

## Measuring success - learning from the law students' experiences

Anne Carver & Helen Yu  
Faculty of Law  
annecarver@cuhk.edu.hk

### Abstract

The Faculty of Law has filmed interviews with a selected group of founding year students since September 2006. In particular, these founding students reflected on their university experiences, the LLB curriculum and the culture of the Faculty of Law. Insights gathered from the students' reflections on their learning experience have been used, inter alia, to develop both new strategies for the alignment of the curriculum and our vision for the provision of legal education in CUHK.

The film project has gone through a full cycle, as the first cohort of LLB students at the Faculty of Law have already graduated. This presentation provides empirical evidence on student experiences within the four years they have spent completing their LLB degree. The presentation will consist of a 10-minute film clip of one of the student interviews with a short paper to show how the interviewee changed throughout the four years. This short film has been made for this year's Teaching and Learning Innovation Expo to demonstrate aspects of one particular student's experiences over the 4-year LLB programme. The film assesses the Faculty of Law's contribution to the changes in aspects of the student's development and asks the question – how do we measure success?

The Faculty of Law at the Chinese University of Hong Kong was established in 2006 (as the School of Law) when instruction began for the first cohort of LLB students. The founding students were involved in a unique personal experience and the teachers recognized that it was important to record this emotional and intellectual journey in the students' own words. The idea of a "film project," *The Student Voices*, was thus conceived by the School of Law and supported by a Teaching Development Grant awarded in October 2006. Professor Mike McConville was the Principal Investigator and Mrs. Anne Carver of the School of Law, Professor Carmel McNaught (Director of CLEAR) and Dr Glenn Shive (Adjunct Associate Professor of Educational Administration and Policy and Director of the Hong Kong America Centre) were the Co-investigators, with Ms. Helen Yu as assistant to the project. These five sets of films made over the past four years serve as a systematic record of the progress made by the founding students over the four year LLB programme, as well a basis of evaluation for the Faculty of Law's teaching and learning quality process.

The goal of *The Student Voices* was, and continues to be, to see how students responded to the skills and values taught in the LLB curriculum. We selected eleven founding students (out of a total of forty-eight) to be interviewed over the four years of their LLB programme. The film interviews, typically 20 to 30 minutes each, mark the yearly checkpoints along the law school

marathon, where students ponder on their immediate pasts, and share their aspirations and concerns on their future. As the first cohort of LLB students at the Faculty of Law has graduated in May 2010, *The Student Voices* has already completed a full project cycle.

*The Student Voices* is, first and foremost, a longitudinal research. The goal was to see how each individual student change (or as we hope, develop) throughout their four years as a law student. There is also a “horizontal aspect” to the study. The students were all asked the same questions and their responses emphasized the common concerns for being an undergraduate and a law student in CUHK. Common themes have emerged from these interviews to inform the analysis of personal, academic and professional development that is representative of the Faculty of Law’s success in its first completed cycle of the LLB programme.

This paper draws on the common themes gathered throughout four years of periodic interviews and brings forth the longitudinal aspect of *The Student Voices* by considering the general trends of development in the founding students’ personal and professional lives. An analysis of these trends provides the backdrop against which Patricia Lam’s university experience can be highlighted, as shown in the short film submitted along this paper at the Teaching and Learning Expo of 2010 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

At the first filming of the eleven students in October 2006, the founding students had been in The law School for six weeks and had just begun their university education. They shared their experience as novices in the law, a demanding academic subject; at the same time they had to balance the excitement of being in a university environment that provides ample opportunities for general education and social skills. As such, the theme of transition pervaded the first interviews. Most of the interviewees noted the difficulty they experienced in adjusting to university-styled teaching. All but two interviewees were graduates of local secondary schools; many took note of the difference between secondary school learning, which tends to cultivate reliance on the teacher’s role in conveying knowledge, as opposed to that in the Faculty of Law, where students are expected to be disciplined and independent in the pursuit of knowledge and skills as future professionals. Students found the amount and difficulty in reading law to be overwhelming, and that seemed to present the most challenge in their adjustment to the academic aspect of university life.

By the second film interview that took place at the end of the first year, the interviewees all noted that they had become quite accustomed to the workload. They were reading in greater speed with more familiarity with the case law method, which is one of the most valued skills in the legal training of all common law jurisdictions, to which Hong Kong belongs. By the third interview in spring 2008, (filmed at the end of their second year), the students no longer mentioned the volume of reading being overwhelming, although a number of them noted that courses in the second year courses were much more challenging than those in the first year. This feeling of being overwhelmed by school work, by and large, had disappeared by the end of second year. Despite the law courses being more difficult, students found them to be manageable because they made the effort to improve their reading, learning and time management skills during the first year.

