



STINT Teaching Sabbatical Report

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

School of Life Sciences, Biology Programme
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Markus Langeland
Department of Animal Nutrition and Management
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences



Background

I did my teaching sabbatical at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), School of Science in the Biology programme. CUHK is one of the 20 degree-awarding higher education institutions in Hong Kong, and one of the eight universities that are funded under the University Grants Committee (UGC). UGC financial support consists of both recurrent grants and capital grants. The former, which normally are distributed on a triennial basis, are to support the universities' academic work and once approved gives the receiver high latitude in how to allocate the resources. The other institutions are either self-financed (#11) or publicly funded (#1). Geographically the universities of Hong Kong are quite widespread with some located on Hong Kong Island in the south, in Kowloon and some, including CUHK, in the New Territories in the north of Hong Kong.

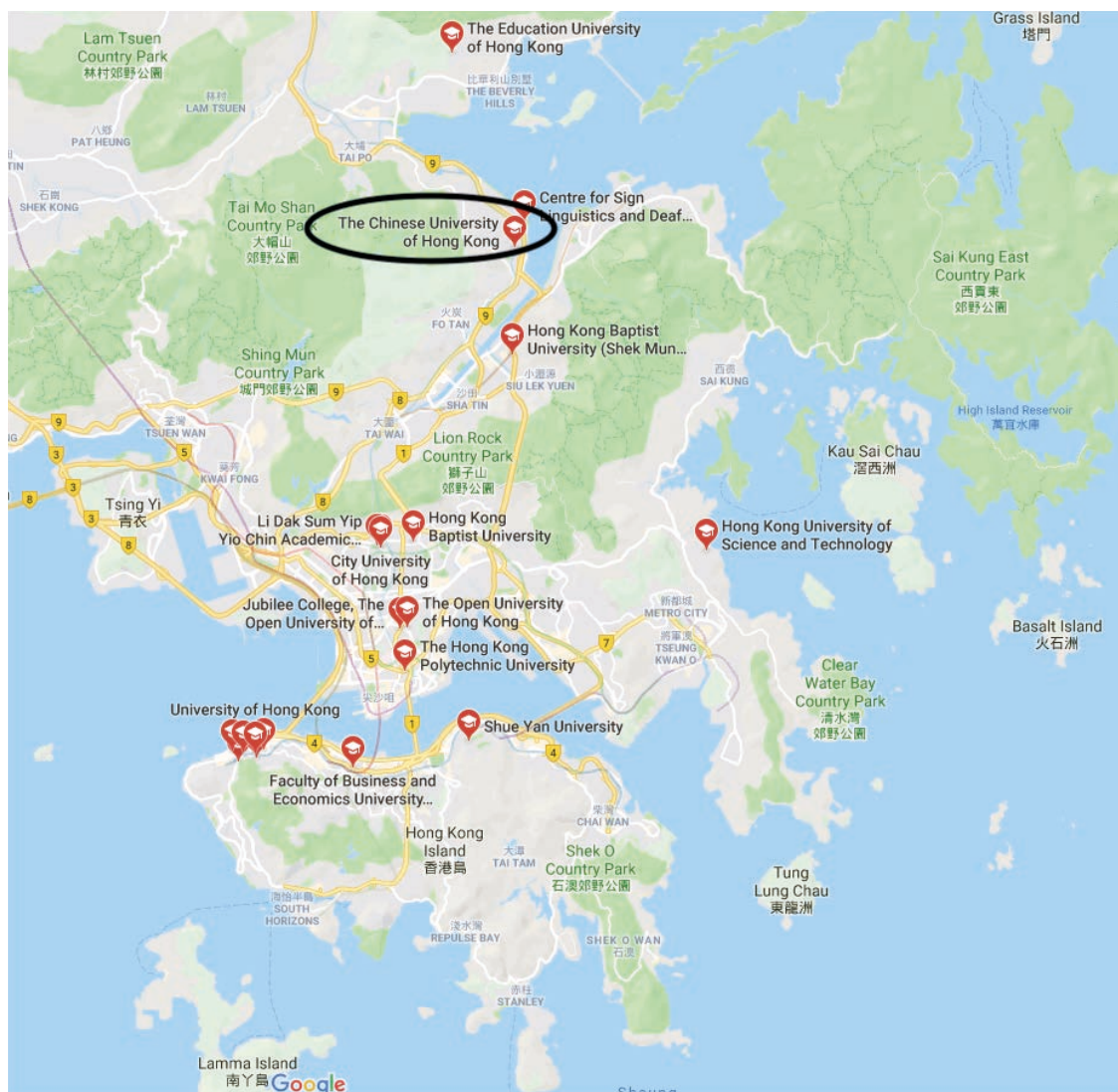


Figure 1. The major universities of Hong Kong (CUHK circumscribed).

