

## CASE STUDY

**Building co-curricular learning experiences: Lessons from a student-driven experiential learning initiative underpinned by a student-staff collaborative model**

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## ABSTRACT

In this case study, both authors look into their experiences with a student-driven experiential learning initiative in the form of an academic services committee. The committee embodies a developing community of undergraduate students reading the double degrees in government and laws and also aims at promoting the scholarly study of public affairs and jurisprudence within a traditional and comprehensive research-intensive Hong Kong university. As the flagship student community of the double degree programme, the committee provides tailor-made services for current students and connects them to alumni networks. The authors critically evaluate the multipurpose nature of the committee by applying the five criteria for successful staff-student collaborations, namely (a) reciprocal trust and respect, (b) self-efficacy, (c) flexibility and autonomy, (d) commitment, as well as (e) ownership and responsibility (Martens et al., 2019). Within a synergic collaborative model, students can assume a leadership role in creating and managing multidisciplinary co-curricular learning experiences, with faculty members only assuming indirect, non-voting, and advisory roles under limited circumstances.

## KEYWORDS

co-curricular learning experiences, experiential learning initiative, student-staff collaborative model, government and laws, Hong Kong universities

This case study focuses on the establishment and development of a student-driven experiential learning initiative in the form of an undergraduate student academic committee that is part of the prestigious Bachelor of Social Sciences (Government and Laws) and Bachelor of Laws double degree programme at The University of Hong Kong (HKU), otherwise known as the Government and Laws Committee HKU (GLC). Established in 1999, the programme is a 5-year undergraduate double degree programme in political science and

law. Past graduates have pursued diverse career paths, becoming lawyers in public and private practice, civil servants, business professionals, academics, journalists, and leaders of the non-profit sector.

The lead author, Adrian Lam, is a course tutor at the Department of Politics and Public Administration (PPA), where he tutors a research methods course that is taken by all students majoring in PPA, including those studying government and laws. In structuring the case study, we mainly employed the perspective of Anfield Tam, the student author, who is in his third year of undergraduate studies and was formerly a director of GLC. During his time on GLC, he was responsible for overseeing the progress of a wide range of initiatives, coordinating the work among his colleagues, as well as devising strategic visions and goals for the future development of GLC and the programme.

The dynamic, interactive, and collaborative student-staff collaboration reflected by and incorporated into the development of GLC sheds light on how universities can create a comprehensive and balanced co-curricular learning experience for students. As synthesised by Martens et al. (2019), successful student-staff collaboration should reflect a series of criteria, which include (a) reciprocal trust and respect, (b) self-efficacy, (c) flexibility and autonomy, (d) commitment, as well as (e) ownership and responsibility. This case study aims to make sense of GLC directors' real-life instances and experiences by shedding light on how the co-author, as a student, experiences and perceives such student-staff collaboration in the context of GLC and the above five criteria. While there has been a growing body of literature examining staff-student partnerships, most partnerships are framed in the Western context, while only a few can be found in the Chinese context (e.g., Ho, 2017; Liang et al., 2020; Liang & Matthews, 2021). However, Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2016) comment that research should be further extended and theorised to much broader contexts and ways in which partnerships may take place. In particular, the co-curricular learning experience is complementing and supporting the formal curriculum context, which allows students to attain a totality of student learning experience (Nachatar Singh, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to illustrate some of the evidence-based instances in the case of a university in Hong Kong, followed by articulating how students are driving while staff are supporting the experiential learning initiative and academic community.

#### GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF THE COMMITTEE

GLC is incorporated as a student body and administratively under the programme in HKU's PPA Department. Its governing council consists of a president and several directors in charge of various portfolios, including an editorial board. This board publishes a widely recognised student-edited yearly journal that routinely features quality submissions from scholars, students, and other parties. This journal has been recognised by the university's Faculty of Law, to the extent that the publication of every new issue is mentioned on the faculty's website. The board is also responsible for the more frequent publication of the programme's official student magazine. GLC is not a membership-based association but a pro bono academic services committee. Insofar as one is a current government and laws student, one will be treated as a service recipient, unless one opts out from it.

