LITE Lab@HKU – Future Lawyering to Serve Hong Kong’s Tech Startups, Social Entrepreneurs and Access to Justice

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I am honoured to be here to share our new LITE Lab@HKU programme with our many colleagues from abroad, as well as my fellow colleagues from HKU who may be less familiar with our new programme. For some context, earlier last year, Hong Kong’s Legislative Council’s Parliamentary Committee on Legal Education and Training concluded an extensive review and found that:

“Technology and associated organizational disruption of legal services has important implications for access to justice, the business of “doing” law, the skills required of new lawyers, and, perhaps, the demand for new lawyers as well. These developments require both new knowledge and skills, and it is argued, potentially a different mindset.”

Consulting firm McKinsey estimates that 22% of legal work can be replaced by automation (robotics and AI) by 2030, and firms like Linklaters and Microsoft are arguing for the need to upskill lawyers. Hong Kong, like many other jurisdictions, is increasing its focus on startup and social entrepreneurship to grow the jobs of tomorrow, with corresponding recognition of a key challenge being the cost of doing business, including for relevant legal information and guidance.
Yet, how do we develop the requisite skillsets and mindsets in tech and social entrepreneurs, as well as in lawyers to support this important ecosystem where many startups cannot afford and need legal counsel and information?

Wilson [Chow] has already kindly provided conference attendees with an overview of Hong Kong’s legal landscape and the role of the PCLL run by its three law schools plays as a gatekeeper for law students who want to be legal practitioners.

At HKU, as with elsewhere, there is an increasing push towards interdisciplinary studies, and a new undergraduate degree was recently launched, namely the Bachelor of Arts & Science or BASc. Amongst the six streams are the BASc (FinTech) degree (led by the Department of Computer Science in conjunction with the Faculty of Business & Economics) and the BASc (Design+) degree (led by the Faculty of Architecture), and the Law Faculty was invited and keen to contribute courses towards these new degrees. It was Doug Arner, whom I had known for many years, who tapped me on the shoulder and said: “Brian, we are trying to set something new up: would you like to lead it?”
And so, sitting under the Asian Institute for International Financial Law (AIIFL), which Doug leads, and HKU’s Law & Technology Center, LITE Lab@HKU was born. I came up with the acronym “LITE”, which stands for Law, Innovation, Technology and Entrepreneurship, and added “Lab” at the end to show our intention to experiment.

As you can imagine, a lot of people, especially within the Law Faculty, asked: “why is there a lab in a law school?” That is why I am particularly pleased to have at this conference Dan Jackson, who leads Northeastern University’s NULawLab, as well as Daniel Rodriguez, whose Northwestern Pritzker School of Law offers an Innovation Lab course. Many leading law schools around the world are adopting similar interdisciplinary and experiential approaches to the teaching and practice of law, and I am so pleased to do my part to introduce it in Hong Kong as well.

So why did Doug tap me for the role?

My initial legal career was relatively conventional: I received my BA/LLB in Australia and articled at Mallesons (now King & Wood Mallesons) in Perth. I then obtained my LLM at NYU, and joined Sullivan & Cromwell in New York, and was in Silicon Valley during the dot-com boom (and bust). I was subsequently headhunted to join Credit Suisse in Hong Kong to cover investment banking across the Asia-Pacific region (think IPOs, M&A and bond offerings) and was a leader in the corporate counsel community as an Executive Committee member of the Hong Kong Corporate Counsel Association (now Association of Corporate Counsel).

My career became less conventional when I initially left the law a few years ago to go into “startup land” and set up ACMI that focused on capital markets professionalism which was launched at the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. At the same time, I founded a social enterprise called Young Makers & Changemakers that focused on inclusive and impactful K-12 STEAM [science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics] and young maker education. Young Makers & Changemakers has become best known for bringing Technovation to Hong Kong. Technovation is a global technology entrepreneurship challenge for girls aged 10 to 18 to ideate and prototype mobile apps that address the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and then pitch their solutions. In our first year, our top Hong Kong junior team made it to the grand finals held at Google in Silicon Valley, and won!
In the meantime, ACMI pivoted and changed its focus more to fintech and regtech, including my appointment as co-chair for the Regtech Committee of the Fintech Association of Hong Kong. In 2018, I heard about the Global Legal Hackathon and was excited to support whomever was organizing it in Hong Kong to help promote legal innovation here. When I found out no one was, I said that I would be willing to organize it if somebody would underwrite it, and Thomson Reuters kindly stepped forward. And so I organized Hong Kong’s first lawtech and regtech hackathon, and our top Hong Kong team (led by HKU and CUHK law students together with industry technologists) made it the finals in New York, and **won**! So I guess these are some of the reasons that led Doug to think of me for the role as the founding executive director for the new initiative at HKU Faculty of Law, which is in conjunction with the Department of Computer Science - a Department with whom I had already established linkages when they kindly hosted my Technovation #GirlsMakeTech bootcamps.

