “it’s just that they need more of a sense of community. If there was something like a WhatsApp group, that all students who want to learn English could join…I get 6 or 10 students in a row (in language advising) all saying ‘I want to improve my speaking and I want to do it with someone’...They just really want to be connected.” It seems
this interaction issue is also tied into the cultural issue, especially for those students coming from the Mainland. T2 put it precisely, “actually they have this cultural adjustment to make that language seems to be the way the key to assimilating with the culture…It’s not instrumental…if you can’t speak English and there isn’t Cantonese…that is an added-value especially if they live in the halls. There’s a sense of exclusion, which is the driving force, which is interesting and which ends up being language as a possible solution in their minds”. This may be true for students from China but local students also expressed the need for more speaking opportunities.

**Learning culture**

When asked when there was a problem, supposing a peer tutor spoke too fast or they did not understand a point, more than half of the students (8 out of 15) claimed they did not seek clarification nor would they ask the person to slowdown. Tutors in the SAC did not know whether the objective was to advise learners on long term strategies or a quick fix. Their assumption is that students want a quick fix such as proofreading. However, students wanted more comments on the structure in writing support, especially related to their disciplines. That is a concern for some of the tutors as they are not sure about coursework requirements for various faculties. Several students commented that the language consultants gave them good advice but for various reasons they may not follow it, while some of them expressed a wish to have some kind of evaluation so that they can monitor their progress.

**Culture and accent**

More than half of the students expressed that it is more important to have native speakers in peer tutoring and advisory services. Also, having someone from a different culture would be an added advantage as opposed to a Chinese native-speaker of English because they can get to know interesting things from another culture as well. Surprisingly, Taught or Research
Postgraduate students did not mind interaction or being peer-tutored by undergraduates who are proficient in English. On the other hand, the “Conversation Exchange” on the Virtual English website puts some of them off as mostly Mainland Chinese students sign up for it so it is highly unlikely anyone would be able find an English native speaking partner. There is a need to contact more non-local and international school graduates for such support services.

**Findings and Conclusions**

As self-access has become part of the learning commons, there are more opportunities as well as challenges. The findings from the data analysis can be summarised as follows:

- There was inadequate staff to man the physical resources and provide information to students querying the various kind support services or finding a location of services was noted.
- The Advisory Zone has become a place for seeking help and that may have an adverse effect on students just wanting to have a chat with peers in English in a conducive environment which is the immediate need.
- The use of non-human support systems to enable enhancement of and log-in registration system is not functioning well in management and support of Self-access services.
- The lack of objectives or mission from senior management and regular feedback from learners regarding the various support and services offered in Self-access and limits its effectiveness.

In the next chapter discussions of the findings and implications for practice as well as direction for further research will be presented.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

This qualitative case study focused on a specific university to demonstrate the complexity of providing language support to learners campus wide and across various disciplines. To better understand how a Self-access Centre can support students’ learning and the choices made by them to achieve self-efficacy in English, while in the higher education context that is mostly accountability-driven, the theoretical framework chosen comprises of activities in context coupled with formative assessment and mapping to make key decisions. The framework proposed by Morrison (2003, 2011) for the evaluation of self-access language learning is used as a lens to explore the problem of practice.

In the context of the existing literature we will examine the findings. Gardner and Miller (1999) stated that there are two kinds of costs, the start-up costs and recurrent costs. The key element to successful running of a Self-access is the pedagogical input which is most costly. Nowadays with so much information on the internet, there is still a need for human support, so it cannot be entirely eliminated. From the findings we can see that the operations have been reduced to a minimum and as the SAC coordinator mentioned he can foresee that “the growth of SALL has peaked and is about to plateau off”. This remark was made when comparing figures of users over the last decade or so. The University Grants Committee allocates a lump sum to the Centre; the CAES Director in turn distributes money to English enhancement activities which he thinks are most effective. The CAES administrator confirmed that the overall expenditure of the SAC was about 4.06% in 2013-14, which is largely spent on human support (such as hours for language advising and research postgraduates who provide writing support). The other aspects of undergraduate activities include in-class teaching, course co-ordination and summer teaching hours. Technically, summer teaching also includes of summer support activities run by
the SAC, however there is a Summer Support coordinator to relief the SAC coordinator during the summer period.

**Self-access centre’s role within the university**

As mentioned in Chapter Two when resources are scarce, according to the strategic contingencies theory in terms of horizontal power, it seems to be favourable to Self-access language learning as English support services are central to the university because it is the language used in subject-content teaching and not merely as a second language for daily conversations or travelling. As Bess and Dee (2008, p. 756) stipulate “effectiveness and efficiency are often in a zero-sum relationship”: overemphasis on efficiency may overlook external changes and process, vice versa too much emphasis on effectiveness may cause frequent changes to sustain internal structure and systems. Though the English support services are constantly fully utilized as shown in summative reports, the fact is that much more could be done to improve its effectiveness and allow a larger group of learners to benefit from them, thus it becomes more efficient. Indeed there are many opportunities for co-operation with other faculties and subunits. Therefore, it appears evaluation and changes are necessary as leaders, adapting to inside pressures and sticking to internal activities, are not maximizing goals of these subunits, such as SACs. On the other hand adjusting to outside pressures with cross-boundary activities are neither maximizing goals nor permitting the flow to be continued. As noted by (Bess and Dee, 2008 p.756):

> These imbalances call for a change in resources dedicated to various subsystems (internal or cross-boundary), thus suggesting new work processes, new ways of interacting with the external environment, or new linkages among the units within the organization.
In order to examine the role of self-access learning from a learner’s developmental perspective, evaluations need to consider both efficiency and effectiveness. From the teachers’ focus group and students’ interview findings, it is apparent that the following recommendations (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 231) that are vital to measuring effectiveness were not adhered to in this case:

- Good and bad practices leads to development of learning materials and activities.
- Effective teachers would encourage students to use SALL and expose them to a wider range of learning opportunities.
- If SALL is seen to be effective, more learners would want to make use of it.

