

Policy analysis of vocational training with advocacy coalition framework: a case study on Hong Kong dental care profession

Higher Education
Evaluation and
Development

101

Sin Yi Lam

Faculty of Dentistry, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Received 2 November 2024
Revised 25 February 2025
29 April 2025
6 May 2025
Accepted 7 May 2025

Abstract

Purpose – This article explores the vocational training in tertiary education in Hong Kong, referencing the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) by Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1994). A case study on the training of dental care professionals (DenCPs) in Hong Kong, with considering the feedback necessary for technique-sensitive training to support Hong Kong's healthcare system, is included to examine the coherence and conflicts between stakeholders in the education system and the relationship between vocational training, market needs and policymakers' roles in projecting and identifying future societal needs.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper employs the ACF as the primary analytical tool. Data collection involves document analysis of vocational training policies, interviews with key stakeholders in the dental industry and review of relevant literature. ACF identifies and analyses the advocacy coalitions involved in shaping vocational training policies in Hong Kong. The alignment between vocational training, market demands and public health policy is examined to understand the impact on the development and efficacy of training programs for DenCPs.

Findings – The study particularly emphasises the role of the ACF in shaping vocational training policies, highlighting the influence of various advocacy coalitions. The alignment between vocational training, market demands and public health policy is essential for developing effective training programs for DenCPs. This paper contributes to the discourse on vocational training efficacy and policy development, emphasising the need for collaborative efforts to meet the evolving needs of the dental industry.

Originality/value – The originality and value of the paper lie in its comprehensive analysis of vocational training policies in the context of the dental industry in Hong Kong. By applying the ACF, the research offers a unique perspective on the interplay between stakeholders, policy development and workforce needs. The study's focus on aligning vocational training with market demands and public health policy to address the shortage of dental professionals showcases its innovative approach. This contributes valuable insights into the efficacy of vocational training programs and their impact on the healthcare sector in Hong Kong.

Keywords Workforce development, Tertiary education, Vocational training, Advocacy Coalition Framework, Dental care professionals (DenCPs), Hong Kong healthcare policy

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The educational landscape in Hong Kong has experienced substantial transformation over the past decades. In the 1970s, the education system provided students with six years of free compulsory education. However, through the implementation of various financial aid initiatives, this period has been extended to twelve years. These programs have been instrumental in ensuring that all students have equitable access to educational opportunities regardless of their socio-economic background (Leung *et al.*, 2018). Each year, the Education Bureau offers only 15,000 places for first-year publicly funded college programs, even though there are over 50,000 eligible students, leading to intense competition (South China Morning Post, 2022).

© Sin Yi Lam. Published in *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode>



Higher Education Evaluation and
Development
Vol. 19 No. 1, 2025
pp. 101-113
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2514-5797
p-ISSN: 2514-5789
DOI 10.1108/HEED-11-2024-0048

The recent government review of the Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance and the proposed amendments to the Dentists Registration Ordinance aim to improve the quality and transparency of vocational training programs. The Government launched a review of the Post Secondary Colleges Ordinance (Cap. 320) to improve post-secondary education opportunities in 2020, focus on enhancing the registration rules for post-secondary colleges by updating current procedures and establishing a unified system for all self-financing institutions offering degree and sub-degree programs, to ensure these institutions are transparent and meet modern governance standards. Proposed changes will evaluate the effectiveness of existing rules, uphold education quality, streamline registration, and eliminate outdated provisions. The Legislative Council is expected to review these proposed changes in the latter half of 2024. While the proposed amendment focuses on the administration and execution of the educational system, it is essential to recognise the link between education and workforce quality. The changes could enhance the city's completeness by improving the workforce quality and increasing the availability of skilled professionals to meet community needs. This article explores the vocational training in tertiary education in Hong Kong, referencing the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) by [Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier \(1994\)](#). A case study on the training of Dental Care Professional in Hong Kong, with considering the feedback necessary for technique-sensitive training to support Hong Kong's healthcare system, is included to examine the coherence and conflicts between stakeholders in the education system and the relationship between vocational training, market needs, and policymakers' roles in projecting and identifying future societal needs.

Vocational training policies in Hong Kong

Vocational training equips students with the practical skills and knowledge necessary for the job market by preparing them for various industries to address labour market demands ([Oviawe et al., 2017](#)). Policy documents reveal that vocational education has consistently been a focal point for the Government, illustrating its evolution. Examples include:

- (1) Report of the Working Party on Pre-Vocational Education (1970)
- (2) Learning for Life, Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong (2000)
- (3) The New Academic Structure for Senior Secondary Education and Higher Education (2005)
- (4) Review of Development of Vocational Education in Hong Kong (2015)

According to the Government report "Review of Education System Reform Proposals" (2000), higher education encompasses all "learning opportunities beyond secondary school level," including public and private universities, post-secondary colleges, and non-local tertiary institutions. The report emphasised "community college" as an alternative route to formal higher education, focusing on acquiring "skills and qualifications recognised by employers to enhance employability". One primary function of community college training is to align with job market demands. The report maintains a notion of a disadvantaged group with a "lenient entry, stringent exit" policy, ensuring that applicants with inadequate academic performance in secondary education can achieve recognised standards and qualifications to meet future employers' and professional bodies' expectations ([Wong, 2021](#)).