The idea was for the LITE Lab@HKU programme to introduce new interdisciplinary and experiential courses and opportunities at HKU and beyond. But how do we attract undergraduate students to join? To give students a feel for why we were different from other courses, I created a short promotional video showcasing the legal hackathons, smart legal contract challenges and seminars on blockchain, AI and lawtech that we organized since LITE Lab@HKU’s **soft launch at HKU Fintech Day in 2018**.

Here is the [video](#) that was made with the assistance of a student volunteer who I met during one of our hackathons – it is probably the first time a video was created for a new course at the Law School!

Some of the key drivers of the LITE Lab@HKU programme are phrases heard throughout this conference: innovation, interdisciplinary, experiential, technology, entrepreneurship, and being collaborative. However, as we all know, the main challenges lie in implementation.

Raising awareness of LITE Lab@HKU outside of the law school was assisted by my short article in the *Hong Kong Lawyer*, which is the Hong Kong Law Society's main publication, on the three main mindsets that lawyers need in the technology age, namely: being client-centric, process-conscious and technology-friendly. And being invited on [CNBC](#) to talk about LITE Lab@HKU and the future of education, even before our first class, which was great too!
So how many students did I get? We ended up with 39 undergraduate students (which I was told was great for a newly introduced course) from almost all years of study with a concentration from Year 4.

Many students were studying single degrees from law as well as from finance, engineering, design and even translation. And even more were studying double degrees, which was fantastic! Also, about a third of the class were exchange students from all over the world. This class mix presented opportunities as well as challenges given the broad diversity of students with different levels of understanding of the law. In my first class, I conducted a poll to better know my students (or users, in design thinking parlance). My first question related to technology confidence, and as you can see, most students leaned towards the middle/bottom half.

On my question of business acumen, it was again quite balanced.

On my question regarding programming language knowledge, notwithstanding some mischievous comments in light of the then ongoing Hong Kong protests, you can see some students knew Python but otherwise most knew none.
Most importantly, on my question regarding learning intentions, 47% said they wanted to be lawyers to advise startups, 42% said they wanted to be startup founders, and about 11% said they wanted to be legaltech innovators.

On this basis, I tweaked my course accordingly as we sought to pilot pedagogies for 21st century entrepreneurial lawyering education.

Here is a high-level overview of our pilot pedagogies.

1. Business Model Canvas
2. Legal Design Thinking - user focussed
3. Computational/ Algorithmic Thinking
4. No-Code Lawtech Platforms
   • Video explainers
   • Document assembly
   • Chatbots
5. Blended Learning
6. Team assignments (group of up to 5)

Student agency, motivation and engagement
We started with introducing the Business Model Canvas to give a framework for students to better understand business as well as how legal documents and issues applied in each of the different facets.

![Business Model Canvas](image)

We then introduced Legal Design Thinking to encourage students to be more user focused.

![Legal Design Thinking](image)