As the focus group participants claimed, there appears to be no forum for anyone to exchange views and share good practices. They saw the focus group as a rare opportunity to do so, as T2 said “This is it!” The SAC coordinator affirmed that a core team of tutors with common beliefs and attitudes would be ideal to move forward effectively. However, this was not conveyed to senior management at least when time-tabling. Tutors with previous experience could be given priority to serve in the English support services team. The current method is that whoever has an extra hour or two missing in their workload calculation would be given Self-access work. In an extreme case of maternity leave during the period of research, a tutor was given four hours a week of language consultant duty to avoid class substitution in the middle of semester because of delivery. Not all teachers can be good language counsellors but the reverse can be said to be true. Language counsellors are encouraged to go through training and consider it as a developmental process of professional growth in becoming learners themselves as participants in dialogue looking for answers and carry out action research at the same time (Gardner & Miller, 1999, Karlsson, Kjisik and Nordlund 2007, Mozzon-McPherson, 2000). In fact, the SAC coordinator expected the language
consultants to take their own initiative in watching the “One to One Consultations” video pack produced in 1998 in the department but this seems highly unlikely, because of the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs may not be the same.

**Collaboration and Space**

There were three moves within two years of the physical re-location and resources in the Self-access Centre which resulted in a loss of its name neither being an “English Learning Resource Centre” (ELRC) nor a Self-Access Centre; it has become part of the Advisery Zone where Academic Advising, Library Information and Practical Cantonese Tutoring are all situated in one area. The Advisery Zone has become a place for seeking help which may have an adverse effect on students just wanting to have a chat with peers in English in a conducive environment as that is the immediate need. On the other hand, being more visible and located within the Learning Commons may be an advantage, since there are more opportunities of collaboration with other subunits such as Centre of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS) and Information Technology Services (ITS). Not only are some activities co-organised, they also have places for the English support services on their websites and brochures. These subunits provide support for services, university wide and have a positive relationship with students, especially undergraduates. Murray and Fujishima (2013) emphasised that social learning space or learning commons share a lot of features with SACs.

The emergence of a Community of Learners in the social learning space not only could promote a sense of learning but also support intercultural exchange. The example of the English Café research (Murray & Fujishima, 2013) noted the phenomenal emergence of autonomy as the manager connected learners who could support one another and progress through self-regulation to independent learning. The only instances of social learning observed from the interviewees is
when learners get each other’s contact after discussion groups, meet up and become good friends. Some of the interviewees expressed their wish to meet peer tutors beyond the interview room, such as over a cup of coffee, needs looking into if the social space as a resource can be tapped into. This would certainly enhance the effectiveness of Self-access support services.

**Community of Practice (CoP)**

**Staffing**

The findings shows that there were no full time staff provided by CAES, even the SAC coordinator had a full teaching load and was given three hours a week to run the SAC support services (both human and virtual support systems). His work was managing about 25 tutors including language advisers, peer tutors and writing support tutors (the research postgraduate students who had CAES scholarships) both human and virtual. On top of that there were students’ queries and complaints, in case a tutor showed up late or was on sick leave and so on. There was inadequate staff to man the physical resources, provide information to students querying the various kinds of support services or find the location of services or resources. The one staff provided by ITS works from 10am to 4pm at a reception counter, whereas the Learning Commons operates much longer hours than that. This implies that part-time students or staff will neither have support nor access to the information, although the VE website can compensate by providing details of services offered. Given that human support systems are the most costly part of maintaining an SAC, student helpers or clerical staff may be deployed to provide practical information to learners. Gardner and Miller (1999, p. 188) note, “Clerical staff and student helpers who give practical staff also need training.” On the other hand, student helpers if
deployed may become more involved in the SAC, may become role-models to peers and learners may feel more comfortable approaching them.

**Language consultants and advisers**

Employing clerical staff would free up the language consultant’s time as they become familiarized with the day-to-day running and location of resources in the centre and become more committed. Although questions that learner ask initially may be about how to find materials or use of equipment, language consultants also need to help learners as these initial questions would most likely build trust and they would then return for advisory sessions. However if the counsellor lacks the practical skills to assist learners in the beginning, they would not return and the opportunity for further language advising would be lost (Gardner & Miller, 1999). A narrative study conducted in Japan (Yamaguchi, 2011) found that student staff members could act as role models and further activate their agency to gain voice in the CoP by fostering learner autonomy and affect their fellow learners who visit the SACs.