[Yau et al. \(2020\)](#) noted new policies aimed at revitalising vocational education and training (VET), rebranded as Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET), by including programmes up to the degree level, offering specialised vocational skills and professional knowledge. VPET helps equip learners with skills for work and life during the school-to-work transition period. It also addresses workforce needs by providing talents of different ages. These talents can enter the job market one to two years earlier than

undergraduates, supporting the job market by extending the age range. Despite its benefits, [Yau et al. \(2020\)](#) concluded that VPET's promotion needs enhancement to break the image of providing second-class education and not lead to higher pay and status in society. The concept of "vocationalism" — the orientation of education around preparation for labour markets — remains valid 30 years after Grubb's mention (1985). The political mission of vocational training to lower the unemployment rate and enlarge the workforce range cannot be ignored, though it is not the focus of this analysis.

Analytical framework: advocacy coalition framework (ACF)

[Cairney \(2015\)](#) had a clear expound on the framework. ACF is comprised of individuals from varying roles who share a similar set of beliefs. It encompasses fundamental values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions, and these individuals engage in coordinated activities over time ([Sabatier, 1988](#)). ACF examines the interactions between competing advocacy coalitions within policy subsystems ([Haar and Pierce, 2021](#)), which operate within a broader political system and external environment. This framework portrays subsystems as relatively open and multi-level, involving many actors beyond the traditional "iron triangles" of administrative agencies, legislative committees, and interest groups ([Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1994](#)). Participants from different government levels, communities, researchers, and policy analysts contribute significantly to creating, disseminating, and evaluating policy ideas ([Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1994](#)). This perspective arises from the emphasis on the role of ideas in policymaking. Actors may wield influence by articulating significant ideas, not merely through the exercise of power. ACF particularly highlights the importance of belief systems, noting that many actors gain influence by sharing beliefs with a large group of others. Converting these shared beliefs into policy decisions and outcomes is a collective endeavour. Beliefs function as the "glue" that binds numerous actors together ([Figure 1](#)).

ACF is underpinned by four critical elements that elucidate its operation ([Ohno et al., 2022](#)). Firstly, the core beliefs of the coalition encompass the values and assumptions held by its members, alongside their resources such as financial means, expertise, professional skills, social status, and political influence. Secondly, the policy subsystem represents the environment in which policy decisions are made ([Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018](#)). It involves various coalitions that interact and sometimes clash, employing their strategies to drive changes in specific policy areas. Thirdly, the guidance mechanisms are pivotal in facilitating change. This could manifest as significant budgetary adjustments or substantial legislative reforms in vocational training. Individuals sharing similar beliefs coalesce into groups, striving to translate their convictions into policies that serve their interests. Lastly, the time is counted. The Government aggregates the beliefs of diverse actors across various levels, manipulating rules and guidelines within the subsystem over time. Sabatier posited that policy change might span a decade to achieve "a reasonably accurate portrait of programme success and failure" ([Sabatier, 1988](#)). However, this period may be shortened considering contemporary social, political, and technological advancements. ACF operates akin to a chemical reaction: Over time, there is an evolutionary transformation of a product resulting from the collision, combination, or elimination of external elements ([Weible et al., 2011](#)).

Coalitions operate based on core beliefs and values, influencing their actions and interactions within the policy systems and subsystems ([Pierce et al., 2017](#)): Government agencies prioritise public health outcomes, workforce readiness, and the efficient use of public funds; Educational institutions focus on academic excellence, accreditation standards, and the employability of graduates; Professional bodies emphasise professional standards, ethical practices, and the recognition of qualifications; Industry stakeholders seek a skilled and competent workforce to meet market demands and ensure high-quality work; Students and trainees aim for accessible, high-quality education that leads to stable and rewarding careers.

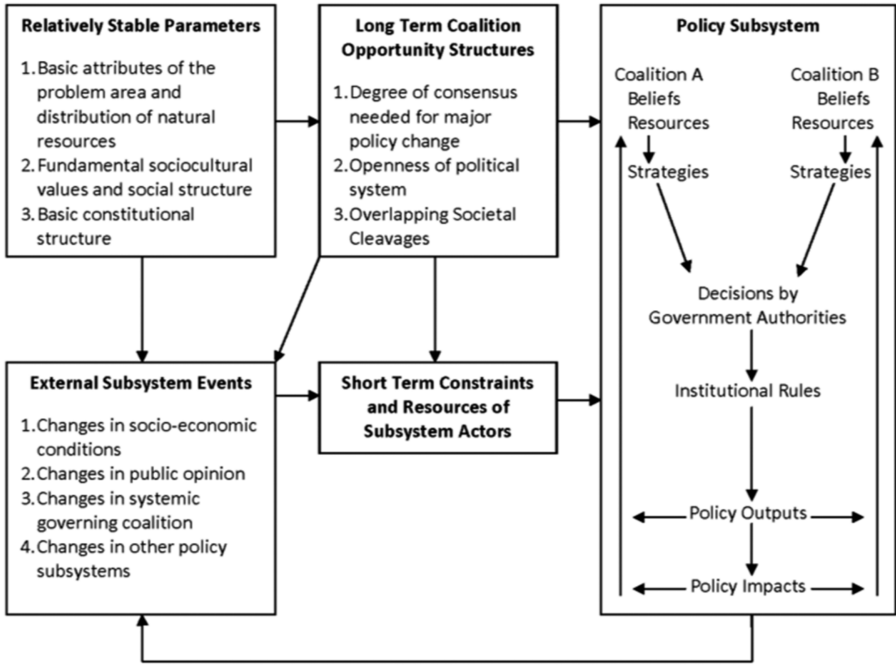


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the advocacy coalition framework (Cairney, 2015, p. 487)

