

Article

Environmental justice in law school curricula and the Hong Kong context

Chi Yeung Lo

Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom; cx11087@student.bham.ac.uk

CITATION

Lo CY. Environmental justice in law school curricula and the Hong Kong context. *Journal of Environmental Law and Policy*. 2025; 5(2): 3539. <https://doi.org/10.54517/jelp3539>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 1 April 2025

Accepted: 25 June 2025

Available online: 30 June 2025

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2025 by author(s).

Journal of Environmental Law and Policy is published by Asia Pacific Academy of Science Pte. Ltd. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract: Climate change poses an existential threat, disproportionately impacting marginalized communities. This article explores integrating environmental justice principles into Hong Kong legal education to empower future lawyers in combating the climate crisis. It highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, experiential learning opportunities, and policy advocacy training. Case studies illustrate successful legal interventions and grassroots support strategies. The article emphasizes the evolution of professional ethics, balancing client interests with societal responsibilities. It proposes curriculum designs that incorporate real-world case studies, clinical experiences, and skill development in areas like legal drafting and climate litigation. By equipping Hong Kong law students with environmental justice perspectives, legal education can cultivate a generation of climate-conscious lawyers, driving transformative change towards a more equitable and sustainable future.

Keywords: environmental justice; climate change; legal education; sustainability; curriculum design; experiential learning; policy advocacy

1. Introduction

From severe weather events to sea level rise, climate change is causing massive disruption around the world. No nation or community will be spared these consequences, but not all will experience the adverse consequences equally. Unfortunately, historically marginalized communities, poor people, and poor countries will experience these consequences disproportionately. These communities, despite contributing minimally to global emissions, suffer from severe environmental harm, while major polluters, such as industrial corporations and energy producers, bear primary responsibility for driving climate change. This disparity indicates the need for an environmental justice framework to hold principal offenders accountable and address systemic inequities.

Lawyers, particularly those in fields such as corporate, energy, and property law, play a critical role in addressing environmental harm by advocating for accountability and sustainable practices, though not all legal fields directly engage with these issues. The Net Zero Lawyers Alliance, launched in 2021, brings together international law firms committed to accelerating the transition to net-zero emissions [1]. A robust response to climate change requires not only concerted efforts of all stakeholders, but also support of an appropriate legal framework. The rule of law and sound legal system of Hong Kong will provide a solid foundation for government policies and initiatives to meet the challenges of climate change. The Department of Justice actively supports the relevant work of the Environment Bureau [2]. Local initiatives, such as The Law Society of Hong Kong's 2024 efforts to promote digital publications, implement internal environmental measures, and nurture legal talent for Sustainability [3], demonstrate lawyers' increasing engagement with environmental sustainability.

However, effective advocacy requires specialized training to navigate the complexities of environmental justice and equity.

In Hong Kong, legal education has yet to fully embrace environmental justice, prioritizing commercial law over justice-focused training. Analysis of 2023–2024 course catalogs from CUHK, HKU, and CityU reveals that environmental law courses are offered only as electives, with no systematic integration of environmental justice or equity perspectives. This gap leaves future lawyers underprepared to address pressing local issues, such as air pollution disparities affecting low-income communities. This article proposes integrating environmental justice and equity into Hong Kong's law school curricula, particularly in relevant fields, to equip students with the knowledge and skills to advocate for equitable and sustainable solutions, ensuring they can tackle systemic environmental inequities.

This article argues for integrating environmental justice and equity into Hong Kong's law school curricula, particularly in relevant fields, to equip students with the knowledge and skills to advocate for equitable and sustainable solutions. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on environmental justice in legal education; Section 3 analyses the current state of Hong Kong's legal education system; Section 4 examines the importance of environmental justice understanding for lawyers; Section 5 explores key skills and frameworks for climate-conscious lawyering; Section 6 proposes specific curriculum designs for integrating environmental justice into legal education; and Section 7 discusses experiential learning opportunities and implementation challenges. Through this analysis, the paper demonstrates how targeted curricular reform can prepare Hong Kong law students to tackle systemic environmental inequities without diluting the focus on unrelated legal disputes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining environmental justice and equity

Environmental justice is a framework that ensures all individuals, regardless of race, income, or background, have equal protection from environmental harms and meaningful involvement in decisions affecting their environment [4]. It encompasses advocacy, systemic change, and community empowerment to address inequities caused by climate change and other environmental issues. Environmental equity, a related but distinct concept, refers to the fair and equal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens across all communities, ensuring no group faces disproportionate harm due to socioeconomic status, race, or other factors [5].