CUHK is a comprehensive research university established in 1963, and by that one of the oldest universities in Hong Kong. The university points out its *"global vision and mission to combine tradition with modernity, and bring together China and the West"*. CUHK is

ranked as one of the top universities in Hong Kong and Asia, which is often stressed by the university. Almost 20,000 students (17,100 undergraduates, 800 taught post graduates and 2,000 research postgraduates) are enrolled at CUHK. The university is organized in eight academic faculties (arts, business administration, education, engineering, law, medicine, science, and social science) and nine colleges. In fact, CUHK was formed as a federation of the colleges New Asia College (founded in 1949), Chung Chi Colleges (founded in 1951) and United College (founded in 1956). In 1986, Shaw College was formed and more recently Morningside, S.H. Ho, C.W. Chu, Wu Yee Sun and Lee Woo Sing Colleges were added as well. The Colleges provide programmes and activities that complement the formal curricula by delivering pastoral care and whole-person education as well as close interface between teachers, students and alumni. In total,

The faculty of Science is divided into five different department/schools: department of Chemistry, School of Life Sciences, Department of Mathematics, Department of Physics and Department of Statistics. In total, the Faculty of Science has more than 250 faculty members and 3,000 students, offering 14 undergraduate programmes. The School of Life Sciences was established almost 10 years ago when the departments of Biology and Biochemistry merged. The school has about 50 teaching staff and 66 technical, administrative and clerical staff. In addition, some 80 postdoctoral fellows and other research staff are also at the school

Preparation and planning

The initial contact with my contact person and host professor at CUHK, K.H. Chu was taken in early February. I was informed that I was going to co-teach in a course in the Biology programme: Fish Biology and Mariculture. I was provided with the syllabus, former schedule (the course hadn't been given for some years), literature list, examination etc. Prof Chu, some of the staff and me had regular email contact before the *planning trip* was done, regarding the course, accommodation etc. and some of the structure and other things about the course were settled during this period.

My wife and I left for a one-week stay in Hong Kong in early April. We had a meeting and Campus tour with the STINT coordinator at CUHK, Ms. Olivia Kwok, who introduced us to the University, assisted us with some practical matters and gave a Campus tour. Prof Chu and I had an initial meeting in which we continued planning the course, which involved going through the syllabus and learning objectives, setting the schedule, discussing the poster project and the study visits. In addition, I had been invited to a couple of seminars taking place on the School of Life Sciences, but unfortunately I couldn't attend at these due to meetings with potential landlords in Hong Kong. Instead we met several of the professors at the School of Life Sciences at a traditional Cantonese dinner and at a lunch.

My wife accompanied me at the planning trip with the mission to find a suitable living for our family. This turned out to be more difficult than we first imagined since Hong Kong is one of the world's most expensive cities to live in. We were planning to stay in Hong Kong from September 2018 to January 2019 and the short period made finding an affordable living a challenge since almost all contracts for apartments are for a minimum of 6 months. We tried AirBnB and websites for short-term contracts but soon decided to

go for a serviced apartment, since you can rent them month-by-month. There are plenty of serviced apartments all over Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New territories. My wife spent most of our planning trip visiting different apartments but wasn't able to book anything for our stay since availability is only known a month before. This meant we spent most of the summer slightly worried about accommodation.

Location was a key factor in our choice of living since my wife was going to be home with our children, aged 3 and 5 years old. We didn't have pre-school for the children since the international schools in Hong Kong are very expensive and we didn't want to spend that much money for such a short time. So, the location would have to be a good base for them to travel to and from activities. We first looked in the area around the university, the new territories, but since we didn't find very many serviced apartments that suited our family. Most of the flats are for one or two persons, so a size for a family of four didn't leave us with many options. We checked everything from outer areas such as the Gold Coast, to busy Mong Kok in Kowloon and places on Hong Kong Island and weighed factors like my commute to the university, apartment size, suitable area for kids and price, against each other. Since I only had teaching two days a week at the university we then decided we wanted to live on Hong Kong Island so that my wife and the kids would have easy access to all that Hong Kong has to offer and be close to her father and friends that lived on the island. This made my commute a little longer the days that I went to the university but also made us experience Hong Kong from a great location. We rented a two-bedroom apartment in Sai Ying Pun, on the eastern side of Hong Kong Island. The neighbourhood is starting to become more popular and has many restaurants where the expat community dines and spends their weekends but is still quite traditional for Hong Kong with wet markets, fruit and vegetable stands and Chinese specialities like dried fish and other for us westerners strange things.