Vocational training in Hong Kong

Tertiary education in Hong Kong aims to balance its multicultural heritage and historical context, transitioning from an industrial to a knowledge-based society. Vocational training prepares individuals for the labour market, especially during the rapid industrialisation of the 1950s. Initially seen as a second-tier option compared to academic study, vocational education has gained importance due to its practical skillset. Vocational training in Hong Kong began with the Junior Technical School in 1931. Over the past 90 years, governmental and private entities have significantly developed vocational education, with higher education institutions joining in from the 1960s. Institutions like the University of Hong Kong (HKU) have adapted by offering vocational training through the School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU SPACE). Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of HKU’s vocational programmes in meeting current market demands remains underexplored.

The Chief Executive’s 2023 Policy Address highlighted the recent government approach to vocational training by facilitating the establishment of “Universities of Applied Sciences (UASs)” to elevate vocational qualifications to the university degree level. This initiative encourages self-financing institutions to transform into UASs, offering more applied degree programmes with financial support. UASs will collaborate with industries to offer programmes enriched with internships and practical learning experiences. While the Hong Kong Government has provided robust support for vocational training, it is important to consider stakeholders’ views.

Case study: vocational training for dental care profession in Hong Kong

The training of DenCPs integrates into Hong Kong’s tertiary education policy, driven by practical needs and public healthcare imperatives. ACF offers a method for managing this

intricate policy by dividing it into stable societal factors and volatile elements influencing policy development and implementation. According to [Sabatier \(1988\)](#), advocacy coalitions within the policy subsystem share a common interest but have specific concerns based on their backgrounds, shaping public policy through their interactions.

The DenCPs strongly bond with public health policy. The Hong Kong Government's recent amendments to the Dentists Registration Ordinance (Cap. 156) highlight the importance of DenCPs in providing quality dental care. These professionals play an indispensable role in the healthcare landscape of Hong Kong, with a team approach supporting dentists in delivering comprehensive dental services. Vocational training in Hong Kong has evolved significantly, with initiatives like UASs aiming to elevate vocational qualifications, featuring the importance of aligning vocational training with public health policy, to meet market demands by enhancing the workforce.

Overview of the professional roles

The trained personnel in the team play unique roles to deliver top-notch healthcare services. In the past, dentists were expected to be all-rounders and take on the responsibility of individual patient care, regardless of whether there was no formal training before the mid-1850s or the start of the system of qualification afterwards. Betty Ladley [Finkbeiner \(2000\)](#) highlights the importance of trained personnel working as a dental team by applying the four-handed dentistry concepts for enhanced productivity, patient care quality, and team well-being.

The vocational training of DenCPs in Hong Kong shows significant variation ([Gao et al., 2018](#)). The Department of Health (DH) launched in-house training for dental therapists in 1977, specifically for school dental care services. In the early 1980s, dental hygienists started training at the Prince Philip Dental Hospital (PPDH), the only dental hospital in Hong Kong that serves as a training venue for the Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) at the University of Hong Kong. At the same time, Hong Kong Polytechnic, the first institution to provide technical education in Hong Kong, began offering training programmes for dental surgery assistants and dental technicians. These programmes were suspended, resumed, and restructured with the suggestion from the 1997 Report of the Health and Medical Development Advisory Committee with the approach of "training under one roof" ([Chung et al., 2007](#)), ultimately resulting in a set of accredited programmes for local students mainly executed by educational institutions with the support of PPDH.

Dental therapists

Dental therapists play a vital role in the collaborative landscape of dental practice. Operating under supervision, they take care of some specific clinical tasks delegated by dental surgeons. Their multifaceted duties encompass radiographic examinations, preventive and primary dental treatments, and engaging in oral health education. Additionally, the symbiotic relationship between dental therapists and dentists ensures comprehensive patient care, with each professional contributing their specialised expertise. Dental therapists bridge the gap between diagnosis and treatment, enhancing oral health outcomes.

Dental hygienists

As dental caretakers, all registered dental hygienists in Hong Kong are monitored by the Ancillary Dental Workers (Dental Hygienists) Regulation (Cap. 156, section 29). In 1980, PPDH began offering a one-year dental hygienist program, with most graduates serving in the Government and institutional clinics and PPDH. Since 2005, HKU SPACE and PPDH have jointly organised a two-year, full-time, self-financed Higher Diploma in Dental Hygiene. The training venue alternates between HKU SPACE and PPDH. Each annual

enrolment includes around 35 students. Generic skills subjects are conducted at HKU SPACE, while dental hygiene specialisation involving patient care, mainly scaling, delivering fluoride and oral hygiene instruction, occurs at PPDH. Applicants with dental clinic experience or holders of a Diploma in Dental Surgery Assisting or an equivalent qualification may be given special consideration. This is the only dental hygienist training course in Hong Kong until 2023 when the situation will change.