Each governing council is selected to serve a term of 1 year. Interested students may apply to be nominated as candidates for individual posts, and they will subsequently undergo training guided by the incumbent governing council. Candidates will later present their year plan and answer queries before the annual convention, which is open unlimitedly to all current students of the programme. If no less than half of those in the annual

convention objects to one or more of the candidates, candidates will be confirmed within 48 hours by GLC's senate, which comprises class representatives from each year. The entire electoral process is managed, organised, and supervised by students.

#### REVIVAL OF A CENTURY-OLD VISION

GLC emerged as the heir to a cosmopolitan tradition dating back to 1924 when George Keeton, HKU's inaugural lecturer in political science and jurisprudence, was appointed from the United Kingdom. The tradition of the student-faculty joint venture has its roots in his initiative, where the lecturer himself co-established a student society and journal with his law and politics students. This academic, who would over time become the dean of the Faculty of Laws at University College London, outlined a powerful vision for his society and its journal, in these words:

The immediate object for which our Society is founded is the study of law in a wider fashion than is possible in mere academic courses, and to embody the best of our work (even though its total sum may seem less than a single drop in the vast ocean of legal knowledge) in a journal. It is a work which can only be attempted if we regard ourselves as a band of enthusiasts working with a constant purpose; and certainly, it can only be successfully accomplished if each member in some fashion, co-operates loyally. . . . [W]e possess enthusiasm . . . [that] will materially advance . . . the solution of the ultimate problems of legal and social science. (Keeton, 1926, pp. 2–11)

This passage enshrines fundamental constitutional values that would come to define GLC almost a century later: inter-disciplinarity ("the study of law in a wider fashion than is possible in mere academic courses"), consistent commitment to professionalism and excellence ("embody the best of our work"), fidelity to constitutional duties ("It is a work which can only be attempted if we regard ourselves as a band of enthusiasts working with a constant purpose"), collegiality ("if each member in some fashion, co-operates loyally"), and non-partisan scholarship that is unbiased ("the solution of the ultimate problems of legal and social science").

The founding of GLC was understood within GLC and the programme as a restoration of Keeton's pre-WWII scholarly society at HKU, which laid dormant since around 1927. GLC is an internal component of the programme, unaffiliated with any other student organisation at HKU. Nevertheless, it stands firm by the principle of governance by current students only. GLC is committed to delivering a wide range of tailor-made services and support to all government and laws students, which includes mentorship schemes, career-planning workshops, and examination preparation sharing sessions. All these initiatives cut across the academic, professional, practical, and even personal dimensions of students' development. GLC maintains a mutually respectful partnership with various academic and administrative units of both the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law, to which government and laws students jointly belong. GLC regularly expresses students' opinions to staff, from whom it seeks timely assistance and professional advice on various initiatives.

## STRONG EMPHASIS ON STUDENT AUTONOMY AND CO-DECISION-MAKING

Faculty members are aware of the principles that underpin GLC as a non-profit-making, non-partisan student-driven experiential learning initiative serving the twin aims to (a) foster the scholarly exchange of political science and law and (b) build a tightly cohesive community of continuity among students and alumni. The underlying relationship between GLC and the programme re-enacts the student-staff collaboration of the late 1920s. Unlike the conventional top-down, centralised, and hierarchical approach in decision-making, the collaborative dynamics between committee office-holders and faculty members help ensure a balance between student autonomy and programme integrity. GLC is aware that, in the exercise of its autonomy, it should give due weight to the fact that it openly bears the name of the programme, such that it has an active obligation to ensure that its governance, initiatives, and behaviour would not adversely affect the reputation and interests of stakeholders of the programme. GLC has hence created its disciplinary tribunal, known as GLC Constitutional Court, to enforce rules of good conduct enshrined in its constitution on its office-holders. The programme is also keenly conscious of the fact that students running GLC would be deprived of an invaluable learning experience if they did not enjoying genuine autonomy in carrying out GLC's responsibilities. Based on this consensus, there has been a strong sense of empowerment in granting students powers and responsibilities in a rewarding partnership.