Tasks and responsibilities

My primary role at the School of Life Sciences was to co-teach in the course Fish Biology and Mariculture. This topic fits very well into my own research area within animal science, aquaculture, fish nutrition and physiology. However, since we don't have any similar course at my home university the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), I had to prepare a lot of new lectures and learning activities which had to start during the spring and summer. In addition, the course was supposed to relate to aquaculture in Hong Kong which was an unknown area for me. I was not the official course responsible/convenor, but since Prof. Chu couldn't attend at the start of the course I was responsible for this as well besides just giving lectures. I also took part in the planning of study visits, the poster project, final examination and the grading. Besides of this I didn't have any other official tasks or responsibilities at the School, but attended some seminars and gave one myself about my research area in Fish nutrition and feeding.

In addition to my own teaching, I tried to involve myself in other activities at CUHK and observe as much as possible on teaching and learning as well as the educational system at the School of Life Sciences in general and Biology Programme in particular. Since the School does not currently have a course or programme in animal science or fish nutrition, it was not possible for me to take part in any research collaboration or to take an active teaching part in other courses. In Hong Kong, the aquaculture production

voluntary for the students, and unfortunately all except two were cancelled due low numbers students that signed up. This might reflect low interest from the students, but also conflicts with other courses since the study visits were offered outside the scheduled lectures, including Saturdays.



Figure 3. Study visits to fish farms.

One of the activities and examinations in the course was a scientific poster project. The students formed in groups of three, and chose a topic related to aquaculture but not

covered by the lectures. In the end of the course we arranged a poster session in which the students presented the posters and were asked questions on the topic. We also let the students grade each other posters as well as the internal group members. This was something new for both my colleague and me. The final written examination consisted mostly of questions covered by my lectures, so the majority of questions were formulated and corrected by me. In the end of the course I had a course review (open for all kind of questions) and course evaluation (written and oral).

There are always seminars at CUHK, and the School of Science has several different seminar series. I attended several of them, and gave a talk on *Closing the Nutrient Loop-Sustainable Aquaculture Feeds*. I sat in on some lectures given by colleagues. Apart from these activities, I conducted meetings and natural conversations with teachers, researchers and students to gain further insight in the state of which teaching, learning, pedagogics, quality assents, research, funding etc. takes place at CUHK.

Comparisons and reflections

There are plenty of differences between CUHK and SLU. First av all, SLU is a small University with 2,500 undergraduate students and 1,200 postgraduates, spread out on three main campuses. Several of the programmes are professional degrees, in comparison to CUHK where most are academic degrees. The differences observed between the universities are not only related to size and type of degrees, but also very related to cultural differences. Honk Kong is often described as a place were “Eats meets West”, referring to the culture’s mix of its Chinese roots with the culture brought to it during the time as a British colony. CUHK is indeed a very modern University highly integrated in a global context, with increasing interaction of people, countries and traditions. Thus, I have also recognised several similarities between CUHK and SLU in terms of for example disappointment over student’s learning, research funding and a very busy working situation. The following are some reflections from my sabbatical at CUHK, which mostly compare at the level of school/department and faculty as the variation within Universities, are often substantial.

At CUHK the administration is very professional and effective, which I noticed even before the first visit in all the emails from different persons in the administration. We were very well taken care of from the start primarily by the Office of Academic Links and the Personal Office. The administration at the School of Life Sciences were also always very helpful, even though I think that they were not as used to foreigners like me coming in for a short-time visit with a lot of questions and little knowledge of the campus and educational system at CUHK. At SLU the administration is not as extensive as at CUHK. Since I never been a stranger at my own University its hard to say how much assistant foreigners get from SLU, but from what I have heard from colleagues its not to the same degree as at CUHK.

The curriculum at CUHK is much more flexible than at SLU, both at programme and course level. This was a bit challenging to me when planning my lectures in the course, since I was given a lot of freedom. Since the biology programme at CUHK is an academic degree and not a professional degree as many are at SLU, I think this is of less importance.

The student group in my course at CUHK was a very homogenous age and gender group, very similar to my faculty at SLU that is strongly dominated by young, female students. The students at CUHK seem, in general, to be very ambitious. This is the same experience that I have from Sweden with students (as well as researchers) from Mainland China and Hong Kong. All of the students in my course were from Hong Kong, and as far as I know most of them still lived in their parent's household. Even though the students are very ambitious, several of my colleagues did actually comment on the student's attitude towards their studies and thought that they should work harder. This might reflect the students in the Biology programme, which isn't the most popular programme in Hong Kong with not as good career as programmed related to business for example. One other theory is that children in Hong Kong start compete for the best preschool, and schools very early in life, having interviews at the age of 2-3 years; some might simply have lost some of the motivation when finally reach the university. However, all of the researchers and teachers agreed on that the students are very good in writing exams, and normally get high marks. In general, students gave the course (at least my lectures) a very good grade in the course evaluation. Some students thought it was a bit unclear what they should study for the exam, and they all seemed to like the poster project (Figure 4). There were no negative comments on the student-active parts of my lectures, even though I got some student to tell me after classes that they liked it but it demanded more from them, which they are not used to. This might have been something that some students didn't prefer over the more traditional teaching. At SLU, this type student-active learning is most often very appreciated. It should also be mentioned that the lectures I sat into at CUHK was quite conservative with little or no integration between the teacher and the students.