Dental surgery assistants (DSAs)

In Hong Kong, dental surgery assistants (DSA), known as “nurses,” play a treatment-supportive role in patient-centred dental care. Unlike the UK, DSA in Hong Kong lacks registration requirements, allowing open entry. Primarily aiding dentists, therapists, and hygienists in treatments and surgeries, DSA also manage various administrative tasks like reception, records, and infection control. Historically, DSA training evolved to meet practical needs, with formal training commencing in the 1980s. While dental therapists and hygienists have educational restrictions, DSA have various training options, showcasing the profession’s adaptability. Hong Kong’s diverse DSA entry pathways ensure a responsive approach to dental care, raising questions about the necessity of vocational training given the lack of registration requirements.

Dental technicians

Dental technician training often goes unnoticed, lacking historical documentation and feeling undervalued. [Gelbier \(2005\)](#) emphasises the essential role of dental technicians in assisting dentists with fabrication tasks. Despite job stability in government and private laboratories, career progression is limited for dental technicians compared to DSA graduates. Dental technician graduates pursue varied paths, from working in clinics to entrepreneurship or becoming sales representatives for dental suppliers. The lack of advancement opportunities leads graduates to explore alternative career avenues for personal and professional growth, contributing to dental technology advancement. PPDH offers a unique two-year full-time High Diploma in Dental Technology, with an annual intake of around 20 students, showcasing the program’s adaptability and graduates’ versatility in the dental industry.

Shift of the policy: necessity and implementation

Vocational training can support public policy development and maintain the existence of specific industries. In May 2024, a high-profile critique of the BDS programme by the University of Hong Kong highlighted the need for better alignment between training and market needs. The recent Government’s proposed amendment to the Dentists Registration Ordinance (Cap 156) has significantly impacted the dentistry industry, including adding training institutes for dental hygienists to enhance local training for DenCPs. The Government is collaborating with the Vocational Training Council (VTC) to organise a new course for dental hygienists. The number of training places will double from 95 in the 2023/24 academic year to 185 in the 2024/25 academic year. The Government will continue to work with training institutions to increase workforce resources for DenCPs further and provide tuition sponsorships to attract more individuals to the industry, aligning with the strategic development needs of oral health and dental care. “This aims to enhance the standard of professional training and management of DenCPs under the regulatory control of the Dental Council of Hong Kong (DCHK) to establish their professional status while ensuring service quality. The Government expects DCHK to implement the statutory registration system for DenCPs within three years after the passage of the Bill, enabling dental therapists to work outside the Department of Health”.

Identifying advocacy coalitions

ACF provides a valuable lens through which to analyse the policy dynamics surrounding the training and development of DenCPs in Hong Kong. By examining the interactions between various advocacy coalitions, we can better understand how policy changes are driven and how they impact the vocational training landscape.

In the context of DenCPs in Hong Kong, several key advocacy coalitions can be identified:

- (1) **Government Agencies:** The Education Bureau, the Department of Health, and the Vocational Training Council (VTC). These agencies are responsible for setting educational standards, funding programmes, and ensuring the training aligns with public health needs.
- (2) **Educational Institutions:** Institutions such as the Prince Philip Dental Hospital (PPDH), the University of Hong Kong (HKU), and various community colleges are crucial in delivering programmes and maintaining academic standards.
- (3) **Professional Bodies:** Organisations like the Dental Council of Hong Kong (DCHK) and professional associations for dental hygienists, therapists, and technicians advocate for the interests of their members and influence policy decisions related to professional standards and practices.
- (4) **Industry Stakeholders:** Dental clinics, hospitals, and private dental practices that employ DenCPs are key stakeholders. They provide feedback on the skills and competencies required in the workforce and influence the demand for trained personnel.
- (5) **Students and Trainees:** The individuals undergoing programmes are also important actors. Their experiences, career aspirations, and feedback can shape the development and improvement of curricula.

Applying ACF to dental care professionals training in Hong Kong

Applying the ACF to this case involves identifying most advocacy coalitions or actors. These actors wield various instruments, including institutional reputation, academic standards, job market success, career development, and the skills of employees and co-workers. The next step is to analyse their beliefs, resources, and political context. This analysis can reveal opportunities to reform and modify programmes to meet societal needs. Interest groups that could form the policy subsystem include students, parents, teaching personnel, educational institutions and business interest groups (training providers), accreditation bodies, different clinics and their users, NGOs enhancing dental services, and government entities (responsible for resource allocation and sponsoring the training).

ACF posits that policy change occurs through policy-oriented learning, where coalitions engage in continuous learning and adaptation based on new information and experiences (Sabatier, 1987). In the case of DenCPs training in Hong Kong, the collision between coalitions can be seen in several ways. First, in the view of curriculum development, feedback from industry stakeholders and professional bodies can lead to adjustments in curricula to better align with market needs and technological advancements. Second, Government agencies may implement reforms of regulatory frameworks, such as the amendments to the Dentists Registration Ordinance (Cap. 156), to enhance the professional status and scope of practice for DenCPs. Third, the greater collaboration and coordination between educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and professional bodies can lead to more effective programmes that meet the labour market's needs and public health objectives.