This was followed by Computational/Algorithmic Thinking to encourage students to do what most lawyers do not do, namely to be able to express their process of thinking and workflow in the form of flowcharts – this is because once you can describe it in a process, you can code it.
Assessment is something that has been talked about quite a bit yesterday and today at the conference. I told my students that I am not interested in papers that they create that are only seen by them and myself as instructor. I believe in student engagement, agency and motivation: if students are motivated, they will have agency to learn and work hard to create projects that can have impact. And so I was keen for students to learn to work in teams to create projects and tools that can be used on our LITE Lab@HKU website to benefit the broader Hong Kong entrepreneurship ecosystem to help position our LITE Lab@HKU website to be Hong Kong’s one-stop tech startup legal information destination. This kind of free digital self-help or public/community legal education, especially for startups, was inspired by startup law websites at Berkley Law (OLLIE) and Penn Law (Entrepreneurship Legal Clinic Startup ToolKit) that were created by faculty. I wanted ours to be created by students, where, yes, the students receive a grade, but they also create an artifact that they can proudly show to potential employers and impact and benefit the ecosystem. Based on the feedback received regarding technology competency, I decided to focus on no code/low code platforms. We had a very limited budget, and so through my contacts, we provided the students access and resources for them to build animated video legal explainers, document automation and chatbots, all provided free of charge and often by the lawtech founders. To do this, we incorporated Blended Learning, with students provided with online learning resources, and used the classroom for curated discussions. And to reflect the real world, I emphasized team assignments, requiring at least one assignment to be conducted by a team of up to five.

The course is best described as a survey entrepreneurship or startup law course with the focus on legaltech and client-centricity. Here, you can see the substantive law aspects that were covered, starting from organising your startup; operating it and protecting its assets; negotiating partnerships and fundraising; understanding data privacy and consumer protection, as well as the evolving law relating to the ABCD frontier technologies, namely AI, blockchain, cloud and data.
To manage expectations, I reminded students that every single class could be an entire course, and the aim of the course was to introduce and contextualise entrepreneurship law for future lawyers and startup founders.

In addition to creating artifacts using legaltech tools that may be on our LITE Lab@HKU website, I sought to foster student motivation through participation in student competitions.

**Iron Tech Lawyer Challenge** is organised by Georgetown University for students to learn as part of a course to create a legal tool that assists an NGO beneficiary for access to justice. Georgetown has been running this for about eight years, and this is the first year they are opening it up to the world.

Dan’s NULawLab is participating (as are many others) and LITE Lab@HKU has enabled HKU to be the only law school here in Asia that is participating. This competition was provided as an option to students for their second assignment, and when the dust settled after substantial initial student interest until many realized how much work was involved, we had two teams: one to assist the LGBTIQ community and the other to assist injured workers seeking employee compensation. These projects were ideated by the students, not by me, and after they “sold” me on the ideas, I then also helped them identify and connect with NGOs to provide important user input and feedback.
[Post conference comment – in April 2020, our HKU team EC Bank won the Iron Tech Lawyer Invitational Finals that was held virtually rather than in Washington DC due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and was one of the youngest teams as undergraduate students]

Our second semester LITE Lab course is more like a project-based externship. With about 15 students, we are curating legal research projects proposed by Hong Kong startups from government-run Cyberport, HKU’s entrepreneurship hub iDendron and the Fintech Association of Hong Kong, in a manner that seeks not raise unauthorized practice of law issues. There are so many fascinating and cutting-edge legal research topics on areas such as AI and blockchain that the students can research that can benefit the individual startups as well as the overall ecosystem.

LITE Lab@HKU is also separately supporting a HKU team to participate in the inaugural Computational Law e-Mooting competition which I think our friends from Sun Yat-sen University will be quite interested in. We are all familiar with law student mooting competition. This competition organized by ANU and SMU is unique in not only being completely online to introduce students to online dispute resolution (or ODR), but will specifically focus on researching and arguing the emerging law of computational law and disruptive technologies, and HKU is proud to be the only Hong Kong university competing.

[Post conference comment – the HKU team was a quarter-finalist]

We have been very active in the community, and among the different activities that we have organized or been engaged in include being a part of the growing international legal innovation and education ecosystem, for example, I had the good fortune to be at Stanford CodeX, where I met with leaders like Daniel [Rodriguez], as well as at the Berkeley Transactional Clinicians Conference, where I met pioneers like Dan [Jackson].

We want LITE Lab@HKU to be plugged into that global community that Daniel was talking about, in the same way that we aim to be connected with and positively impact the startup and social entrepreneurship ecosystem here in Hong Kong.

I wanted to conclude with some reflections.
I attended a wonderful session by Julienne [Jen] earlier this year about the importance of getting student feedback, and so I asked our first cohort of students what we are doing right, and how we can improve. Here are some of their reflections that we received.