Earlier this year, the student author was preparing for a signature public affairs symposium themed on recent local political and legal developments. Nevertheless, the local climate had turned increasingly polarised, and any mistake could provoke outrage from opposing forces, which could be detrimental to students and the programme to which they belong. The student author, together with his colleagues, carefully shortlisted choices of invitees to maintain a thorough and balanced discussion of many prominent issues across the panel. The symposium turned out to be a resounding success, featuring a diverse panel comprising a former chair professor of the PPA department, a former dean of the Faculty of Law, a former government minister, a former speaker of the regional legislature, and a former leader of the bar. It was also well-attended by a sizeable audience in person and online through concurrent live broadcast and widely reported across major media outlets, with a prominent academic staff of the PPA department supportively delivering the welcoming speech on behalf of the programme.

Although faculty academic and administrative staff refrained from taking part in GLC's decision-making processes, GLC has taken the initiative to consult them for advice in their capacities as experienced bystanders or event participants. The consultation process, part and parcel of GLC's peculiar model of governance, bore fruit. This the student author found to be useful, given staff members' rich life experiences which complements the shortcomings of students in identifying neglected but important issues. While students could gain hands-on experience in moderating large events and maintaining the delicate balance in the choice of panellists, they have also benefitted from consulting the generous advice of their teachers.

The consultation views of the honorary advisory board (which consists of all relevant academic staff teaching on the programme), though non-binding according to GLC's constitution, helped to countervail the dangers of bias and groupthink within GLC. Success is dependent on students' ability to spot issues that are beyond their ability to tackle. If students have been overly ambitious or confident, they would not have considered it

necessary, or even desirable, to consult faculty members for a second opinion, through an institutional process entrenched in GLC's constitution. Meanwhile, if faculty members were wholly unconcerned and detached from GLC, given not even ex officio membership on the honorary advisory board, they would unlikely be informed of the circumstances, let alone provide second opinions, given their research or academic burdens.

#### MANIFESTATION OF STRONG COMMITMENT AND DEDICATION

A student-driven initiative that receives staff support could cast a transformative impact on the overall student-staff collaboration experience. When the student author served as a director on the governing council, GLC launched the first-ever mentorship scheme that promoted dialogue between alumni of the programme and current students. Through their alumni connections, faculty members had been instrumental in bringing about mutually beneficial mentor-mentee relationships. Whereas honorary advisory board members offered recommendations of potential alumni mentors upon consultation, it was the governing council who liaised with interested alumni, handled students' applications and queries, matched mentees to mentors according to their interests and aspirations, and devised guidelines to ensure the orderly progress of the mentorship scheme. Both mentors and mentees kicked off the scheme by understanding its purpose, their responsibilities, as well as the potential benefits that they can hope to receive. The continual access to a mentor with professional expertise and life experience could offer participants guidance and support in terms of mapping out their career and life plans.

To students, these were valuable opportunities to explore their emerging needs, interests, and issues, given that many of them were cultivating their own identities and destiny. Mentors offered support to meet their developmental needs and provided them with abundant opportunities to reflect on the experience. Despite the advisory role played by members of the honorary advisory board, including external examiners, the reality remained that the mentorship scheme was entirely managed and sustained by students. The mentorship scheme required students to gain important insights when dedicating their own time and effort to maintaining their mentor-mentee relationships. Therefore, students' inexperience and generation gaps could dissuade some of the alumni mentors from joining again, whereas students' lack of social connections could impair the success of the mentorship scheme as members of the governing council are solely responsible for inviting mentors.

GLC maintains an interactive Instagram page originally intended to be a platform for the programme to stay connected with current students, alumni, and potential applicants. GLC worked hard to the effect that the latest updates of the programme and GLC could be routinely disseminated and viewed. GLC was responsible for coming up with various designs and posting messages as well as responding to comments. Working in conjunction with supportive administrative staff, GLC gained access to bulk email delivery systems that reminded students and staff members of GLC's upcoming events, which GLC sincerely believed was in students' interest and for their benefit.

The student author is grateful for the kind assistance and enthusiasm of academic and administrative staff on the one hand and students on the other. Without their participation, it would be impossible for us to build up from scratch the outstanding experiential learning initiative and academic community that is GLC. It is a foundational principle first articulated in the writings of George Keeton that students and staff are not enemies. There has been no irreconcilable tension between faculty advice and student self-

governance, as GLC's life thus far has shown. This again reveals how staff and students can play a mutually supportive role in shaping the learning experience towards a productive direction.