**Communication**

Communication is vital and needs to be enhanced as even during the interview process the researcher found that about 75% of the learners needed a lot of explanation of the Self-access support services. These were students who had filled in the questionnaire and volunteered to be interviewed. This validates what tutors were saying about having to repeatedly introduce the services and it seems that learners had no clear objective why they were there in the first place. Also two-thirds of the student interviewees conveyed that the log-in registration system is cumbersome. They have to watch a video and add ‘My CAES’ to their favourite links in order to access the Virtual English website for registration of any of the human support services. Many are just put off watching the video which also contains information on how to get the link on
mobile devices or iPad. Several interviewees explained to their peers how to do the initial setting. Tutors in the focus group also spent a good deal of time discussing how to enhance the log-in registration system and combining it with providing more information to facilitate the language advising sessions. Some of the things they suggested include students’ background, learning habits, specific questions about learning English. Additionally the system can inform students what not to expect, such as proofreading services.

**Vision and Mission statements**

In a recent publication examining Self-access at management level, Gardner and Miller (2014) emphasise the importance of an organizational vision and the rationale for the subunits existence that is visible through the mission and is aligned with their strategic planning. In the case study, the University’s mission is clear (see Figure 5.1) but not that of CAES (on the annual report but not the website) nor the SAC. In fact three out of eight of the University’s mission is related to SAC work and will be discussed later in the chapter. There was mention that it may have been misplaced with all the changes on the website and moves in recent years (interview with Associate Director May 2014). “SALL managers should be aware of the institutional vision and mission and be able to articulate ways in which SALL aligns with them” (Gardner & Miller, 2014). In the interview with the SAC coordinator, he *did* mention that it was not necessary and seemed old fashioned to have a mission statement on the VE website. However, it has caused some confusion among students and tutors as they do not really understand the rationale behind the support services offered. Tutors in the focus group to teach strategies or allow quick fix
Figure 5.1 HKU’s Vision and Mission statements published on website: http://www.hku.hk

during advising sessions. Learners would also benefit if they knew the purpose of Self-access and may consider whether they need some guidance on improving their English strategically. They would then also think of the particular skill or sub skills they would like to work on, thus making the advising sessions more fruitful. Gardner and Miller (1997, 2011) found that after almost after 15 years of rationales of SACs in Hong Kong were still not still clearly communicated to stakeholders (2014 p. 33).

Feedback

Since there are ongoing changes in Self-access support services from semester to semester, it is necessary to collect feedback in a timely manner. The research carried out in the second semester of academic year 2013-2014, saw a huge change in student demographics
because of the education reform. The Teaching Assistants had ended their contract (four full time graduates left CAES who had been a part of a Teaching Development Grant Project). Peer tutoring support and Writing support services were newly introduced, as well as a new location for the resources and services. There has to be ongoing feedback collected in order to make key decisions about the services offered and make adjustments like putting more human support into popular activities, limiting or increasing the number of participants in discussion groups and/or workshops, and offering new workshops to develop skills and/or strategies.

**Conceptual Framework**

Dr. Morrison’s evaluation framework was re-examined after the preliminary findings and a meeting to consult him was held in July 2014. A consensus was reached that SAC mapping should not be a linear diagram and there needs to be more feedback, communication and interaction with the external as well as internal stakeholders. The focus of all the support services, especially both human and non-human support, offered in Self-access is the **learner** (students should not be used in terms of self-access) and how to help him or her develop learner autonomy.

Assumptions of the learner at starting point of the framework (SAC mapping) suggests that he or she potentially lacks linguistic knowledge or proficiency, lacks practice or feedback opportunities, lacks motivation, confidence or effective learning strategies. To a certain extent this may be true but given that all Self-access support services users are at tertiary level and would have learned English to a certain level having had at least 15 years from K1 to Y12 (in Hong Kong it’s three years kindergarten, six years primary and six years secondary school). Therefore, the starting point is where the learner is at and the next level that he or she wishes to
attain. An analogy would be, using Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs (see Figure 5.2) that the basic need would be survival English for visiting an English-speaking country, asking for directions and so on. However, in this context the needs are different. Some learners who visit the SAC are there because they need to pass an IELTS or TOEFL exam, which is the next level. It is often found that year 3 or postgraduate students are seeking employment, so they will have a higher need in terms of communicating in English professionally. Like Maslow’s highest two levels referring to self-esteem and self-actualisation, is similar to learners who want to climb up the social ladder and be seen in socialising going out to the pubs and bars and being able to communicate in English or become native-like speakers of English. The SAC would be more effective if there were support for all levels of the hierarchy but given the limitations of resources and human support, this would be difficult. An evaluation would entail learners’ needs if
satisfied and then they might return for more support or would tell their friends about the support services, thus, feedback is necessary.

