



10-2016

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## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Cho, Allan (2016) "The Rise of the Innovation Commons: A Conversation with City University of Hong Kong's Candy Lau," *Journal of East Asian Libraries*: Vol. 2016: No. 163, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol2016/iss163/7>

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**The Rise of the Innovation Commons:  
A Conversation with City University of Hong Kong's Candy Lau**

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Abstract: Founded in 1984 as the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, it became a fully accredited university and was renamed the City University of Hong Kong in 1994. It became a public research university located in Kowloon, Hong Kong and is uniquely situated in the vicinity of the Festival Walk Mall.

City University of Hong Kong, which is globally recognized as a top institution of higher learning and research, is currently ranked #57 in the world in the QS World University Rankings and ranked #2 in Asia by the U.S. News & World Report. Although not a large space, how the Innovation Commons was creatively repurposed using existing library space into a collaborative learning environment is a model worthy of a closer examination.

Established collaboratively between the university library, the School of Law, the Knowledge Transfer Office, and the Education Development and Gateway Education, the Innovation Commons serves as a one-stop resource center physically located inside the university's Run Run Shaw Library. In short, the Innovation Commons is a unique draw for students and the campus community as the hub for community engagement, entrepreneurship, and innovation.

**A: Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself and your role at the City University of Hong Kong, especially within the Innovation Commons?**

C: My name is Candy Lau. I'm the Education Development Officer, and my office is the Office of Education Development and Gateway Education (EDGE). My role for the Innovation Commons is to I oversee the space, including its daily operations, its organization of activities, and providing the coaching for the students.

**A: Could you briefly describe the Innovation Commons?**

C: We are a one-stop resource space for City University students where they can have one place to find all the information about innovation competitions, both on campus or off campus, and this includes funding opportunities as well – funding for scholarship or projects. The purpose of the Innovation Commons is to promote and nurture students in innovation, entrepreneurship, and intellectual property. This is quite unique because our Innovation Commons links these three aspects together.

The other centers in other Hong Kong universities stay mainly focused on the business side, mainly on entrepreneurship. They do not really pay a lot of attention to international property. At the Innovation Commons, these three are integrated so that once the students have their inventions, they can file the patent because it is much more efficient for them to file the patent before they lock themselves into any project.

**A: What is the size of Innovation Commons in terms of space within the City University library?**

C: The Innovation Commons is 51.75 square metres. We have a co-working space adjacent to us. It is about 36 square meters. We also have plans to convert existing office space close by into meeting space for the Innovation Commons.

**A: Could you tell us more about the Innovation Commons? What would you say are the highlights of the Innovation Commons?**

C: The Innovation Commons was established by four stakeholders, including the Run Run Shaw Library, the Knowledge Transfer Office, the School of Law, and the Office of Education Development and Gateway Education (EDGE). The university created the Innovation Commons because it really wanted to promote interdisciplinary ideas for its students, particularly for projects or start-ups, so that it does not necessarily need to focus on one discipline or any one school. Although a student may be a business or engineering major, he or she would not be labeled as such in the real working world as all organizations are comprised of people with different backgrounds. The Innovation Commons simulates an actual working company by combining the talents of different disciplines, just like when a company requires expertise in accounting, technology, and design, just to name a few, when creating a product or project.

Thus, the reason why we want to establish the Innovation Commons in the library is to encourage the students to work cross-discipline. Not only working with their own peers who they are familiar with, but also to have a chance to work with students from all disciplines.

**A: Could you describe in more detail about this collaboration between the library, the School of Law, the Knowledge Transfer Office, and the Education Development Gateway Education (EDGE) in operating the Innovation Commons? How does this collaboration work?**

C: Each stakeholder contributes in its own way. The Library provides its space to us, as well as all the fixtures and the furniture—it takes care of everything concerning the Innovation Commons' physical facility. In addition, the Library provides the patent search databases which the Innovation Commons staff assist the students in using. As the purpose of our space is to nurture the student to better understand intellectual property for entrepreneurship, the software and databases are critical for

patent searching; thus, the students come here and use the service provided by the library.

The School of Law, on the other hand, provides an internship program in which students from the School of Law come as peer advisors to the Innovation Commons. We usually have law school students volunteer as part of the program and assist as advisors to students who want to do a patent search. It is a mutually beneficial program because both law students and undergraduate students can obtain hands-on experience in learning from each other and from intellectual property law. At the end, our undergraduates learn how to properly file a patent as well. So the School of Law plays an effective role in the Innovation Commons.

