How HKU sees the future of education to help students thrive in the new work world
The modern workplace is changing at a breakneck pace because of globalisation and rapid technological change. It is increasingly common to work in an office with a multinational staff and to encounter the latest technological services. Changing jobs frequently is also a common phenomenon. The current economic downturn has only exacerbated conditions, and competition in the working world is keen.

“The working world is very tough,” Professor Amy Tsui 徐碧美 (BA 1971; DipEd 1972; MA 1979), Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Teaching and Learning) of The University of Hong Kong and Chair Professor of the Faculty of Education, said. “Confronted with ill-defined problems and novel situations, students need to learn how to face and deal with them.”

In fact, Professor Tsui is suggesting that the university needs to totally rethink how it is training students to meet the new challenges they face. HKU has been making changes to adapt to this new world through curriculum reform. And part of what the reform is aimed at is breaking down the walls that separate the university from the world of work.

“Experiential learning is one way to help students break down the barrier between the workplace and university learning,” Professor Tsui said. Even joining an internship programme, students are encouraged to go beyond their professional and academic context to participate in social responsibility programmes such as NGOs’ activities and to investigate social problems.

“HKU provides different kinds of opportunities in a structured way,” she continued. “Students are not learning broad knowledge, but there is an interconnectivity that they have to look at issues from multiple perspectives.”

In the past, there was a concept that students graduated from the university and then went to work. But it is no longer valid now. Many graduates who return to the university to earn a post-graduate degree are not looking for job training but for the knowledge they want to acquire, such as philosophy. They want to learn new things in order to equip themselves. “It is a kind of lifelong learning,” she added.

At HKU, Professor Tsui said, “We do have some room to shape the curriculum and educate our students about the sense of righteousness and justice, which are the core values of university education.”

To get a sense of how some HKU alumni have adapted to change in the workplace, Convocation Newsletter interviewed David Lee 李景輝, Lynn Yau 邱歡智, Samson So 蘇毅雄 and K Y Chan 陳繼勇. Their stories illustrate how they have charted innovative career paths with their professional knowledge, global perspectives and transferable skills that were learned from HKU.

But with the changes that curriculum reform will put in place the hope is that many more students will be ready to adapt their career paths the way these alumni did.
David Lee
Bachelor of Business Administration (Information Systems) 2003
Bachelor of Engineering in Software Engineering 2004

Work experience:
2003-present Co-founder of Team & Concepts Limited
2006 Business Week Asia’s Best Entrepreneurs under 25
2008 Business Week Asia’s Best Young Entrepreneurs

“Dream big and set to do it.”
When faced with a poor economic environment, some students fear unemployment after graduation, but David Lee tells how he created a job before graduation. Perhaps his story is an example of youth entrepreneurship that today’s HKU students might want to follow.

“Dream big and set to do it,” he says.

Lee and his partners launched Team & Concepts Limited in 2003 when they were third-year HKU students in a double degree programme in business administration and software engineering. Their product was EditGrid, a 100 per cent made-in-Hong Kong online spreadsheet application aimed at global IT people that competes with Microsoft Excel and the Google spreadsheet.

Youthful, energetic, skilful and with the idea that he had nothing to lose, Lee says it was not a hard decision to start a business. “The objective became clear when I assembled a team capable of writing software on its own. We had products and services to sell by the end of year three.”

“University is a good place to start up a business. It feels like – the things I learn today, I can use tomorrow,” he continued. “Our first client was the HKU Computer Centre. The first product was developed inside Meng Wah Complex Room 205 during a summer vacation on an old idle server that was sponsored by the department. The idle resources such as classrooms and old computers can support many new start-ups. They are what entrepreneurs always ask for.”

Lee seizes each opportunity he meets and masters his knowledge of commerce and technology well. He explained, “I followed a double degree programme in which many outstanding students enrolled, even though the dotcom bubble burst in 2000. It trained students to possess both IT and business skills, which widened our scope to understand issues in different ways.”

However, on graduation day, Lee faced his first challenging business adversity. “Originally we had eight partners who contributed HK$2,500 each for the seed capital and we had made a commitment on the roof of the Main Building,” he said. “But each partner had a different career plan when they graduated.” Partners and capital are important elements to expand the company; Lee did not give up asking for co-operation. “I met an old businessman who told me to take risks when starting up a business,” he said. “Then I borrowed HK$100,000 from a bank and rented an office in Cyberport where rent was relatively low during the post-SARS period. Eventually three partners stayed at the company.”

Lee dares to take risks and turn challenges to opportunities, which leads to his success. In other words, having a dream and a detailed plan in a favourable business environment became a formula for his start-up. He believes there are three qualities that lead to success. First, risk-taking made him willing to take the first step; second, persistence gave him the ability to reach the destination without quitting; third, luck, which he says is reserved for a well-prepared person.

In the competitive IT world, Lee seems to be fighting against Goliath every day. “Quick response, being target-oriented and having wisdom are key components that can help you beat other competitors even though you don’t have much capital,” he said. “Through job exposure, engineers constantly enhance themselves to catch up to an innovative idea when any new products are launched. I keep myself active in popular blogs to know the market news.”