From the SAC Mapping diagram (see Figure 1.4), the five components would be reduced to three protagonists, the learner, human support and non-human support with resources and environment would coming under non-human support. In fact, IT support would be of two types that of the system for administration and English resources (this is actually beyond the scope of Virtual English as it involves the whole world-wide-web and social media). Likewise for human support systems would be for administration and the activities or services, such as language advising, writing support, workshops and discussion groups. Therefore, there is a fine line between human and non-human resources in the revised framework (see Figure 5.4 below). Even though peer support services is in collaboration with another subunit, it is worth getting feedback from learners to evaluate whether such collaboration should be continued. Reports with feedback and data from various support services need to be collated every semester and closely monitored (SAC Mapping indicated by in Fig. 5.5) for evaluation and decision making.
Total quality management principles can be applied to Self-access language learning as it not a quick fix to addressing issues but that of continuous improvement. Change can be directed by leaders in business and government without consensus but in higher education there needs to be a consensus for change to happen because real power lies in the people and the perceived power of leaders (Sim & Sim, 1995). In SAC mapping, Kaizen or continuous improvement can be applied as the human and non-human support systems if they are reviewed each semester from the feedback and evaluation in place; therefore, changes can be made rapidly.
**Conclusion**

The college and university of the twenty-first century must prepare students for the real world, that is, for the ever changing career and economic realities they will face. “Institutions of higher education must abandon the production model of higher education in which success is based on head counts, credit generation, grades and degrees and move toward a learning environment that emphasizes an involvement that will empower students with a high quality “tool kit” to meet new challenges” (Sims and Sims, 1995, p. 11).

This research set out to explore the process by which university management and administrators evaluate a self-access centre’s (SACs) effectiveness and efficiency in a university in Hong Kong and to describe how students and tutors experience a centre. The findings have answered the central research question as summative information is inadequate to address the issues of effectiveness in the SAC as it is far more complex than courses offered by CAES. The findings in Chapter 4 also indicated that there are very different perspectives on students’ and

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**Figure 5.5 Improved version of Morrison (2003) Framework’s Hong Kong SAC Mapping**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HUMAN SUPPORT</th>
<th>LEARNER</th>
<th>NON HUMAN SUPPORT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer tutors/advisers/writing tutors/admin. staff</td>
<td>Needs</td>
<td>Resources &amp; Materials (Organisation &amp; accessibility)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert knowledge</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems (incl. sharing good practice &amp; development and training)</td>
<td>Proficiency</td>
<td>Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Learning style</td>
<td>Physical &amp; Virtual Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motivation &amp; Interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Through feedback evaluation continuous improvement)
tutors’ experience of the centre (RQ 1) and that a lot needs to be done in order to raise students’ self-efficacy (RQ2) in order for them to become independent learners which is the ultimate goal for Self-access Language Learning.

**Recommendations for Practice**

To improve communication and for the SAC to work effectively, there are several recommendations that can be implemented in the short term.

**A Strengthened Core Team**

While the Centre of Applied English Studies’ (CAES) vision is that it aims to be recognized as a regional and international leader in the field of second language education through teaching, research and innovation, which makes a vital contribution to the university (CAES Annual report, 2012-3), Self-access seems to do more than that. There are at least three university’s mission statements (HKU’s Vision and Mission statements published on website: [http://www.hku.hk](http://www.hku.hk)) that are in line with Self-access language learning ideology:

- To provide a comprehensive education, developing fully the intellectual and personal strengths of its students while developing and extending lifelong learning opportunities for the community
- To produce graduates of distinction committed to lifelong learning, integrity and professionalism, capable of being responsive leaders and communicators in their fields
- To develop a collegial, flexible, pluralistic and supportive intellectual environment that inspires and attracts, retains and nurtures scholars, students and staff of the highest
calibre in a culture that fosters creativity, learning and freedom of thought, enquiry and expression.

In terms of role theory, in this case study, a balance between role clarity and ambiguity would be most effective. As CAES’s vision and that of Self-access may not be entirely the same, tutors may be confused as they are concurrently teaching many of the courses offered by CAES. Role ambiguity allows less specifications of roles and loose coupling among Self-access tutors. According to Orton and Weick (1990) as cited in Bess & Dee, 2008), “loosely coupled systems may lead to more rapid development of new roles in the organization, more flexible connections among roles across the organization and more adaptive role responses to changing external conditions” (p. 266). The mission of SAC could be aligned to the university’s ones mentioned above which would appeal to the wider student population. English is not the only focus of Self-access, it is also to help students become independent learners that clearly aligns with “lifelong learning” and “natures students…in a culture that fosters creativity, learning and freedom of thought, enquiry and expression”. Moreover, the rapid changes in the external environment makes it necessary for a core team to be responsive and make adjustments in a timely manner. The Community of Practice needs to function and develop its own judgment regarding supporting learners effectively. The annual report that consists of summative information may not help the professional development of SAC tutors nor is there any room for sharing of good practice or success stories. On the contrary, if more recognition of the work of SAC tutors existed, the core team would become stronger. It is also suggested that the tutors’ diverse interests and professional backgrounds be made known to SAC users in areas such as business, law, literature and examiners of various public exams. Students could then make choices to see the relevant person for language advising and/or writing support.
An Enhanced Non-human Support System

The use of IT can help eliminate some of the tedious tasks and serve in improving the flow of information. Much of the repetition that the tutors’ focus group members mentioned, such as how to log into registration system and finding resources on Virtual English website, can be facilitated by producing videos. Students who have used the support services and appreciated it can be invited to share in interviews that can be recorded on video and aired on Campus TV for promoting the SAC and its services.

The cumbersome log in system needs to be simplified and an enhanced VE website in collaboration with Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL) staff is essential. Because tutors requested more information about learners as well as suggesting putting on the website what not to expect, for example, proofreading can be made clear.