Figure 4. Students after the presentation of their poster projects.

The course evaluation did also reveal that several students would have wished more text in my power point presentation, instead of mostly figures and key words. I was very surprised reading this since I never received this critic before, and the general advice when it comes to making a good power point, is not to add to much text. In some of my lectures we discussed fish health and welfare, as well as sustainability in a wider concept and how this applies on sustainable aquaculture. In Sweden, students in general are very interested in these topics and almost every one has an opinion. It was quite clear that the students hadn't reflected over the fact that fish can feel pain and have an impaired welfare. The discussion continued outside of the classroom with some students that thought this was very interesting. To integrate the students into the discussion of sustainability, they did a word cloud (Figure 5) from which we picked topic to discuss. Since the students were very quite, I had to really challenge myself to make them a part of the discussion, as well as use all available tools for this. Unfortunately the lecture rooms we had were very classical, and didn't support a good and spontaneous discussion.



Figure 5. A word cloud the students did on the question “what is sustainability”.

At SLU, there is no distinct difference between researchers and teachers. In fact, one is not supposed to only engage in teaching and very few of such positions exist. Everyone is encouraged to do research and integrate that in the teaching. At CUHK, there is a very clear difference between researcher (mostly professors and associate professors) doing research and teaching, and teachers, which are not suppose to engage in research (at least not to a higher degree). In general, my colleagues at CUHK are extremely focused on their careers and work very much. This is heavily supported by they way you live in Hong Kong with helpers that take care of children, cocking, cleaning etc. I had to struggle a lot to have contact with my colleagues at the School of Life Sciences since they were all very busy and focused on their research, applications or teaching. Since there is no coffee pause at CUHK (or rest of the world as far as I know, at least not the Swedish “fika”) and people seem to stay in their offices, there were no natural situations for meetings, except the seminars. With that sad, I must be mentioned that all of my colleagues at the school really did their best for me to be integrated at CUHK and have a good time. To reach out to more people at the School, I think giving a research seminar

at the planning trip in spring as the way forward. Then more people will know who you are and what your research is about, which is very important. I was actually asked by some people why I was on a teaching sabbatical and why I didn't prioritise my research.

My impression is that research is more important than teaching, which is a similarity between CUHK and SLU. In conversations with colleagues at CUHK this was confirmed. Maybe due to this, pedagogical issues were discussed less by the school, according to my own impression and what people told me. The programmes at the School are evaluated on a regular basis, which seems to be very important for the professors. Both students and alumni also review the programmes. CUHK keeps very good contact with its alumni, an activity that is also supported by the college system.

Lessons learned and Action plan

The sabbatical has been a great experience and learning for me, and will influence my teaching practice as well as development for pedagogical projects at SLU. The time I spent at CUHK hasn't totally changed my way of teaching, but I am much more experienced and have a few very concrete things that I will implement at SLU.

On a personal level, I will be clearer with the learning objectives for each lecture. Obviously the students in my course at CUHK had some difficulties understanding my core message. Also, I will to a higher degree describe the purpose with my "clean" power points and that the idea is that the students are supposed to find additional information in the literature. In the course at CUHK we provided the students with a quite detailed reading list to every lecture, this is something I will implement in my next course at SLU.

The students at CUHK have an academic contact person which is supposed to guide the student in different situations like which courses to choose etc. I think this is a very interesting set up, and the teacher-student contact needs to be improved at SLU. I will try to implement this on a programme level, and start to discuss it with the programme directors.

At CUHK it seems quite common with tutorials in which the application of knowledge presented in the more theoretical lecture is discussed. This would show how theories, models and principles taught in the lecture could be applied and used. Since the programmes at my faculty at SLU are very applied this system would probably be very successful and appreciated by the students. If PhD students and/or teaching assistants can cover the tutorial, it also adds a time and money saving aspect.

At CUHK there are some very good websites on pedagogics, teaching, tools and ideas, developed by The Centre for Learning Enhancement and Research and the Centre for eLearning Innovation and Technology. These websites are free for everyone to use so I can recommend them to my colleagues, but I would also like to see that the pedagogic unit at SLU could do something similar. Potentially this could be done together with the technology unit for more professional, available and easy e-based learning.

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