The theme of transition continued to take a centre stage in the student interviews. Many of our interviewees began to be concerned with becoming a professional at law. Some worried about their job prospects due to keen competition in the legal field, which places much emphasis on academic performance. It is clear that, by the end of the third year of their LLB programme, the interviewees were already well aware of the fact that they had embarked upon a period of transition from university to professional life. At the beginning of their fourth year (autumn 2009 interviews), all of them had gained professional working experiences in the previous summer. These experiences gave all of them a fair exposure of the professional world as they observed their seniors in practice and in many ways participated in the practice of law themselves. Through their summer experiences the students developed a sense of what professional path to take by narrowing down their professional interests. Although they still discussed their law courses with a strong sense of engagement, many interviewees noted the difference between learning law in the classroom and working with the law as professionals.

This process of transition accelerated as we hear the students at the end of the final fourth year May 2010 interviews, the last set in the project cycle. By that time our interviewees had finished their final examinations and were about to graduate from the LLB programme. They were asked to discuss their experiences with the legal profession over the past four years, including the interactions with their distinguished professional mentors or other members of the profession, and their summer internships. Without exception all the interviewees were able to articulate the difference between being a student and being a professional, and invariably they noted peopling skills to be an especially important professional training in their summer internships. A number of them said that as lawyers one acts in the client's best interests. One student noted, for example, that the relationship with clients is more than just getting the job done—it is to form a relationship with the client with the sharing of legal advice, confidence and even commercial strategy. A few students noted, more specifically, that tactful communication and the ability to empathize are key attributes in serving clients well, particularly when the client is a member of disadvantaged population. As none of them found themselves lacking during their internships in “classroom legal skills” such as reading agreements, writing memos, and conducting legal research, it appears that our interviewees found the relational aspects of professional life to be the most significant difference between student life and the professional world.

The repertoire of views and experiences in the film interviews shows that the process of transition from a secondary school student to a law student in CUHK came to fruition by the end of the students' first year at the Faculty of Law. By the beginning of the students' third year, they could imagine their professional careers, be it in the law or not, on the horizon. At that point, a number of our interviewees, then in year 3 of the LLB programme, were still considering their options and keeping the thought of a legal career at arm's length. Many leaned strongly toward becoming lawyers but at the same time they were managing their expectations in light of the competitive aspect of the legal profession. Regardless of whether they were optimistic about their prospects, all our interviewees exhibited the awareness that they were then positioned at the doorstep of the next phase of transition: from university student to professional and working life. By the time they had completed their coursework in year 4, our interviewees were all able to articulate the key differences between being a student and being a professional. In our view, this indicates a major turning point in the transition from university student to professional. The

students clearly know the demands of professional life in specific terms, having noted the skills and personal attributes needed in their internships.

The theme of transition is especially intriguing to us as mentors and educators of the founding year students. Because the founding year students did not benefit from the guidance typically provided by senior students, teachers at the Faculty of Law often took up the role of a “friend-and-teacher.” In many ways, members of the Faculty took to their personal responsibility the founding students’ adjustment from secondary school to university life, then from university to professional life. The film interviews were one, amongst many, way in which students concerns were channeled to the formal decision making process at the Faculty of Law.

While the students’ intellectual and professional development continues to lie in the forefront of our attention, their personal development is also a key concern. We have gained many insights into the professional development of our interviewees from this four year study and we have seen distinct “phases” in their transition. The same theme of transition in the interviewees’ personal development progresses much more subtly, taking somewhat of a backseat to the students’ academic and professional experiences.

At the first filming we asked the interviewees a direct question on personal development. The question was either framed as “what are your personal goals?” or “what do you imagine yourself to be in four years’ time?” A number of interviewees mentioned the development of skills and knowledge in the law; but many also commented on personal attributes that they would like to develop and addressed the intended purpose of the question. We find William Cho’s personal aspirations to be particularly memorable, “I would like to be confident, witty, and also very reasonable and a considerate person,” a statement that bears testimony to William’s sense of self-awareness and his desire to develop the quintessential attributes of adulthood.