While environmental justice focuses on the broader process of achieving fairness through legal and policy interventions, environmental equity emphasizes measurable outcomes in environmental conditions. In Hong Kong's legal education, environmental equity is a critical curricular goal with the following educational objectives:

- 1) **Identifying Disproportionate Burdens:** Equip students to analyse how marginalized communities, such as low-income residents in Hong Kong's urban areas, face disproportionate environmental harms, such as air pollution or waste facility proximity.

- 2) **Advocating for Equitable Solutions:** Train students to develop legal strategies, such as litigation or policy advocacy, to ensure fair environmental outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations.
- 3) **Applying Interdisciplinary Perspectives:** Enable students to integrate human rights, public health, and environmental law principles to address equity issues, fostering holistic approaches to environmental challenges.
- 4) **Practical Skill Development:** Prepare students to draft climate-conscious legal documents and engage in community advocacy to promote environmental equity in Hong Kong's commercial and regulatory contexts.

These objectives guide the curriculum proposed in Section 8.3, ensuring that Hong Kong law students are trained to address disproportionate impacts, such as air pollution in low-income areas, and design legal solutions that promote fairness in environmental outcomes.

2.2. Importance of environmental justice in teaching of environmental law

Integrating environmental justice into the law curricula enables students to learn the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Nardone and Oscars highlight that traditional environmental law courses tend to focus more on regulations, statutes, and policies rather than examining the human impacts and societal inequities caused by environmental issues [6]. Their analysis of U.S. law school curriculum reveals patterns similar to those in Hong Kong, where regulatory frameworks dominate course content while justice perspectives remain peripheral.

Environmental justice education bridges theory and practice, exposing students to real-world advocacy, community engagement, and interdisciplinary collaboration needed to tackle complex environmental challenges facing vulnerable populations [7]. This pedagogical approach aligns with Schlosberg's conceptualization of environmental justice as multifaceted, encompassing distributional, procedural, and recognition dimensions. By incorporating these dimensions into legal education, students develop a more comprehensive understanding of environmental challenges and their differential impacts on communities.

2.3. How environmental justice addresses issues arising from climate changes and inequalities

According to the World Inequality Report, there are inequalities in terms of carbon emissions, which is how much you contribute to global warming through your consumption, which is how much carbon dioxide your daily or your regular consumption emits, what's your carbon footprint like? For example, in Hong Kong, air pollution, particularly PM2.5, presents a major public health issue, disproportionately affecting socially deprived communities. Research shows that residents in constituency areas (CAs) with higher Social Deprivation Index (SDI) scores, characterized by low income, low education, and non-professional occupations, are exposed to elevated PM2.5 levels due to urban dynamics such as

traffic and industrial emissions. This environmental injustice amplifies health risks, as these communities often have limited resources to cope with pollution-related illnesses [8]. Higher income citizens of Hong Kong may be able to purchase air purifiers and adapt to this higher position, while people in the lower income segments may not be able to afford those adaptations.

Environmental justice is the lens through which they must judge the history and future of the nation if it is to achieve the goals of clean air, clean water, good health for all citizens. Environmental justice movement broadened the definition of “environment” from just wilderness areas to where people “live, work and play”, putting focus on environmental risks in people’s daily lived experiences, especially for vulnerable communities.

While environmental justice advocates were initially focused on inequitable exposure to toxic pollutants, they increasingly turned their attention to the inequitable impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities, especially after events like natural disasters caused by extreme weather [9].

This evolution from localized environmental justice to climate justice represents a significant expansion of the framework’s scope, reflecting the growing understanding of climate change as both an environmental and social justice issue. For Hong Kong’s legal education, this evolution requires training students to recognize and address both local pollution inequities and the broader climate justice implications of legal practice.

2.4. Research gap

While literature exists on environmental justice movements, theories, and policies, as well as some work on integrating social justice broadly into legal education, there is a lack of research specifically examining how the key concepts and aims of the environmental justice framework could be incorporated into law school teaching and coursework. The literature review reveals little substantive past or current discussion about integrating environmental justice perspectives into law school pedagogy, particularly in the Hong Kong context.

Guevara-Herrero et al.’s systematic review of environmental justice education literature found minimal focus on legal education specifically, with most studies addressing primary, secondary, or general higher education [7]. Similarly, while Nardone and Oscars examine environmental justice in U.S. law curriculum, there is no comparable analysis for Hong Kong or other Asian jurisdictions. This gap is particularly concerning given Hong Kong’s unique environmental challenges, including air pollution disparities and waste management inequities [6].

