EXCHANGE REPORT

Full name: WONG Cho Lik
Curriculum: LLB / BBA(Law)
Host institution: University College London (UCL)
Duration: Full year – September 2010 to June 2011
Scholarship awarded: HKUWW Scholarship
Host institution: UCL

The United Kingdom is one of the most popular exchange destinations for HKU law undergraduates. Its capital London is where tradition and modern collides. The landmarks situated in this metropolitan city are the Big Ben, Tower Bridge and the latest London Eye. International spotlight converged to Prince William's Royal Wedding in April 2011.

Established in 1826, UCL is now the world's leading multidisciplinary university. Its reputable Faculty of Laws, with some 65 distinguished academic staff, is based at Bentham House in the heart of London. The building is named after the English jurist Jeremy Bentham, the spiritual founder of UCL.

Academic experience

At UCL, I have completed five courses, namely Competition Law, Intellectual Property Law, Jurisprudence and Legal Theory, Law of Evidence and Property II (equivalent to Equity and Trusts in Hong Kong). Especially to a mixed-degree student like me, such curriculum is far less intense than my first three years of study. All the courses were assessed by end-of-year closed-book examinations. Compared to open-book assessments usually employed at HKU, memorizing case names, facts and principles proves to be exceptionally challenging.

Similar to HKU, classes were conducted primarily through lectures, seminars and tutorials. Generally speaking, each course was comprised of weekly two-hour lectures and fortnightly one-hour tutorials. Depending on the format, the class size varied. Apart from the locals, a large group were exchange students from other European countries. Asian affiliate students include a few Singaporeans and of course the five from HKU.

Teachings at UCL emphasis quite heavily on academic debate among scholars, while learning at HKU focus more on practical issues. The intellectual exercise strengthened my ability to critically evaluate different theories and arguments.

Many students, including myself, choose to read law in the UK since the Hong Kong legal system is historically inherent from England. To my surprise, many areas of English law have gradually evolved, departing from the older methodology adopted in Hong Kong. In some cases, the UK law is inclined towards the European Union approach in order to promote harmonisation among member states. I am now more aware of contemporary legal development from an international perspective.

Non-academic activities: pro bono work

Volunteers who work closely with vulnerable groups, such as school children, are subject to very strict rules and police check. Consequently, not many long-term pro bono opportunities are available to exchange students. Last October, I participated in the Buddy Day Programme organised by the University and a local charity. As a fresher to UCL, conducting campus tour was an exploration for both the young visitors and myself. The activity deepened my understanding of the school history and surrounding landscape.

Accommodation

I was offered a place at a catered intercollegiate hall ten-minute walk from the Faculty of Laws building. Given the expensive rent in Central London, living in university residence is the most reasonable option open to exchange students. Mine was a single room and I shared the toilet with my neighbour. A small pantry was located on each floor. Items kept in the common refrigerator were exposed to an unavoidable risk of theft. The location, facilities and hygiene were satisfactory overall.
The quality of catering was far below average. The ingredients were inferior and the portion was small. The food variety at breakfast time has never changed throughout the whole academic year. Despite several rounds of questionnaire surveys, improvements, if any, were hardly noticeable. Yet catered residence is a convenient alternative to preparing every meal on my own.

Because of the limited contact hours at school, cultural exchange occurred mainly at residential hall during mealtime rather than inside the campus. Staying in an intercollegiate hall facilitates my interaction with students from other institutions.

**Dining, entertainment and travelling**

To compensate for the barely edible hall food, nothing is better than having a great weekend feast with friends somewhere outside. The classic fish and chips is an English national dish, though the battered fish fillet may not be extremely appealing. French is arguably the finest cuisine across the Continent. Italian pizzas and pasta are readily available in town. It is not at all difficult to identify wonderful Japanese, Korean, Thai and even Chinese restaurants in the Soho area and China Town. Thanks to the 20% VAT implemented earlier this year, the cost of living in London is much higher to that in Hong Kong. As a reference point, a McDonald’s value meal there is approximately twice as costly.

In London, the entertainment activity I enjoy most is watching musicals. *The Phantom of the Opera* is my all-time-favourite. Its sequel *Love Never Dies* is also a spectacular production with visual projection and stage effects.

An old Chinese proverb says, "Travelling ten thousand miles is more enriching than reading ten thousand books". I absolutely agree. With budget air travel, my friends and I fully utilised holiday breaks to sightsee around Europe. I cannot pinpoint the city I like most, but Paris, Vienna and Malta definitely top the list. Each has their own character. To be frank, I am not into history. But I do recognise the time and effort injected into every piece of artwork, be it an architectural work, a painting or a sculpture. Moreover, travelling is the best time to practise my photography skills. A picture is worth a thousand words, I believe.

**Advice to prospective students**

Host institutions change their course syllabus from time to time. Outgoing students should pay full attention to any such variation. Seek clarification and approval if necessary.

Quality and efficient customer service has been taken for granted in Hong Kong. The work style in some other parts of the world tends to be more laid back. Those who want an overseas bank account, for example, can make arrangements before departure to avoid lengthy procedures and unexpected charges.

Airlines apply stringent weight restrictions on both checked luggage and hand baggage nowadays. Rely on a trustworthy shipping company particularly when one is returning with lots of heavy textbooks.

**Final remarks**

As Tony Wheeler, co-founder of *Lonely Planet* Travel Guides, puts, "All you've got to do is decide to go and the hardest part is over. So go!" Going on exchange is to step outside our comfort zone, to adapt, accept and to appreciate.