- **Breadth and relevance** - “Cutting edge/potential to be relevant”/ “Broad range of topics”/ “Broad in covering every aspect of startups”; “Interesting topics which are useful for running a startup in the future”/ “informative”/ “Good outline of different legal issues”/ “Practical approach to theoretical explanation of concepts (suggestion of apps, corporations, etc)”/ “diverse content”

- **Mix** - “Very interesting varied content”/ “Great mix of law, technology and entrepreneurship”/ “Crash course in business, tech and law”/ “Exposure to business and law aspects of the course – How to implement these ideas into project based work”

- **New Materials (esp for no-coders)** - “Plenty of interesting and engaging materials on Moodle”; “Considerate to people who don’t code”/ “So many no code solutions (as a non-coder)”

- **Practical** - “Interactive sessions”/ “Experiential learning”/ “Very hands-on”/ “Practical hands-on experience creating legal tech product”/ “Really enjoy the focus on practice rather than theory, I still fell like I get a lot of content out of it”/ “Student participation very much encouraged”/ “New skills learned”/ “Practical – able to know what are the issues in real life practice”/ “interactive learning”

- **Flexibility** - “Freedom to choose what we are interested in”/ “flexible”/ “flexible assignment method”

- **Energy** - “The energy and enthusiasm from the professor”/ “Enthusiasm and energy/engaging”/ “Good amount of support/interaction with professor”/ “highly value how dynamic it is in terms of Q&A between student and professor”

Many of the students liked the course breadth and mix; the new materials; it being very practical and flexible; and the energy that I apparently exude.

As for what can be improved, interestingly, some commented that the course was too broad; too ambitious; had not enough tutorial time; and students wanted more coding time.

- **Breadth** - “Too broad”/ “A lot to think about without a lot of depth”/ “Too superficial on some topics; needs more depth”

- **More Law Content/ Pace** - “Lack of law content for people who are here to learn laws”/ “More content about entrepreneurship law”/ “More law content about entrepreneurship law”; “Pace can be increased”; “A little slow when it comes to the legal parts (although understandable as not all are law students)” yet “Sometimes very law technical even though students are not all pursuing law studies”

- **Mix** - “Over ambitious – tries to be a law class and tech components”/ “Identity crisis – is this tech for lawyers? Law for technics? How to startup?”

- **Organisation** - “A bit confused about what I should know coming into each lecture”/ “Disorganised – hard to know what to expect day to day and how classes connect to each other”/ “Bit random structure sometimes”

- **Tutorials** - “Why do we even have tutorial”/ “Lots of wasted time in class”/ “Get more hands-on scope in tutorials (revise projects, see how an app works)”

- **Coding time** - “Incorporate a section of the course where students learn to code”; “Perhaps license software for students to use-develop more partners who are willing to share their platforms with LITE Lab”

- **Real world** - “Talking to client should be step 1 of the course”/ “Need real world examples of how these ideas/ steps have been executed by startups”
And there were many comments on assessment.

- **Assessment** - “More clear instruction about assignment” / “logistics for the course are too messy and confusing. Like there are instant updates on the assignments” / “Assignment criteria is quite fluffy” / “Share more about grading standards/ expectations” / “learn more about grading criteria” / “a clearer grading criteria would be needed” / “For one assignment, 2 videos is a lot” / “Limit word requirement for written assignment”

**Grade distribution:** For recommended grade distribution [as agreed at BoE on 23 June 2015], markers are reminded of the following recommended grade distribution applicable for (i) LLB and JD compulsory courses and (ii) any courses with 30 students or more:

- A range – 5% to 30%
- B range – 30% to 65%
- C range – 5% to 15%
- D range and below - remainder

As a new Faculty member who is also a lawyer, I follow the rules, and the rules require the grading of classes of this size to be bell curved, which for those who teach experiential courses know can be quite challenging. So maybe, for next year, I will cap the class at 29 to not be subject to the bell curve requirement.

I am really pleased to share our experience and learnings with you all today and welcome any questions. In the meantime, I authored the Hong Kong chapter of the [State of Legal Innovation in Asia-Pacific report](#) and have extra copies for those who are interested.

We are all learning together and iterating to improve how we can better prepare the legal professionals of tomorrow. I look forward to sharing our experiences and learning from all of you in the coming years. Thank you very much for your kind attention.