Addressing this gap is critical because law schools play a key role in shaping the next generation of environmental lawyers, policymakers, and leaders. Integrating environmental justice principles could enhance law students’ understanding of the disproportionate impacts of environmental policy on vulnerable communities and ensure these perspectives are brought into the legal profession.

This study will explore potential approaches, challenges, and benefits of incorporating environmental justice frameworks into core environmental law courses, clinics, and other law school curriculum components through curriculum analysis.

3. Current state of legal education in Hong Kong

3.1. Hong Kong's legal education

Hong Kong's law schools prioritize commercial and financial training, sidelining environmental justice and limiting their contribution to addressing pressing environmental challenges. A detailed analysis of 2023–2024 course catalogs from CUHK, HKU, and CityU reveals that environmental law courses, such as “Chinese Environmental Law” and “International Environmental Law,” are offered only as electives, according to the Standing Committee on Legal Education and Training. Many of the courses focus on regulatory compliance and international treaties, with minimal emphasis on environmental justice or equity. For instance, CUHK's “Environmental Law” elective covers pollution control but omits discussions of disproportionate impacts on low-income communities.

The consultation on Hong Kong's legal education and training, conducted between November 2015 and February 2018, gathered 36 responses from diverse stakeholders, representing groups such as universities, professional bodies, and government departments. These responses strikingly reveal a significant curriculum gap: 97% (35 out of 36) fail to address emerging issues including environmental issues, with only one anonymized submission noting uncertainty about its importance [10]. This overwhelming neglect against the prioritization of traditional areas like conveyancing, indicates a critical oversight in aligning legal education with emerging societal needs, such as environmental sustainability and justice.

Further, Hong Kong's legal education, as detailed in the SCLET Annual Reports, emphasizes skills in corporate law, finance, and dispute resolution, aligning with the city's role as a global financial hub [11]. This focus neglects eco-centric frameworks, such as environmental custodianship, which reframe human-nature relationships to prioritize ecological preservation. The absence of environmental justice training leaves students underprepared to address local challenges, such as air pollution disparities or waste facility siting, which disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Hong Kong's fragmented environmental policy, rooted in economic priorities since the 1990s, perpetuates this educational gap, as law schools mirror the government's focus on development over equity.

3.2. Historical context to current gaps

As Hills and Barron observed in 1997, Hong Kong has historically operated with “loosely linked pollution control measures” rather than an “unambiguous environmental policy,” creating a fragmented approach where environmental concerns were treated as technical problems rather than integrated policy challenges [12]. This structural fragmentation persists in current legal education, where environmental law remains largely confined to elective courses at institutions like CUHK and CityU.

The 2024 report on environment and health inequalities exposes significant policy shortcomings in Hong Kong's environmental and health governance [13]. While the government has implemented various environmental initiatives, the report reveals a concerning lack of integrated policy approach linking environment, health,

and social equity, most notably evidenced by the absence of health and equity considerations in the Climate Action Plan 2050.

More importantly, Hong Kong's law school curricula appear to address environmental degradation and climate change as existential threats to Hong Kong's continued development and stability. The focus is on city-level targets, capabilities and comprehensive governance rather than on sub-city equity dimensions. It is backed by the fact that, for decades, Hong Kong prioritized economic growth and poverty alleviation through urbanization. Environmental policies may still be oriented towards enabling this development trajectory rather than focusing on marginalized groups.

3.3. Quantitative analysis of curriculum gaps

To quantify the environmental justice gap in Hong Kong's legal education, we conducted a systematic analysis of course offerings and content across the three major law schools. The findings reveal significant deficiencies in environmental justice integration:

- 1) **Course Availability:** Elective courses in the LLB, JD, and PCLL programs at CityU, CUHK, and HKU, as shown in the 2023 SCLET Annual Report, include about 28% focused on corporate and commercial law, such as 'International Trade Law', 'Financial Regulatory Practice', and 'Corporate Finance', compared to only 1.6% for environmental law. This strong emphasis supports Hong Kong's role as an international financial center.
- 2) **Content Analysis:** Environmental law electives at CUHK and HKU, such as HKU's 'International Environmental Law' and CUHK's 'Principles of Environmental Law', as noted in their course descriptions, primarily focus on regulatory frameworks and compliance, such as legislation and enforcement, with very little emphasis on justice or equity issues, such as human rights, reflecting the technical focus of environmental law education in Hong Kong.
- 3) **Clinical Opportunities:** None of the three law schools offers clinical experiences specifically focused on environmental justice, compared to multiple clinics for commercial and corporate practice.
- 4) **Faculty Expertise:** As Hong Kong's first and a globally renowned law school, the University of Hong Kong Faculty of Law employs approximately 60 full-time academic staff. However, only 5.6%, or roughly 4 faculty members, list environmental law as a research or teaching interest. This indicates an opportunity for HKU to enhance its focus on this critical global issue.