Since the Writing support system is a new initiative, there needs to be feedback and improvement. As mentioned in the previous section, knowing the tutors’ expertise would help students get the appropriate feedback on writing. It may also be useful to create a system where students can send queries and drafts of their writing a few days in advance before meeting a tutor for writing support, so that writing support sessions can be more diagnostic and effective. More information and training of ITS services staff (who sit at the front desk in Chi Wah Learning Commons) is necessary to answer some student enquiries such as locating a resource, differences between the various human support services, navigating the VE website and so on.

This would save a lot of tutors’ time in order to become more efficient, so that the 20-minute language advising session would be devoted fully to enhancing English and study skills.
Implications for practice

The case study of a Self-access centre’s effectiveness and efficiency provides information useful to institutions that are in a similar situation in several ways. First, it is necessary to examine the SAC’s role in the context of the university it serves not only as a subunit of a particular faculty. The management needs to recognise the vital role Self-access plays in providing support services to campus-wide users and not only the students of CAES courses, especially in an English medium university.

Second, the research provides helpful strategies in collaborative efforts with other subunits on campus thus producing desired results without having to put in many more resources.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the Self-access centre requires more than summative reports based on headcounts. There needs to be sharing of good practices, development of a core team that is, the Community of Practice and a quality “tool kit” of continuous improvement through constant feedback and evaluation.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this research is that it focused on one site and a limited time frame of one semester to explore the issue of evaluating a Self-access centre’s effectiveness and efficiency. Further research could include case studies in other institutions in Self-access Centres in Hong Kong or in Asia to evaluate their effectiveness and efficiency using the revised framework. Although Gardner and Miller’s (2014) book, Managing Self-Access Language Learning, looks at the managerial perspective and presented six case studies of SAC’s in Hong
Kong, a study on manager’s beliefs and attitudes would enable us to gain valuable insights into the prospects of SACs in Hong Kong.

Other research based on longitudinal study or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of learners that have graduated or are employed to evaluate whether the effect of SACs have caused them to become independent learners and lifelong learners. There were two interviews that are good examples of this type of further research one learner became a peer tutor (S14 interview) and another one who is a current member of staff in HKU (S15 interview) and he/she presented a conference paper in English out of the learners’ own interest.
References


Appendices
Appendix A

Daya Choy Datwani
Evaluating an SAC's effectiveness and efficiency
The University of Hong Kong, Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES)
Principal Investigator: Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Student Researcher: Daya Choy Datwani
Title of Project: Evaluating a self-access centre's effectiveness and efficiency
Email cover

Request to Participate in Research

My name is Daya Choy Datwani and I am a student of the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University, Boston, USA. I am interested in studying how to evaluate a self-access centre's (SACs) effectiveness and efficiency as well as students' experience in terms of their self-efficacy after using the SAC and its services. I would like to invite you to participate in a web-based online survey that should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. The survey is part of a research study exploring views and perceptions on the effectiveness of the Centre of Applied English Studies (CAES) English support in Zone R – Chi Wah Learning Commons (previously known as ELRC) and Virtual English online. The questionnaire is anonymous except the last question for interview is voluntarily. I assure you that contact information for the interviews are not linked in any way to the questionnaire responses.

I am asking you to participate in this study because you are a English as a second language learners and a student of the university who may have used our services online (Virtual English) or by physically visiting Zone R in Chi Wah Learning Commons. You must be at least 18 years old to take this survey.

Data obtained from the survey will be analyzed through descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis based on description, exemplification and cross data analysis. Your part in this study is anonymous even if your response may be identified by IP address or electronic record, I assure I will not capture this information and the data from the research will be used only for professional presentation and publication purposes. To ensure this all data will be coded or pseudo-named.

I would greatly appreciate if you would volunteer for a follow-up interview, by filling in the last question. Participation in the interview will provide an in-depth understanding of your own learning experience in the ELRC and will be beneficial in becoming an independent learner and improving English self-efficacy. I will conduct the face-to-face interview personally which take 30 to 45 minutes. Interviewees will be invited to a tea-party to practice speaking English naturally.

The deadline for the completion of the survey is 2 May 2014. The survey web link is:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GKSCS5B
Questionnaire about the Centre of Applied English Studies (CAES)

*1. Have you ever used any of the English resources/activities offered by CAES? If so, please tick the ones from the list below:
- Discussion groups
- Workshops
- English Advising
- Writing support
- English Peer Tutor service
- CAES websites
- Virtual English
- Other online resources
- Books, DVDs, Newspaper and Magazines

Other (please specify)

*2. Are you (choose one of the following)
- an undergraduate?
- a Taught postgraduate?
- a Research postgraduate?

*3. How often did you use the resources/activities in Zone R, Chi Wah Learning Commons during the semester?
- Once a week
- Every fortnight
- One or two times each semester
- More than once every week
- Every month
- Never

4. If you rarely used Zone R resources could you tell us why?
Questionnaire about the Centre of Applied English Studies (CAES)

Physical Resources in Zone R

5. Did you use the resources as part of a coursework requirement? (e.g. CAES9820 15 hours SALL required)
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No
   Other (please specify)
   

*6. How useful do you think that Zone R is, to learn English?

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<tr>
<th>Learning English in Zone R</th>
<th>Not at all useful</th>
<th>somehow useful</th>
<th>quite useful</th>
<th>very useful</th>
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7. What resources did you use in Zone R and how often?