For the Office of Education Development and Gateway Education (EDGE) – my particular portfolio – the role is educational. We liaise with City U's undergraduate students and give them coaching until the project is mature enough to find a patent. Whenever students have projects they want to further develop, or they want to join a competition, we will provide consultation and advice, such as what kinds of competition they can join and how to modify their proposals. When they come to our office we will tell them whether they are ready to file a patent or not because some of their inventions or distributions are not patentable. If their invention is patentable, we guide the students through the entire procedure and what other options they have in taking their project to the next level. We also help our students obtain funding through grants.

Once this is completed, we then pass the case to the Knowledge Transfer Office and it will do the patent filing and all necessary procedures for the student. The role of the Knowledge Transfer Office is to deal with the actual patent filing for the whole school. The office seeks to maintain a good network with the business world so that it can link our students with the business world.

**What is the funding like with collaborations such as this? How is the funding? Is it equal funding development or is it one that leads the rest? How does the budget work? I'm just interested in terms of a unique collaboration such as this between four partners, what are the operation costs?**

We have an Innovation Commons committee that meets regularly to discuss all the issues pertaining to the space. The university allocates a budget specifically to the Innovation Commons, and how it is spent depends on the needs and interests of the space. For example, if there is a need to replace a lighting fixture, the Run Run Shaw Library will take care of this since it handles the physical space. Another instance is the programming part, which the university encourages students to come up with their own inventions. So in that case, the Knowledge Transfer Office would offer the funding for students to encourage them to further develop what they discover as they develop their proposals and presentations at the Innovation Commons. The School of Law offers the expertise of its law students, who volunteer their time for legal

advice on patent issues. Funding in the budget is also used to invite guest speakers to come here to give a talk or a workshop at the Innovation Commons. So as you can see, it's really a committee-driven process in which the funding is allocated and decided by a committee comprised of these different units within the university, depending on the unique needs of the Innovation Commons.

**What is the discovery-enriched curriculum? And how does the innovation commons facilitate this new curriculum?**

Since 2012, the City University of Hong Kong incorporated a new curriculum across its campus, called Discovery-enriched Curriculum (DEC). The goal of the DEC is to give all our students the opportunity to make an original discovery while at CityU so that they learn what it means to create new knowledge, communicate it, curate it, and cultivate it to benefit society. In terms of the course structure, City U encourages its students to create their own project and discover, rather than learning from traditional exams. In encouraging students to have their own discovery during their four-year study at City U, the Innovations Commons supports the DEC by providing resources for students to make their own discoveries and to develop themselves in this field.

In the past, prior to the Innovation Commons, a student's formal learning happens after the final presentations in a course. But now with the DEC, we want students to make the final presentation the beginning of their journey. What we do, my colleagues and I, attend the final presentation of some of the courses and act as the judges of the final presentations. We try to target the DEC presentations and pick out projects with potential to further develop. That's where the Innovation Commons comes in. We want to have the students further develop their discovery in terms of joining the competition or getting the funding.

We are currently entering the second phase, called DEC 2.0. We want to set a target: every undergraduate student will have his or her own DEC project. Eventually, we will replicate this DEC model for post-graduate courses, so that for the Masters course students can also have a chance to develop their own discovery during their two years of post-graduate study at City University.

**Who are the majority of the Innovation Commons' users? That is, who comes to see you about your services? Are they mostly professors, or students from City University, or people from outside the post-secondary sector, mainly the public?**

Most of the users of the Innovation Commons are undergraduate students. They are our primary main targets because Innovation Commons is the extension of the DEC, which is embedded in the undergraduate curriculum. But of course we still serve the alumni—particularly new alumni who graduated one or two years ago and who participated in the DEC curriculum. We have the Innovation Commons' Knowledge

Transfer Office taking care of the knowledge mobilization so that in some of the events that we organize, we have students from other universities, like Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) or Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) join us. The Innovation Commons also hosts talks on how to get funding from the Hong Kong Cyberport Management Limited, and we encourage City University students to let their friends from the other HK universities to join and take part in that.

**Does the Innovation Commons serve faculty who have a project in mind that they think has potential as a patent?**

The Innovation Commons' focus is on students, particularly so that they won't have to go through the Knowledge Transfer Office and then back to us. We handle the process from beginning to end. However, if a professor wants to get the funding, they would need to go back to their own faculty. But if the professor wants to nominate or wants to refer the student to get started on a patent, they can refer the students straight to us.