Confidence seems to be the most valued quality to these young university students and at the initial filming most of our interviewees felt that the development of skills and knowledge in the law was closely tied with confidence-building. A number of them also said they would like to speak English fluently, a skill that the Faculty of Law also values highly. Throughout the filming cycle, around 8 of the interviewees who did not grow up in an English environment in Hong Kong have exhibited an increasing ease during the interviews. They are able to articulate their views in English with increasing facility and sophistication, including the way they describe legal issues, the law and even its shortcomings; and on the other hand they might have become more accustomed to the filming exercise as well. For the interviewees who grew up in an English environment in Hong Kong, better confidence shows not so much in the spoken expression but rather the content of the discussions, where views and concerns are expressed with impressive specificity as the interviewees extend a conscious effort to elaborate their points with examples and personal experiences. This increasing articulation across the board seems to show in the mere fact that the interviews have, on average, run longer than the previous ones for each individual interviewee; the students also respond better to the interviewer when he probes further into points of interest during the conversations. Viewed in its longitudinal aspect, the film interviews confirm the interviewees’ initial view that the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the law is strongly correlated with confidence building for a student of law.

The transition to adulthood was also conveyed throughout the four years of interviews, although less self-consciously articulated than the students' interest in their own professional development. At the final set of interviews we asked each student, "so how have you changed in the past four years?" William Cho responded to this question citing professional skills, facility with the English language, and the broadening of one's perspectives to be the key changes that he has experienced during his university education. He felt that independence in learning and the ability to spot issues in the law was the key to his intellectual development. He was also able to "appreciate the fine distinctions" in the law as he pays more attention to word usage. William furthermore noted that the interactions with students from different backgrounds had enabled him to appreciate diversity, and this had, in effect "liberalized" his worldviews quite significantly. We were also pleased to see that the same sense of self-awareness and the reflective qualities that William showed in his first year with us had not faded at all. Rather they had been critical to his personal development as he cite "maturity" to be an important goal in university education.

Although the film project has completed a full cycle, we continue to follow the students and their future plans. We invited Patricia Lam back to have an extra interview in the summer of 2010, before she departed Hong Kong for her postgraduate degree in Oxford (Bachelor of Civil Law). In the company of her parents and her sister, Patricia Lam shared her success story in front of the camera and told us a much more personal story than we have ever known in the previous interviews.

Strictly speaking, the interview was not intended to be a continuation of our film project as we only wanted to learn about Patricia's aspirations at this point of her life and about her family life. Yet the theme of transition and personal maturity emerged with much more depth than previous interviews. The family dynamics shown during this filming session answers fundamental questions that the previous interviews never addressed, namely, how does a student come to become who she is, and how one's family upbringing prepares her for university and, more importantly, life.

Her passion and thirst for knowledge persistent, and it was not surprising to us that by the fourth year she was ready to pursue higher degrees in law, a path that will most likely lead her to a career in the academia.

Besides being the original source of inspiration for Patricia's intellectual development, the family relationship also plays a prominent role in supporting Patricia emotionally throughout her life, especially during her time at the Faculty of Law. Patricia's mother was particularly important in playing this role. The image of her being a loving mother is presented throughout this film, as she talks proudly of Patricia's accomplishments and the family values of humility, hard work, and open-mindedness that have formed and molded Patricia.

The filming session of summer 2010 presented a rare opportunity for us to look into the importance of family values and tradition in the making of an LLB student, one who is certainly amongst the most successful in the first graduating class in CUHK. As Patricia was about to begin another exciting phase of her life, we asked her once again what her hopes are for the future. In her answers Patricia looks forward to the opportunity to meet top minds from around

the world. To her family, however, this goes beyond the honour of attending the oldest and most prestigious university in the world. Her family sees this as an opportunity for Patricia to experience a wider world, to develop broader perspectives and to eventually contribute her knowledge and skills to the society in the future, especially in Hong Kong.

During the four year film project the LLB students at CUHK all experienced significant development intellectually, professionally and personally. Above all, the film interviews showed a general theme of transition, the professional aspects of which were most keenly examined and shared during the interviews. From a graduate of secondary school to a university student, then to a young professional, our interviewees have grown professionally through a programmatic process, where distinct phases of development emerged. In addition, the students' different stages of personal development revealed themselves as the students reflect on their values. Over the four years of filming the students have articulated their values, and we have seen that they fully expect these values to form a significant part of their world views as they leave the University and begin their working lives. All of us at the Faculty of Law share a sense of achievement that these university graduates have a clear sense of their roles and commitment in their community. That is how we measure success. We hope that the short film of Patricia Lam that accompanies this paper will go some way to demonstrating our sense of what it means to measure success by learning from the experiences of our students.