8. What has been your experience using physical or online resources?

9. What (if anything) would you like us to change about Zone R resources/services? (e.g. by certain kinds of materials, opening hours, staffing, etc.)
Questionnaire about the Centre of Applied English Studies (CAES)

Human support in Zone R

This section is about support that involves a tutor or peer

10. If you did go to Zone R, how useful did you find these activities?

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<th>Very useful</th>
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</table>

11. Do you have any suggestions that could help us improve such activities?

12. Did you go to any of the Discussion Groups or Workshops in Zone R? If yes, how many? And which ones?

13. Did you use the English Advisory service this semester? (one to one with CAES tutors)

- [ ] More than 5 times
- [ ] 2 to 4 times
- [ ] Once
- [ ] Never

Other (please specify)

14. In what ways was the advise helpful? (e.g. for finding resources, for setting realistic goals, for time management, for improving English, etc.)

15. Do you have any suggestions that could help us improve the English advisory sessions?
16. Did you use study English anywhere else during the last few months? If yes, where?
   For example, on the Internet, language courses and so on)

17. If you studied elsewhere, then how much time (%) was spent in Zone R and other places?
   Zone R Chi Wah
   Learning Commons
   Other locations

18. On average, how often do you communicate in English, per week outside of class?
   - More than 10 hours
   - 6 to 10 hours
   - 3 to 5 hours
   - 1 to 2 hours
   - Less than 1 hour
   Other (please specify)

19. Have you ever used a support service like Zone R before you entered University of Hong Kong? If yes, where?

20. What other activities would you like us to provide in Zone R?
Questionnaire about the Centre of Applied English Studies (CAES)

21. Finally, we would like to make working in Zone R as efficient and beneficial as possible for you. Your feedback is essential for this. Would you be willing to participate in a 30-45 minute interview. If yes, please fill in your details here:

Name:
email:
Mobile (optional):
Date available:
Time available:
Appendix C

Welcome,

Is everyone comfortable? May I get anyone a drink? Tissues?

My name is Daya Choy Datwani and I am a student of the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University, Boston, USA. I am interested in studying how to evaluate a self-access centre’s (SACs) effectiveness and efficiency as well as students’ experience in terms of their self-efficacy after using the SAC and its services. You have been asked to participate today in this focus group because you have the shared experience of being tutors of the self-access centre, maybe as a language consultant, running workshops or discussion groups.

Your voice is valued as it provides unique insight into the services offered from the perspective of the tutor. This voice has not yet been fully captured and is essential for informing ways that we can best serve students’ needs. In addition the information you share might be used to inform a number of stakeholders within the CAES at HKU as to how the services and resources can be modified to better serve the emotional, social and academic needs of future students.

To fully capture your voice today, I would like to audio record our conversation. I will be assigning gender-neutral pseudonames to each of you. I will transcribe this conversation, then destroy the recording. After I complete my analysis of the transcript and write up the final report, I will share with you my insights for your validation. I will then destroy the transcript.
I want to be clear that because I also serve as a tutor/ for the self-access centre, during this focus group, I will be moderating not in this role, but rather as an independent research investigator, supported by Northeastern University.

I am reaching out to you for your verbal informed consent. If you would not like to participate in the study or do not wish to be audio recorded please inform me at this time.

I would like to begin audio recording of this conversation. Do any of you have an objection to being audio recorded? Please try and speak loudly, so I can capture your voice.

Good. Let’s begin.

START AUDIO

In order to participate in the focus group, I need every member to verbally agree to a set of norms designed to protect the members of the group. For this purpose I have chosen to use a set of norms developed by the National Association of Independent Schools of New England. These include:

- Honor confidentiality.
- Assume positive intent.
- Speak from the “I” perspective.
- Listen, listen, listen, then respond.
- Take risks.
- “Ouch!”
- Be fully present.
- Lean into discomfort.
- Be crisp, say what is core.
- Treat the candidness of others as a gift.
- Suspend judgment of yourself and of others.

Does everyone in the group feel comfortable to abide by these norms? Good.
The questions that I am going to ask of the group were informed by themes that emerged from students’ interview and responses from an online questionnaire that were collated. This information was collected in the Fall semester of 2013. They are designed to be open-ended and conversational. You are not obligated to answer any of these and you may respond in any order you wish. I will moderate the conversation.

**Ice-breaker questions:**
- How does it feel to be towards the end of the semester?

**Substance questions:**

**Success/Challenges**
- Describe a successful or challenging experience in the self-access centre?
- What are major causes of frustrations and anxiety dealing with students?
  
  *Optional follow-up*
  - Were there any gender / cultural issues?

**Support**
- What are the things that the self-access centre did or not do well?
- What support (academic or non-academic) do you think the University could have provided to boost students’ participation rate in the self-access centre?

**Motivation**
- What are the major motivating factors for you to become a tutor in the self-access centre?
- What do you think are the major motivating factors for students to visit or use (including online services) the self-access centre?
Resources/services offered in self-access centre

- Did you perceive the resources/services to be culturally appropriate?

- What do tutors need to know about students’ learning culture?

Closure questions:

- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you for your participation. I am going to stop recording. If you change your mind, and would like to withdraw your consent for participation, please let me know by email within 30 days.