A critical question is whether individual coalitions pursue the same policy goals with equal conviction. Coalitions within the same policy subsystem often have self-interests and broader coalition-wide interests. According to ACF, stakeholders such as educators may not fully

demonstrate the advantages of vocational training for DenCPs while aligning with employers' needs. Sabatier's ACF suggests that policy change typically spans at least a decade and involves stable parameters and changeable elements (Sabatier, 1987). Stable parameters in the training policy for DenCPs include the basic constitutional structure, professional working structure, and community needs. Natural resources are not a focal point in this policy discussion. Fundamental sociocultural values, such as the necessity of dental care by trained professionals, remain stable, especially in developing countries. The need for training DenCPs, which is closely tied to dental health policy, drives changes in training policy, reflecting the government's focus on this field.

Actors in the policy subsystems are not merely executors of programmes but also professional stakeholders. However, they currently lack sufficient power to influence policy shifts. The Government, as the largest coalition, controls the policy. Other actors, including trainees and their families, institutions, and the community, form the policy subsystem coalitions that catalyse change. External subsystem events may also drive shifts in training policy. Changes in socioeconomic conditions have not significantly impacted public dental care, which has long relied on the private market. Despite managing the quality of personnel entering the job market, students and institutions have limited power and influence within their subsystems. The Government controls significant policies and its direction regarding dental healthcare professionals. As the most significant policy subsystem, institutions and teams execute programmes and maintain a quality workforce in the field.

ACF does not imply that individuals ignore evidence and base decisions solely on values when faced with cognitive limitations. Instead, it acknowledges that people integrate scientific and technical data into their belief systems, shaping their understanding of causes, problem characteristics, and preferred solutions (Olofsson *et al.*, 2020). The policy shift is driven by a "crisis of inadequately trained dental health caretakers" that has emerged in recent years. In dental care, a critical requirement is that patients undergo an examination by a dentist before dental hygienists and therapists perform any clinical procedures. This protocol ensures comprehensive and high-quality dental services and is fundamental. However, due to distinct reasons such as political disagreements or personal choices like emigration, the Government's urgent need to address the shortage of health professionals has pressured the institutions to review the curriculum swiftly. Dentists Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024 to be introduced into LegCo aims to adjust the scope of work for dental hygienists and therapists based on a risk-based approach, allowing them to independently perform lower-risk procedures, such as oral examinations and scaling, to higher-risk procedures like filling and extraction with dentists' presence on the premises. This arrangement is designed to facilitate DenCPs in providing primary dental services while ensuring patient safety. Additionally, it incorporates mandatory continuing professional development for registered dentists and DenCPs to uphold professional standards and keep the regulatory regime current. However, there are concerns about the capacity of existing institutions to meet the increased demand for training vacancies and how to safeguard the quality of programmes. There is debate about whether the community truly needs such a large number of dental hygienists and whether vocational training can drive structural change in society. Measures are required to ensure that graduates can find employment and that the job market does not become oversaturated.

Vocational training reveals significant changes in the composition of DenCPs over years, while secondary school graduates once dominated the field, it now includes more mature students with higher education, e.g. already awarded with a bachelor degree, and diverse career experiences (Wong, 2021). Many of these individuals seek stability in a profession that requires lower academic qualifications but offers a reliable working environment, shielding them from economic and political volatility. The programmes emphasise practical, skills-based learning, making them valuable for lifelong learning and career development. Facing educational policy changes for DenCPs within a socio-political context, policymakers and frontline training authorities must navigate complex dynamics to maintain the longevity, influence, and stability of professionals. Policy actors must specialise in certain areas to be

influential, forming policy subsystems characterised by substantive and territorial dimensions (Milana and Mikulec, 2023). Dental technicians experience stable development, serving hospitals without significant changes. Most coalitions are satisfied with the training, but there are concerns about those who cannot work as dental technicians in Hong Kong. DSA supports the entire dental team, particularly inpatient treatment. An increase in BDS graduates, but the number of hospital-trained DSAs is fixed, raising questions about whether the training meets the needs of stakeholders, the policy-maker or the community.

The broader implications of this policy analysis using the ACF extend to the tertiary education sector in Hong Kong. The Working Group's Interim Report on Oral Health and Dental Care highlighted a significant shortfall in dental professionals in Hong Kong. As of November 2023, there were 2,875 registered dentists, equating to approximately 0.37 dentists per 1,000 population, below the global average. Additionally, 586 enrolled dental hygienists and 237 dental therapists worked under the Department of Health (DH). The Working Group emphasised the crucial role of DenCPs in delivering primary dental services, especially given the shortage of dentists. To address this, the report recommended increasing the training places for DenCPs and providing tuition sponsorships starting from the current academic year. DenCPs should play a more significant role, utilising the existing primary healthcare system to promote oral health across different age groups. The policy shift raises several questions: Is there a need for this move? Should there be a registration requirement for all the DenCPs?