Lee said, “When starting a business, some people will give you advice drawn from their experience. But I think all advice is right to a certain extent and in a certain context. We need to verify it and experience a process to digest it to be part of our own knowledge”.

Lee is satisfied with his job and has recently relocated to the United States to further his IT career.
Lynn Yau  
Bachelor of Arts 1981  
Master of Education 2006

**Work experience:**
1983-1990  South China Morning Post, Reporter
1990-1992  Hong Kong Telecom, Assistant Public Relations Manager
1992-1994  Hong Kong Baptist University, Special Assistant to the President
1992-2000  International Association of Theatre Critics (HK) in various volunteer capacities
1994-1997  The Hong Kong Government, Simultaneous Interpreter
1997-present Eduarts Director; Shakespeare4All Company Ltd, Chief Administrator
2008-present The Absolutely Fabulous Theatre Connection (AFTEC), CEO

“Be true to yourself.”
People like certainty; however, what happens in the real world often is uncertainty. Lynn Yau is willing to take risks, and she did not hesitate a moment to create her education business.

“Be true to yourself,” Yau says. “I am fond of the arts but not mathematics or economics. The careers of lawyers, doctors and engineers may be good, but I have liked the arts since I was small; I also joined Drama Society during my years at university.”

With enthusiasm and creativity, Yau has developed her education business through innovative arts programmes to cultivate critical thinking and build language fluency for teachers and students.

Previously, she had been a reporter for the South China Morning Post. “I had no idea what I wanted to do after graduation from HKU with a BA in English and Comparative Literature. I was awarded a Croucher Scholarship, so I pursued postgraduate research on Shakespeare, Beckett and Stoppard at the University of London,” she said. “When I returned to Hong Kong, I applied to be a reporter for the arts section.”

As a reporter, her views were broadened and she became more detail-minded and logical, and developed excellent writing and translation skills. When the newspaper was restructured, she resigned and worked as an assistant public relations manager for Hong Kong Telecom. However, she was not suited to corporate life, so she reinvented her career several times and kept building her job knowledge. These experiences laid a solid foundation for her to develop her education business. Moreover, she has constantly persisted in her beloved arts and the cultural industry.

“Day jobs were jobs, whereas the arts are my passion, so I did rehearsals and other administrative work at night,” she said. “Later on, I joined a three-week summer school programme at Harvard University and was inspired by David Perkins. His wonderful PowerPoint presentation showed me how to manage colour and design in a different way; I found what I wanted to do.”

After being inspired by Perkins, a prominent education professor, she awoke to pursue her mission in life and gave up her high income to join the echelon of entrepreneurs. She concentrated on her education business from strategic planning to course development.

“Arts and education are worthwhile.” Yau is satisfied with her work and says, “You love your job. Even though you are facing some difficulties today, you wake up tomorrow and immediately go to find solutions. It is a matter of survival.” To enhance her knowledge, she earned a Master of Education in Curriculum Studies from HKU.

Passion is a force of motivation to get things done well. It is also the chief consideration when Yau recruits someone for her teaching team.

“When I recruit a staff member, the candidate should be working no less than a year or not over 16 years for the same company. I will depend on the strength of the candidate in assigning a job. The candidate should be confident, outcome-based, willing to work hard and able to adapt to change,” she says.

The working pace is fast, and the market keeps changing. Yau always encourages her teaching team and participates in the classes herself to look into problems. She says, “Our teaching materials and course programmes are always being reviewed and changed, adding new elements and giving insights to teachers and students.”

Yau dares to take the responsibility to develop better arts and cultural education for the next generation.

“Even though you are facing some difficulties today, you wake up tomorrow and immediately go to find solutions.”
“Freelancing gives me the flexibility I need,” So said. “Had I worked in a traditional environment, I would not have been able to work so much.”
No matter how many challenges Samson So faces, he aggressively pursues his goal: to show the beauty that is around us and to promote conservation. He graduated from HKU’s Department of Ecology and Biodiversity in 1996 and has been working as a freelancer for four years.

“Freelancing gives me the flexibility I need,” So says. “Had I worked in a traditional environment, I would not have been able to work so much.”

So is fond of the natural world. He did not have any objective when he entered university life, but he met a valuable opportunity that changed his whole life.

“While I was sitting in the library extension building, a senior asked me to sign a form to be a nature interpreter for a Biology Society activity,” he said. “From then onwards, I went to Mai Po every week. This was the first time I participated in public green education. I learned how to communicate with people sincerely, deliver a message clearly, and speak English and Chinese properly.”

Connecting with different kinds of people during his duty, So became more active and was willing to share green knowledge with people. After graduation, he joined World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong (WWF) as a training officer whose job responsibility was to provide training to Mainland officials who had worked in the forestry industry for a long time but lacked management skills and an international perspective.

So wanted to expand his exposure to do more on developing an ideological framework; consequently, he quit his job and sought to have a long-term impact on the general public, especially the next generation, and foster knowledge about environmental conservation. He believes education, media and research are three keys towards fulfilling his mission in life. He dared to start up Eco-Institute and begin his freelance career. He also studied part-time to earn a Master of Journalism from HKU. “I want to promote environmental protection through the media, which impacts society so much nowadays.”