STOP AUDIO
Appendix D

Template 1 Format for Signed Informed Consent Document
Please modify the following information as necessary.

Northeastern University, Department
Name of Investigator(s): Primary Investigator, Dr. Kimberly Nolan and Student Researcher Mrs. Daya Choy Datunari
Title of Project: A Case Study: Evaluating a Self Access Centre’s Effectiveness and Efficiency

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to participate in this study because you are [English] as a second language learners and a student of the university who may have used our services online (Virtual English) or by visited Zone R – Chi Wah Learning Commons and used the resources or services there. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this interview.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose is find out how to evaluate a self access centre (SACs) and its services’ effectiveness and efficiency as well as to understand students’ experience in terms of their self-efficacy after using the SAC and its services.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be invited to fill out an online questionnaire anonymously. The questionnaire will contain 20 questions of your experience in the using the resources or services in Zone R, Chi Wah Learning Commons. You will be asked to volunteer for a semi-structured interview for a more in-depth understanding of your experience. If you agree, you may be audiotaped during the interview and the interview will take 30-45 minutes.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed in the students’ lounge at Chi Wah Learning Commons at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will take about 30-45 minutes and conducted by the student researcher herself.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
This procedure has no known risks or discomfort.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, in this study, you will be invited to reflect on your personal experience. Such reflection may give you insights about yourself. In addition, this research project can provide valuable information on how to become an independent learner and improve English self-efficacy.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. The interview participants will be known to no-one except the researcher and will be used for research purposes only. Codes, not names are used on all interview transcript, documentation and analysis for this project to protect confidentiality of participants. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.
Data storage - for research purposes, the interviews will be audio-taped for further data checking. The record will be disposed of 2 years after publication of the relevant research results. The data will be stored for 12 months in a password protected computer.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Mrs. Daya Choy Datwani email: choydatwani.d@husky.neu.edu the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Kimberly Nolan, email: knolan@neu.edu the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be invited to a tea party and gain the experience of speaking English naturally in a social context.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There will be no known costs involved in your participation of the study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part

Date

Printed name of person above

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

Date

Mrs. Daya Datwani Choy

Depending upon the nature of your research, you may also be required to provide information about one or more of the following if it is applicable:
1. A statement that the particular treatment or procedure may involve risks to the subject (or to the embryo or fetus, if the subject is or may become pregnant) which are currently unforeseeable.
2. Anticipated circumstances under which the subject's participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject's consent.
3. Any additional costs to the subject that may result from participation in the research.
4. The consequences of a subject's decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the subject.
5. A statement that significant new finding(s) developed during the course of the research which may be related to the subject's willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject.
6. The approximate number of subjects involved in the study.
Appendix E

Interview Protocol Form

Student Interview Protocol

Institution: Northeastern University, Boston, U.S.A.

Interviewee (Title and Name):  (Student volunteer) of The University of Hong Kong

Interviewer:  Mrs. Daya Choy Datwani – student researcher email: choydatwani.d@husky.neu.edu

Chief Investigator: Dr. K. Nolan  email: k.nolan@neu.edu

Date:  May/ June 2014

Location of Interview: Students’ Lounge in Chi Wah Learning Commons

Previously attained background information (this may be collected from questionnaire)

Student semi-structured Interviews

Part I:  Introductory Question Objectives (5-7 minutes). Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions (under typical circumstances an informed consent form would be reviewed and signed here).

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the experience of being a student user of the self-access centre and its services. Our research project focuses on the experience of undergraduate / taught postgraduate or postgraduate research students with a particular interest in understanding how they experience the centre and its services. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into students’ experience and into the manner in which students’ transition into an independent learner. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can better support students during their academic experience.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me (provide the signed consent form). Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your
participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?

We have planned this interview to last no longer than 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

**Introduction**

A. Interviewee Background

How long have you been a student in this university?

Are you currently a self-access language learner while working on your Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES) coursework?

IF YES: which course?

IF NO: Were you working on a research project that requires academic English?

**Part II:** Objectives (35–40 minutes): Obtain the participant’s insights, in his/her own words, into the learning experiences that have facilitated or hindered self-confidence in English as a second language and becoming an independent learner.

**Prefatory Statement:** I would like to hear about your experience in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences or transitions that you encountered during your studies and your perspective at various times. Your responses may include both academic and non-academic elements as appropriate.

**Context**

Briefly describe how you came to be a student in this university?

Prompts:

(NOTE: KEEP THIS BRIEF AS IT IS NOT THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY)

1) Why did you decide to use the resources or services in the self-access centre? (motivation)
2) What about this specific resource or service was attractive to you?
One of the things we are interested in learning about is the development of your sense of a self-access language learner as you have progressed through your studies. In this context, self-access language learning refers to having confidence in your ability to transition from the role of learner to that of independent learner as well as to accomplish your studies in an English environment. The process of transitioning from a learner to an independent learner is comprised of many smaller tasks or components. The questions that follow reference many of those components and ask you to discuss the ways in which your experiences in using the resources or services in Zone R of Chi Wah Learning Commons or the Virtual English website have facilitated or inhibited your self-confidence relative to these components.

Q1) Reflecting on your time in your studies to date, describe a learning experience in the self-access centre or its services that has facilitated self-confidence in your ability to apply English academically.