A detailed analysis of the policy recommendations from ACF about training DenCPs in Hong Kong reveals several vital points. Firstly, the recommendations align with the needs and priorities of DenCPs by addressing the shortage of dental professionals and enhancing primary dental care services. Secondly, these recommendations could significantly impact the broader dental industry in Hong Kong by increasing the supply of trained personnel and improving service delivery. Finally, implementing these recommendations may present challenges, such as ensuring the quality of training and managing the increased number of graduates. The case study highlights a dilemma between the supply and demand of DenCPs. Are these personnel, especially dental therapists and hygienists, supporting the increasing number of dental surgeons, or are they compensating for the shortage of dental surgeons in numbers, affecting the quality of care? To address market needs, changes in curriculum and practice are necessary. This could involve government resources or self-financed personal development. Accreditation processes help review and balance supply and demand, ensuring that programmes are aligned with market requirements. The policy shift could range from minor adjustments to significant changes. Incremental changes involve small tweaks to existing programmes, while substantial changes could include overhauling the training system to better meet market needs. To conclude, the proposed policy shift addresses the mismatch between the supply of dental professionals and market needs. By increasing the training places for DenCPs and enhancing their role in primary dental care, the policy seeks to improve the overall standard of dental services in Hong Kong. However, careful consideration must be given to implementing these changes to ensure they effectively meet the needs of both the dental industry and the community.

Limitations of ACF on the case analysis

While the ACF is widely recognised in policy analysis, its applicability to education policy remains uncertain. Olofsson *et al.* (2020) note that by 2016, ACF had been utilised in over 300 studies, most of which were conducted in North America and Europe, and a growing number of applications were global. More than half of these studies have focused on environmental policy, followed by health and economic policy. However, as referenced in this article, ACF has limited applications in tertiary education policy.

ACF serves as a valuable roadmap by elucidating how actors, regardless of their degree of impact or influence, drive the potential evolution of policy. This is achieved through the power of diverse, distinct groups sharing the same core beliefs (policy subsystems) and their unique

exposures and practices. ACF acts as an indicator, classifying participants who form the driving forces behind the most influential approaches to public policy. However, it raises the question: Does it serve as a framework for education? It offers no transparent methodology for evaluating how these changes occur. It does not function as a theory to inspire specific approaches to policy development nor anchor the reasons for policy stability and substance. Policies at the societal level should remain consistent over decades to ensure community development. However, according to ACF, relatively stable parameters such as natural resources, social structures, and values are inherently unstable due to the influences of globalisation and technological advancements. This inherent instability challenges the long-term consistency of policies, necessitating a more dynamic approach to policy analysis and development.

Another aim of ACF is to merge traditional concerns with political resources and values/interests on the one hand, with the role of knowledge and policy analysis on the other (Sabatier, 1988). Does this effectively apply to the context of DenCPs training? The number of dental hygienist training vacancies is proposed to be doubled within a year, empowering and leading them to take on roles traditionally held by dentists. Can the most prominent actor or stakeholder, the local citizens, quickly transition their perception from “dentist’s care” to “hygienist’s care”? Locally, it is common for patients to seek to complete multiple dental treatments in the shortest possible time, even in one visit, which may influence the manipulation of the dentist’s practice. If the policy shift is indeed a response to the output of the policy subsystem coherent by the community - the largest group of actors - the surge in dental hygienist training may not have occurred. The public typically expects comprehensive care from a dentist with expertise in all aspects of dental treatment rather than fragmented care requiring multiple visits. This labour-division approach, where a dentist provides a cursory examination, and the hygienist manages the oral condition to the best of their limited knowledge, often results in hurried Hong Kong patients being told, “You need to schedule another appointment to see the dentist for a specific treatment as I am not qualified to perform it.” Is the shift in training DenCPs, particularly those who interact directly with patients, a consequence of the interplay between various actors, including the public? Does this imply that policymakers inadvertently overlooked the outputs of these actors?

Actors play a crucial role within the ACF, with their interactions generating momentum for policy change. However, ACF views actors’ influence linearly, assuming equal capacity for change. The framework emphasises actors’ beliefs and adaptability, but the size and context of each actor may affect their influence. Depending on the political context and the Government’s openness to diverse opinions, one actor might work across policy subsystems. In traditional communities, elite decisions might suffice, questioning the presence of true advocacy coalitions beyond governmental parties. Coalitions in education, like school boards and teachers, are based on institutional roles rather than political power in vocational training policy development. Schlager (1995) noted ACF’s tendency to generalise policy actors’ roles and behaviours, which may not reflect diverse motivations and strategies. While ACF is useful for understanding policy dynamics, its application must consider each policy environment’s unique characteristics. Finally, the relative importance of “interests” versus “belief systems” warrants further exploration within the context of vocational education policy. For instance, to what extent do economists’ models, which are based on actors’ self-interest, provide more parsimonious and equally valid explanations of policy change over time? Moreover, ACF has scarcely addressed the generation and diffusion of innovative ideas. It is often assumed that these ideas are developed by neutral experts in universities and subsequently adopted and popularised by advocates from the appropriate coalitions (Nelson, 1987). However, more research is needed to understand this process comprehensively.