“Self-discipline and personal relationships are very important.”

So wears several different hats. He is a nature photographer, trainer, eco-tour guide and writer. He describes being a freelancer, however, as perhaps his toughest job.

“Freelancing is not as romantic as you might think. I work even harder than before.” Self-discipline and personal relationships are very important. Working over 16-18 hours a day, 7 days a week is common. “Unstable income is a problem. Sometimes I have plenty of jobs but sometimes none. I have no annual leave or medical coverage plan.” But So enjoys his job and says it is worthwhile.

To strive for a better environment and raise public concern on conservation issue, So sometimes faces challenges from the grey area between commerce and education. “Non-profit organisations can borrow my photos for free while commercial institutions should pay money,” he said. “I have a principle.”

So deals with many people every day and enhances his negotiation skills when bargaining over business matters with commercial institutions.

To develop a better portfolio, he tried more jobs and let himself be interviewed by newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations. So has published more than 20 books and written articles for local and international green magazines such as HK Discovery, HK Nature Explorer, National Wildlife and Asian Geographic. He also organises seminars and activities for various parties, from primary schools to tertiary institutes, from NGOs and community centres to government departments, as well as corporations, training centres and environmental consultancies.

So’s research interests are birds, wetlands, mangroves, dragonflies and butterflies. He looks up in books the ones he does not know. Lifelong learning is an important element to solving daily problems. He says he learned this skill from his university education.
K Y Chan
Bachelor of Arts 1984
Postgraduate Certificate in Education 1988

Work experience:
1984-2006 Sai Kung Sung Tsun Catholic School (Secondary Section), History Teacher
2006-present Collectables, Shop Manager

“I am a cultural sleuth who strives for valuable collections and shares them with readers.”

Cover Story – The Brave New Work World
When encountering adversity, a constructive attitude can help a person cope with the problem and create a new path for career development. From being a secondary school teacher to owning Collectables, a marketplace for exchanging and recycling cultural collections, K Y Chan tells about adapting to change and experiencing a meaningful life.

“I am a cultural sleuth who strives for valuable collections and shares them with readers,” he said.

Chan is a pioneer in the business of secondhand English bookstores in Hong Kong; he is proud to be the supplier of a wide collection of used books in subjects such as literature, history and philosophy, and the largest vinyl collection of records, in genres such as jazz, blues and folk rock, in town. He influenced his ex-staff members and students, who have also started up used book markets.

“I encourage competition as it is good for the industry’s development,” he said, laughing. “I expect more secondhand bookstores to appear in this knowledge-based society. We need to read valuable books and cultivate a cultural atmosphere in Hong Kong as well as attract new talent to join.”

“Collectables, established in 1992, was my part-time hobby. I rented a corner of my friend’s real estate service office to start up this business. It didn’t make money and was subsidised by me,” Chan said. “But now I dare to take the challenge and have been working full-time to expand the business.”

“Is being a teacher a job for life?” Chan said. “Maybe yes, because I like teaching. But I have to adapt to change as I deal with my health problems.” He quit his 20-plus-year teaching career three years ago and became entirely involved in managing his bookstore. Adversity turned out to be his opportunity to let his dream come true.

In order to re-invent his career, Chan has mastered the skill sets of entrepreneurship. He communicates with his customers from time to time to enrich his knowledge and also understand their preferences, characteristics and habits.

“It is a win-win result,” Chan said. “I can earn a basic living without losing money and also entertain myself and customers. Do the work you like, put in an honest day’s work and then you can accomplish your goal.”

“Select valuable work and do it,” he continued with self-confidence. “Money is important, but a meaningful life is my most valuable asset. Hong Kong needs a shop like mine that serves human culture. For example, I’ve served Zhong Acheng 鍾阿城, a renowned Chinese writer, who came to my store for classic records. Although secondhand bookstores are not popular, they do exist in the market. When we are doing it with heart, we can have success.”

“I don’t sacrifice for any great mission, but I just want to grasp the opportunity to do what I’m able to do at present.” Chan emphasised. He gave credit to his university education for encouraging him to pursue his interests.

“I’m really glad I met good mentors at HKU,” he said. “They demonstrated excellence in teaching and respected academic matters, which inspired me to treat academia like a good friend of mine.”

HKU is moving ahead with the new four-year undergraduate curriculum in 2012, stressing student learning transformation through a totality of experiences. The reform will give students a greater role in developing a full and rich academic programme with clear learning outcomes, together with diverse co-curricular experiences for individual development and interest.

“Graduates look for a new injection of ideas when they take further study,” Professor Amy Tsui said. “University education is a way to get ideas, and experiential learning is the core value.”

Through the more flexible curriculum structure, students can attain academic and professional excellence, bilingual proficiency, communication skills and a global outlook. As a result, students will be well-equipped to face any challenges in the workplace and can take charge of their futures with a sense of mission and passion.

Story by Connie Chu, Journalism and Media Studies Centre