#### EMERGENCE OF CONSTRUCTIVE AND CONTINUOUS DIALOGUE

As the recognised student community of the programme, GLC hosted the annual Student-Staff Consultative Conference with faculty members from both the PPA and law departments. The conference serves a purpose for all interested students to directly express their opinions towards teaching and learning as well as assessments over the past academic year. This became even more important in recent academic years when many teaching and learning opportunities were abruptly moved online due to the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). GLC worked closely with relevant university and faculty authorities in encouraging student participation and soliciting feedback, as well as administering the selection of class representatives from different cohorts of students. Student members of the board of studies tend to be incumbent or former governing council office-holders. This is another manifestation of GLC's close student-staff collaboration, with GLC not being only partners, but also an effective communication channel between students and staff, allowing all stakeholders to cultivate a strong sense of mutual vision and trust.

Although GLC is part of the programme, committee office-holders are not deemed inferior to faculty members within the honorary advisory board. The communication between GLC and its honorary advisory board is bidirectional: on the one hand, faculty members would outline the programme's future strategies and policies for GLC's information; on the other hand, GLC would directly collect and reflect students' opinions about teaching and learning, assessment methods, and supporting services. This is another representative example of the synergetic interplay of top-down and bottom-up dimensions in decision-making.

In the student author's view, this manifests an empowering collaborative relationship, evident in student-staff deliberation over both the programme and GLC's affairs. He finds this arrangement to be mutually beneficial for both students and staff members; student participation in programme affairs is an enriching experience because students can gain a stake in managing their home community, while other faculty members can take a more proactive role by conveying students' viewpoints and concerns to the university authorities for consideration. Students of the programme are a unique group as they transcend two very different faculties and take courses offered by both the PPA and law departments. Having GLC as a unifying force serves the interests and demands of double degree students in unparalleled ways. This also demonstrates how GLC's student-staff collaborative model leads to a better and more innovative understanding and resolution of problems.

#### FACILITATION OF MUTUAL LEARNING AND SUPPORT

The editorial board is one of the most prized achievements of GLC over the past few years. So far, more than 1,200 pages of high-quality content on law and public affairs have been published in three volumes of the journal and 24 issues of the monthly magazine. The journal and monthly magazine are both student-edited publications specialising in law and public affairs, yet staff involvement remains an essential key to its success. The editorial board welcomes submissions of various types and styles from scholars, current students, alumni, and other parties all over the world who are highly interested in the specific theme

proposed for each volume or issue, which ranges from COVID-19 populism to feminist jurisprudence. Some issues even included interviews featuring both sitting and retired judges from national apex courts and international courts. The aim is to promote a series of robust debates about cutting-edge legal and policy problems across both international and domestic levels. There have been emerging undergraduate student scholars who aspire to undergo academic research and publications. Given this, the timely existence of these two publications offers them ideal venues to express their unique perspectives and learn from one another in a collaborative community.

Although academics are constitutionally barred from exercising any editorial role within the editorial board's governance, their enthusiastic contribution of articles and forewords, participation in book interviews, and provision of useful feedback from the reader's perspective helped bring GLC's periodicals to their current status as leading student publications of their kind in the region. GLC's flagship annual journal has been recognised as a student-edited journal of the HKU Faculty of Law, and its issues are regularly featured on the faculty's official scholarship blog. GLC took the initiative to encourage staff participation in robust debates on a series of law and policy problems, not the other way round, as it typically occurs in classrooms. This was another measure where students could enhance their academic calibre and rigour from the examples of staff members.

## CONCLUSION

The idea of synergic student-staff collaboration has become increasingly consequential among contemporary universities, given its value and importance in shaping a more student-oriented curriculum which can better address students' diverse learning needs, expectations, and interests. The cultivation of partnership can also allow students to cultivate greater academic interest and stronger professional commitment throughout their learning trajectory. The all-around development of GLC over the past few years has resoundingly demonstrated how successful student-staff collaboration hinges on mutual contribution and support from both parties. The dynamics of GLC further shed light on the previously mentioned five criteria of successful student-staff collaboration as synthesised by Martens et al. (2019). GLC's experience indicates that the establishment of a student-driven experiential learning initiative which involves academic and administrative staff in a healthy manner is a successful model that can be replicated in many comparable contexts.

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