Filtering a specific theory for vocational education policy analysis is challenging due to varied countries’ needs, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic conditions. The relationship between vocational training policy development, career development, and the job market is complex. The article “Careership: A Sociological Theory of Career Decision

Making” by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) is a valuable reference. It highlights the paradox in career decision-making, where sociological literature emphasises socially structured pathways while policy assumes individual autonomy. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s work, the “careership” model integrates various dimensions, navigating between social determinism and individual autonomy. This model provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between individual agency and structural factors, offering a comprehensive framework for evaluating employability and career outcomes, particularly in the context of postgraduate education in the UK.

Conclusion

The demand for vocational training in Hong Kong reflects its diversifying economy and need for a skilled workforce. Vocational training within tertiary education bridges the skills gap by equipping workers with essential competencies. However, its efficacy depends on aligning education with market demands and policy objectives. This ACF analysis reveals a disparity: while dentistry training has advanced, DenCPs training lags. This imbalance highlights the need for a more equitable approach encompassing all related professions. The findings offer valuable insights into educational institutions’ roles beyond mainstream tertiary education. These insights guide future initiatives to develop and enhance programmes, ensuring they meet labour market needs. ACF emphasises continuous learning and adaptation among actors to maintain programme effectiveness, highlighting flexibility and responsiveness.

Key factors like employability, migration opportunities, and job stability significantly influence vocational training programmes’ success. These elements must be considered in programme design and implementation to meet labour market and trainee needs. Alignment among all coalitions involved in is vital for successful implementation and sustainability. Insights from this analysis can inform future policies and programmes, making them more responsive to labour market needs. By fostering stakeholder collaboration and adapting to changing demands, vocational training in Hong Kong can become more effective. The “careership” model holds promise for guiding future initiatives attuned to labour market needs.

To enhance the impact of DenCPs training in Hong Kong, several policy recommendations have been proposed. It is essential to foster greater collaboration between educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and professional bodies to ensure that programmes are aligned with market needs and technological advancements. Changes in regulatory frameworks should be implemented to enhance the professional status and scope of practice for DenCPs, thereby enabling them to meet the evolving demands of the healthcare system.

References

- Cairney, P. (2015), “Paul A. Sabatier, ‘An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein’”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Public Policy and Administration*, Oxford University Press, doi: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199646135.013.24](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199646135.013.24).
- Chung, M.Y., Leung, J.L.K. and Hui, K.K.K.H. (2007), “Dental surgery assistants in Hong Kong: history of training”, *Hong Kong Dental Journal*, Vol. 4, pp. 67-70.
- Finkbeiner, B.L. (2000), “Four-handed dentistry revisited”, *The Journal of Contemporary Dental Practice*, Vol. 1 No. 4, pp. 74-86, doi: [10.5005/jcdp-1-4-25](https://doi.org/10.5005/jcdp-1-4-25).
- Gao, S.S., Chen, K.J., Duangthip, D., Lo, E.C.M. and Chu, C.H. (2018), “Oral health care in Hong Kong”, *Healthcare*, Vol. 6 No. 2, p. 45, doi: [10.3390/healthcare6020045](https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare6020045).
- Gelbier, S. (2005), “125 years of developments in dentistry, 1880-2005 Part 5: dental education, training and qualifications”, *British Dental Journal*, Vol. 199 No. 10, pp. 685-689, doi: [10.1038/sj.bdj.4813002](https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.bdj.4813002).
- Haar, R.N. and Pierce, J.J. (2021), “Foreign policy change from an advocacy coalition framework perspective”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 1771-1791, doi: [10.1093/isr/viab044](https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab044).