These quantitative gaps reflect the broader prioritization of commercial legal training over environmental justice education, creating a significant deficit in preparing Hong Kong law students to address environmental inequities.

3.4. Lesson from the UK legal education

Hong Kong's legal education can draw valuable lessons from UK law schools to address its deficiencies in environmental justice integration. The 2021 Warwick Law School workshop demonstrated how climate and environmental justice perspectives can be embedded in core modules like tort and property law, unlike Hong Kong's reliance on elective environmental law courses [14]. For example, Warwick's tort law

curriculum includes cases on pollution affecting marginalized communities, fostering awareness of equity issues absent in HKU or CUHK's core offerings.

Similarly, the SOAS-NLUD joint program's specialized environmental justice courses and clinics provide models for experiential learning, contrasting with CityU's lecture-based electives [15]. The SOAS program specifically trains students in community-based advocacy and policy reform strategies, offering a framework that could be adapted to Hong Kong's context.

Integrating UK-inspired practices, such as case-based learning on local issues like air pollution in Hong Kong, could enhance Hong Kong's curriculum without requiring a complete shift from its commercial focus. These adaptations would prepare Hong Kong law students to address local environmental inequities while maintaining the practical focus on commercial and financial law that reflects the city's economic priorities.

4. Importance of environmental justice understanding for lawyers

4.1. Role differentiation among legal fields

Lawyers in fields with direct environmental impact, such as corporate, energy, or property law, have a critical responsibility to advance environmental justice by addressing the actions of major polluters, which contribute disproportionately to climate change and environmental harm., and advocating for equitable outcomes. In 2009, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on climate change and human rights and requested the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare a report on the link between human rights and climate change [16]. In Hong Kong, low-income communities face higher pollution exposure. For instance, Sham Shui Po residents experience higher PM2.5 levels, showing the need for legal advice or even advocacy. Lawyers in finance and real estate must understand environmental justice to advise clients on such risks, such as regulatory liabilities under Hong Kong's Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance. Legal education should prioritize environmental justice training for these fields, using local case studies (e.g., litigation against polluters) to prepare students for advocacy.

In Hong Kong, where commercial law dominates, lawyers in high-impact sectors such as finance and real estate must understand environmental justice to advise clients on climate risks and hold major polluters accountable. However, lawyers in fields, namely family or criminal law, which typically address issues like divorce or child protection, have minimal direct engagement with environmental issues unless specific cases involve environmental harm (e.g., pollution affecting community health). Legal education in Hong Kong should prioritize environmental justice training for fields most relevant to addressing major polluters, ensuring that curriculum design does not impose uniform responsibilities across all specialties, which could dilute accountability for significant environmental harm or undermine the seriousness of non-environmental disputes like family violence or child protection. As countries decarbonize their economies and adapt to the effects of climate change, lawyers play a crucial role in facilitating transitions, protecting vulnerable communities, and advising clients on the legal implications of these transformations. From corporate transactions and commercial affairs to litigation and intellectual property, lawyers

must develop a specialist understanding of climate change and its legal ramifications to provide competent advice to their clients.

4.2. Climate-conscious vs. climate-blind lawyering

Lawyers handling disputes or negotiations with significant environmental impact, such as those involving major polluters such as industrial corporations or energy producers, must adopt a climate-conscious mindset to address the substantial environmental repercussions of their work. Climate-conscious lawyering entails deliberate awareness of these impacts, prioritizing accountability for major polluters in line with the polluter pays principle [17]. In contrast, climate-blind lawyering disregards these implications, perpetuating environmental harm. For example, a Hong Kong finance lawyer advising on refinancing an oil and gas field directly engages with high-impact climate issues, requiring careful consideration of environmental consequences. Legal education should train students in climate-conscious practices, such as drafting net-zero clauses for local projects, focusing on Hong Kong's commercial context to ensure relevance.

Legal education should focus on equipping lawyers for disputes and negotiations involving major polluters, ensuring that training targets significant environmental challenges rather than applying uniformly across all legal work, which risks oversimplifying the issue. Consider, for instance, a finance lawyer tasked with refinancing an oil and gas field, the climate impacts are immediately evident. However, for an employment or a tax lawyer, the carbon impacts might be less obvious but remain significant. Adopting a mindset that consistently considers the broader environmental impacts of all legal work is crucial.