**Prompt:** Describe what about this experience was most helpful.

**Follow-up:** If applicable, describe a learning experience that has hindered your self-confidence in this area.

**Prompt:** Describe what about this experience was most unhelpful?

Q2) Reflecting on your time in your studies to date, describe a learning experience in the self-access centre or its services that has facilitated self-confidence in your ability to use English in communicating socially.

**Prompt:** Describe what about this experience was most helpful.

**Follow-up:** If applicable, describe a learning experience that has hindered your self-confidence in these areas.

**Prompt:** Describe what about this experience was most unhelpful.

Q3) Reflecting on your time in your studies to date, describe any resources or activities that has facilitated self-confidence in your ability to use English effectively.

**Prompt:** Describe what about this experience was most helpful.

**Follow-up:** If applicable, describe a learning experience that has hindered your self-confidence in these areas.

**Prompt:** Describe what about this experience was most unhelpful.

Q4) Tell me a story about the types of learning experiences you imagine would help you most going forward to continue to develop your self-confidence for becoming an independent learner.
Q5) Thinking back over time from when you first began using the services or self-access resources, describe whether there was anything culturally inappropriate.

Prompt: Please include both subtle and more pronounced changes that you’ve noticed in your confidence over time.

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.
Appendix F

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action

Date: April 16, 2014  IRB #: CPS14-03-26
Principal Investigator(s): Kimberly Nolan
Daya Datwani Choy
Department: Doctor of Education
College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University
Title of Project: A Case Study: Evaluating a Self Access Centre’s Effectiveness and Efficiency
Participating Sites: Permission received from University of Hong Kong
Informed Consent: One (1) unsigned consent
One (1) signed consent

As per CFR 45: 46.117(c)(2) signed consent is being waived as the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required.

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Monitoring Interval: 12 months
Approval Expiration Date: APRIL 15, 2015

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board
San C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
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<td>Join networking event / toastmaster outside HKU</td>
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<td>Choice of activities</td>
<td>Clear sense of purpose / local</td>
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<td>Wrong information / Need more explanation</td>
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<td>Try out / Moving / Not consistent try once or twice</td>
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<td>Online resources (writing)</td>
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<td>Resources vocabulary / grammar books / IELTS</td>
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<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>peer can understand me better</td>
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<td>Adviser said I have improved / Can do amazing things</td>
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<td>Need some kind of progress / record / report</td>
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<td>Professor writing evaluation shows improvement / self-evaluation</td>
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<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Increased confidence / fluency</td>
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<td>Writing support not useful</td>
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<td>Ideology IL2 self / who cares</td>
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Other remarks: Staff, Advisor Topic, DGT is DG too full PT
Appendix H

Development of English Support Services
Academic Year 1991 - 2013

1991 - 2

Writing clinic

1992 - 3

Self-access newsletter
Discussion Groups
Learner training course
Conversation Exchange

1993 - 4

Learner training Course
Concordancing Course
Films
Business Communication Course
Conversation Exchange
Self-access newsletter
Discussion Groups
Basic English Course
SAC Coordinator’s role: Orientation Sessions (Freshmen), Interviews (peer support), Training & Induction (Tutors, RPGs), Managing Physical Resources: Books, DVDs, Magazines, Newspapers, Rooms Booking, Promotion of Support services, Time-tableing, Web-booking, Internet resources
Appendix I

English Language Support by the Centre for Applied English Studies

Writing Support Sessions

Skills Workshops

Summer Institute

EXPLORE English Language Support

CAES-CEDARS Joint Effort: Peer Tutoring Scheme

English Advising

MORE THAN JUST A LANGUAGE: English is a TOOL

Discussion Groups

CAES Centre for Applied English Studies

For details http://caes.hku.hk/ve

The Advisory Zone Zone R
Student Advisory Services Zone
2/F Chi Wah Learning Commons
English Language Support by the Centre for Applied English Studies

How can CAES help you improve your English?

**English Language Resources**
We have thousands of resources to help you improve your pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, academic/professional writing, IELTS, etc.

**Writing Support Sessions**
Whether you are struggling with starting an essay, unsure of what you have written or would just like to have a second pair of eyes look over part of your essay, CAES Advisors are here to help.

**Peer Tutoring**
Want to chat to a student tutor who has excellent English language skills? Book an appointment for a 25-minute one-to-one, face-to-face chat with one of our students! **BEGINNING IN OCTOBER**

**English Advising**
CAES Advisors can help you make a study plan, give you advice about appropriate resources to develop specific English skills, diagnose problems with pronunciation and grammar, and give you feedback on writing.

**Discussions/Skills Workshops**
Sign up for a 1-hour discussion session or a skills workshop with a CAES teacher and other students in a small supportive group.

**CAES Summer Institute**
CAES offers a range of fun and practical English courses during the summer including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary learning and job application. **TO BE OFFERED IN MAY AND JUNE**

**THE ADVISORY ZONE**
ZONE R, STUDENT ADVISORY SERVICES ZONE 2/F, CHI WAI LEARNING COMMONS

CAES
For details [http://caes.hku.hk/ve](http://caes.hku.hk/ve)
Find us on Facebook [https://www.facebook.com/CAES.ELRC](https://www.facebook.com/CAES.ELRC)