- Hodkinson, P. and Sparkes, A.C. (1997), "Careership: a sociological theory of career decision making", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 29-44, doi: [10.1080/0142569970180102](https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569970180102).
- Jenkins-Smith, H.C. and Sabatier, P.A. (1994), "Evaluating the advocacy coalition framework", *Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 175-203, doi: [10.1017/S0143814X00007431](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X00007431).
- Jenkins-Smith, H.C., Nohrstedt, D., Weible, C.M. and Ingold, K. (2018), "The advocacy coalition framework: an overview of the research program", in Weible, C.M. and Sabatier, P.A. (Eds), *Theories of the Policy Process*, 4th ed., Routledge, pp. 135-171, doi: [10.4324/9780429494284-5](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494284-5).
- Leung, Y.Y., Liang, Y. and Tse, W.V. (2018), "An exploration of the history of vocational education in Hong Kong", *US-China Education Review B*, Vol. 8 No. 5, pp. 213-220, doi: [10.17265/2161-6248/2018.05.003](https://doi.org/10.17265/2161-6248/2018.05.003).
- Milana, M. and Mikulec, B. (2023), "Setting the new European agenda for adult learning for 2021-2030: political mobilisation and the influence of advocacy coalitions", *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, Vol. 14 No. 2, doi: [10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4637](https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.4637).
- Nelson, R.H. (1987), "The economics profession and the making of public policy", *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 49-91.
- Ohno, T., Latz, A.O., Mulvihill, T.M. and Uddin, P.S.O. (2022), "The advocacy coalition framework in Japan: contributions to policy process studies and the challenges involved", *The Review of Policy Research*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 32-50, doi: [10.1111/ropr.12485](https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12485).
- Olofsson, K.L., Weible, C.M., Shin, J.C. and Teixeira, P. N. (2020), "Advocacy coalition framework, higher education", in *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education Systems and Institutions*, Springer Netherlands, pp. 100-106, doi: [10.1007/978-94-017-8905-9_153](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8905-9_153).
- Oviawe, J.I., Uwameiye, R. and Uddin, P.S.O. (2017), "Bridging skill gap to meet technical, vocational education and training school-workplace collaboration in the 21st century", *International Journal of Vocational Education and Training Research*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 7-14, doi: [10.11648/j.ijvetr.20170301.12](https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijvetr.20170301.12).
- Pierce, J.J., Peterson, H.L., Jones, M.D., Garrard, S.P. and Vu, T. (2017), "There and back again: a tale of the advocacy coalition framework", *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 45 No. S1, pp. S13-S46, doi: [10.1111/psj.12197](https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12197).
- Sabatier, P.A. (1987), "Knowledge, policy-oriented learning, and policy change: an advocacy coalition framework", *Knowledge*, Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 649-692, doi: [10.1177/0164025987008004005](https://doi.org/10.1177/0164025987008004005).
- Sabatier, P.A. (1988), "An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein", *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 21 Nos 2/3, pp. 129-168, doi: [10.1007/BF00136406](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00136406).
- Schlager, E. (1995), "Policy making and collective action: defining coalitions within the advocacy coalition framework", *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 243-270, doi: [10.1007/BF01000289](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01000289).
- South China Morning Post (2022), "DSE: 61,000 eligible candidates get Hong Kong public universities, down 70%", available at: <https://www.scmp.com/yp/discover/news/hong-kong/article/3305479/dse-61-eligible-candidates-get-hong-kong-public-universities-down-70>
- Weible, C.M., Sabatier, P.A., Jenkins-Smith, H.C., Nohrstedt, D., Henry, A.D. and deLeon, P. (2011), "A quarter century of the Advocacy Coalition Framework: an introduction to the special issue", *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 349-360, doi: [10.1111/j.1541-0072.2011.00412.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2011.00412.x).
- Wong, Y.-L. (2021), "The development of higher education in Hong Kong: an overview", in *Community College Students in Hong Kong*, Springer International Publishing, pp. 35-59, doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-82461-7_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82461-7_2).
- Yau, S.-H.T., Chun, W.-S.D., Hong, C. and Ma, W.W.K. (2020), "Synergy for success: how to better develop vocational and professional education and training in Hong Kong?", in *Applied Degree Education and the Future of Work*, Springer, Singapore, pp. 119-139, doi: [10.1007/978-981-15-3142-2_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3142-2_11).

Further reading

- Caves, K.M., Renold, U. and Buergi, J. (2018), "Beyond employer engagement: measuring education-employment linkage in vocational education and training programmes", *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 70 No. 4, pp. 524-563, doi: [10.1080/13636820.2018.1451911](https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2018.1451911).
- Coffey, B., Cook, K., Meiklejohn, S. and Palermo, C. (2019), "A guide to policy analysis as a research method", *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 34 No. 5, pp. 1032-1044, doi: [10.1093/heapro/day052](https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/day052).
- Davies, W.I.R., Corbet, E.F. and Chiu, G.K.C. (1997), "Dentistry's development in Hong Kong", *International Dental Journal*, Vol. 47 No. 3, pp. 137-141, doi: [10.1002/j.1875-595X.1997.tb00778.x](https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1875-595X.1997.tb00778.x).
- Friedman, J.W., Mathu-Muju, K.R., Robinson, P.G., Satur, J., Moffat, S., Kardos, R., Lo, E.C.M., Wong, A.H.H., Jaafar, N., van den Heuvel, J., Phantumvanit, P., Chu, E.O., Naidoo, R., Naidoo, L., McKenzie, I. and Fernando, E. (2014), "A review of the global literature on dental therapists", *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 1-10, doi: [10.1111/cdoe.12052](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdoe.12052).
- Ingold, K., Nohrstedt, D. and Weible, C. (2022), "Advocacy coalition framework", in *Routledge Handbook of Public Policy*, Routledge, pp. 105-136, doi: [10.4324/9781003269083-5](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003269083-5).
- Latz, A.O. and Mulvihill, T.M. (2023), "Remembering new vocationalism: reinforcing the future of workforce and professional development in the community college", *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, Vol. 47 No. 6, pp. 401-412, doi: [10.1080/10668926.2022.2045646](https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2022.2045646).
- Ogden, W.R. (1990), "Vocational education: a historical perspective", *High School Journal*, Vol. 73 No. 4, pp. 245-251, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40364875>
- Wong, S.S.S., Suen, R.P.C. and Lo, E.C.M. (2013), "Oral health and dental care in Hong Kong", *The Surgeon*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 153-157, doi: [10.1016/j.surge.2012.12.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.surge.2012.12.010).

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

Corresponding author

Sin Yi Lam can be contacted at: sindylam@hku.hk