**So it's truly a student driven, led and curated service. Could you give us an example of a typical research project by a student or scholar from your recent past, perhaps, that you can remember at the Innovation Commons?**

Interestingly, a majority of student projects right now at City University aim to develop applications on mobile phones. A typical example is a group of engineering students (they graduated in 2014) who developed an application called E-[x] (it means "Electronic [x]"). They received four years of financial funding from the Hong Kong Cyberport Management Limited, a fund called the Cyberport Creative Micro Fund.

These students received \$100,000 Hong Kong dollars in cash on projects, and that funding supported them in their development of the idea into a prototype within six months. After graduation from their programs, the students applied to the incubation program at the Cyberport. They will move to Cyberport to have their own office as well as other financial support later this year. For those not familiar with Cyberport, it is a creative digital innovation and technology hub that is managed by Hong Kong Cyberport Management Company Limited and owned by the Hong Kong SAR Government with a goal of nurturing digital industry start-ups and entrepreneurs. The Innovation Commons plays an important role in making this connection.

**The Innovation Commons is an emerging trend in higher education, but it is often physically located in professional schools such as engineering or business faculties. What is the decision or rationale for the Innovation Commons to be situated in the City University of Hong Kong's Shaw Library instead of another area of the university?**

The Run Run Shaw Library is the main library on campus for all the City U students, so that location is easily accessible by our students from all kinds of backgrounds. So that is one of the reasons why we selected it as the location. As a space, the library is traditionally a place where students go to meet up and have group discussions, so it is quite natural that we situate the Innovation Commons in the library as an inviting space for group work and discussion. As mentioned earlier, we really encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between students and for joining competitions, especially as we want to get funding for the student projects. The Innovation Commons also strives for an interdisciplinary focus that reflects the diversity of the real work world. There needs to be subject expertise for a good project team to flourish. A project shouldn't overvalue one field over another. For instance, a technology based project can't just have all technical people to apply for funding because if you want to get funding for a startup to do your business, you definitely need people with a marketing background from the business world. That's why we encourage the collaboration among students from different backgrounds and also why we're not located in any one particular faculty.

I'm sure there similar initiatives (like an Innovation Commons) in a faculty like a business school which has a centre for its own students to join competitions, but this is not our purpose because we encourage a diversified team structure. The Innovation Commons is located in a library because it strives to serve the whole university. We don't want to focus on one particular group of students. I think these are the main reasons we are located in the common area that the students can get access to.

**So it is truly an interdisciplinary initiative. How do you evaluate or assess the successes of the Innovation Commons? What tells you that it's successful?**

We just have a couple of a key performance indicators to assess and measure success, like the number of users during the day and during the annual year. We have a Facebook and the number of posts or the number of followers. On an operational level, whenever a student has a project proposal to submit, they need to submit a form to us to disclose the details of the project so that we would know the level of support to offer. So the number of disclosure forms is an indicator of the success of the Innovation Commons as well. Finally, the number of patents founded by the students, number of start-ups, and the amount of project funding received from external funding. They are all the key components indicated to access our performance.

**What types of technology does the Innovation Commons provide? Types of computers, mobile technologies—what does innovation commons provide?**

We provide computers in the Innovation Commons for students who want to do patent searches. Because students might want to further develop their projects from the idea to the prototype, we can help them out by providing 3D printing for them. So

students can come to the Innovation Commons to use our 3D software, do the modeling, and produce a prototype that is made by paper or plastic in an inexpensive and accessible way. The Innovation Commons also has a large digital screen TV that students can use for practicing their presentations and hold group discussions with remote users off campus.

The Innovation Commons also relies heavily on social media for communications and promotions. We use our Facebook in addition to direct email as it's a very direct line of communication—the quickest way to communicate to our student users. So we use social media to communicate and promote our events through Facebook.

**It sounds like it's a very social space both on the web, which use social media, and also social space, as in physically discussing and having group work. Do you have librarians who work with you in managing the Innovation Commons?**

The Innovation Commons is managed by EDGE, Education Development and Gateway Education office, and by any particular librarian. However, the Library does manage the physical building, for things such as fixtures. So the Innovation Commons works closely with the librarians because the space is located right inside the library. We also work closely with the Library on programming. For instance, there's one librarian who joins us for a monthly meeting for things such as promotions and art exhibitions in the main entrance of the library.

The librarians support the Innovation Commons, particularly using their subject expertise. When there's a competition and is related to the student's own project, the librarians promote and introduce the Innovation Commons materials on topics relating to innovation, obtaining funding, and business startups. They also highlight monographs related to these topics at the front of the library in the display cases. This is the relationship between the librarians and our Innovation Commons.

**What are some challenges you face in the Innovation Commons?**

I think the main challenge that we face is space. As you know, space is limited and in demand in Hong Kong, and the campus is no different. We want to have a good place for our students to do their creative and innovative brainstorming and planning. Not surprisingly, those who want to start their own business and want their own offices to work in often can't afford to rent office space in Hong Kong because it is expensive. So the Innovation Commons definitely wants to have more space so we can provide a bigger co-working space for our students to do their project or business work.

Another challenge we face is providing assistance for project proposals. As we encourage collaboration between students from different subject backgrounds, one of our jobs is to do team matching, or team building. If a business school student has a great idea for an online technology project, but has no technical background, he will eventually need partner or a teammate to work on the technical side of the project.



So when this students look to the Innovation Commons and comes to me for support, I do a referral for him, and I will contact the Engineering school to help recruit from its department students who also want to start the business and may want join the proposal. We've had real success in matching business school students from other technology-based backgrounds.

But of course, at the end of the day, we can match subject backgrounds, but we can't match team dynamics. The trouble is that even though they match the criteria, the real success of a team depends on its people—their personalities or the way they think. This is something that is hard to control. It still depends on the chemistry of how they work with each other.

**Are there other academic institutions in Hong Kong or elsewhere in the world that you know of that also have an Innovation Commons?**

As far as I know, we can claim that we are a unique venture in terms of promoting innovation, entrepreneurship, and intellectual property. For the other universities in Hong Kong, they mainly focus on the business side. That's why they're often called entrepreneurship centers. At Polytechnic University or HKUST, for instance, they focus mostly on business, but at the Innovation Commons, we promote intellectual property as well. We link intellectual property to innovation.

As Hong Kong is establishing itself as a hub for intellectual property, we try to promote the concept and to talk to students to protect their own discoveries by filing a patent or raising the awareness about copyright. Because when our students do their research on inventions, they inevitably deal with some IP issues—from downloading an image from the Internet to wanting to copy something from the web. It all involves IP issues. So we believe the Innovation Commons is unique in Hong Kong in that we promote these three concepts – innovation, entrepreneurship, and intellectual property – to the students in one space.

**This is all entrepreneurship for profit-making. How about for the nonprofit? If I had an idea for a business for sustainability or for a greener environment that doesn't necessarily have a goal for a traditional business proposal, how might the Innovation Commons be of value to me?**

The Innovation Commons not only supports projects that make money, it also helps those students who are interested in social enterprise. We encourage those types of students to come to the Innovation Commons and make a pitch for a proposal and eventual competition for funding. So it depends on the students' needs and what they want. If they come and tell us we want to do a social enterprise, the Innovation Commons will look to support all their particular needs in that area. We're not only focused on the business of making money, or the technology side.

**How about for art based projects, visual arts that also deal with some aspect of the non-profits social enterprise sector. Have there been recent projects or projects at all that have approached the innovation commons? Have there been students from the fine arts and visual arts that have applied to the innovation commons?**

We have had students from the School of Creative Media who has come to the Innovation Commons for advice. These students from the School of Creative Media were interested applying their artistic side in order to commercialize their unique ideas. There's one student who made a jacket called One Man Band. You can make drum sound by just tapping on the jacket and you can make your own performance because everything you need is on the jacket. The students from the School of Creative Media used their art sense and turned the One Man Band jacket a real product. The Innovation Commons helped them to commercialize the idea, by suggesting how to get the funding for further development. Another student's project from the School of Creative Media is a jacket from LED lights. The idea is to use the smartphone in order to control the patterns on a jacket. You create your own patterns. It's not pre-programmed patterns, however – it's done in real time. You put the pattern on your app, on the smartphone, and then it will display on the t-shirt. The University actually filed that patent for that particular project. It's a good example of a success story.

**Which part of your job in running the Innovation Commons do you find most interesting and rewarding?**

I spend a lot of time with our students, and one thing that is quite rewarding is talking to and getting to know our students. Because my background is in business, I provide advice on how to write a good business proposal when students apply for funding. If the students or the group can get funding from the government or from the Cyberport fund, I think it's very encouraging. It's all very rewarding. I remember once at 12 o'clock (midnight) a student sent me a Whatsapp saying, "*Hey, thank you so much for your help—I got funding: \$100,000 cash.*" Now that's really a lot of money, especially since it's all in cash. I really enjoy helping our students.