5. Key skills and frameworks for climate-conscious lawyering

5.1. Responsible lawyering and professional ethics

Because every act by a business has corresponding greenhouse gas emissions, all businesses, including lawyers in these businesses, are responsible for it. UN Guiding Principles can apply to lawyers and businesses where commercial activities may harm the environment [18].

International Bar Association has been leading in setting Professional Standards for advocacy and conduct of the profession about climate change. In 2020, they issued their Climate Crisis Statement. IBA recognize that every lawyer needs to play a role, not just climate and energy lawyers. It also applies to Insurance lawyers, commercial lawyers, property lawyers, and everyone else [19]. Australia, Brazil, the Law Society of England and Wales followed along with the leadership from the ABA and IBA by publishing climate change resolutions in 2021 and 2022, and the Council of Bars and Law Societies in Europe representing 1 million European lawyers from 31 member countries and 11 associate countries also issued a task force passed a resolution in 2022. The International Bar Association's Climate Crisis Statement is a powerful call to action for lawyers worldwide. It urges legal professionals to undertake climate measures in their daily practice, advise clients on the risks and liabilities associated with the climate crisis, encourage voluntary disclosure of climate risks, and engage in

climate dispute resolution on a pro bono or reduced-fee basis for those most affected by climate change.

In Hong Kong specifically, the Mandate of the Law Society is to uphold and protect the public interest in the administration of justice, including establishing standards and programs for the education, professional responsibility, and competence of lawyers [20]. This is also reflected in the Strategic Plan, including responding to challenges and opportunities in the delivery and regulation of Legal Services [21]. The Law Society also acknowledged the importance of their member lawyers understanding their rights and obligations in environmental protection law. They commit to offering guidance on advising clients and providing legal services about climate change matters [22].

Internationally, law firms are increasingly appointing dedicated sustainability leaders, participating in climate-related events, and engaging in pro bono work supporting communities affected by climate change. The Chancery Lane Project aims to bring lawyers together to create climate-focused clauses for commercial contracts that other legal professionals can incorporate into their practice [23]. These global developments demonstrate the evolving ethical landscape in which Hong Kong lawyers must operate, highlighting the need for corresponding shifts in legal education.

5.2. Legal drafting for climate protection

Lawyers draft contracts that govern commercial activities, shaping the environmental outcomes of transactions in Hong Kong's commercial sector. The content of these agreements can either perpetuate high-carbon practices or steer parties toward a lower-carbon future. Lawyer shall propose adding climate wording, obliging parties to set a net zero target, measure and monitor their greenhouse gas emissions, use renewable power, etc. [24]. In Hong Kong, where EIAs are required for major infrastructure projects under the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance, lawyers can use EIA findings to strengthen climate-conscious clauses, but most commercial contracts rely on proactive drafting to address climate impacts. Legal education should train students in both assessing contract impacts and leveraging EIA data when available, equipping them to draft climate-conscious agreements that hold major polluters accountable. An example of global collaboration in legal drafting is the Chancery Lane Project, which offers a platform to bring together lawyers to tackle the climate crisis through contract clauses [25].

5.3. The four Ls framework: lobbying, lubricating, legislating and litigating

Legal work in Hong Kong shapes environmental outcomes through four categories, namely lobbying, lubricating, legislating, and litigating, offering a framework to assess whether law schools train students in these critical areas [26]. This framework, applied to Hong Kong's legal education, reveals significant gaps in preparing students for climate-conscious practice and environmental justice advocacy:

- 1) **Lobbying:** Advocating for policy changes, such as stricter air pollution regulations under Hong Kong's Air Pollution Control Ordinance, is crucial for

environmental justice. However, 2023–2024 CUHK and HKU courses show no training in policy advocacy, leaving students unprepared to influence equitable environmental policies.

- 2) Lubricating: Facilitating transactions, such as green finance deals for renewable energy projects, supports sustainable development. CityU's "International Environmental Law" elective briefly covers green finance but lacks practical training in structuring such deals, limiting students' ability to promote low-carbon investments.
- 3) Legislating: Drafting climate-conscious contracts, such as those with net-zero clauses, mitigates environmental harm. While HKU's "Commercial Law" course addresses contract drafting, it omits environmental considerations, missing opportunities to teach students to embed equity in agreements.
- 4) Litigating: Challenging polluters in court, such as through public interest litigation against incinerator projects, advances environmental justice. CUHK's elective "Environmental Law" mentions litigation but focuses on compliance.

6. Integrating environmental law and justice into legal education

6.1. Strategic integration approach

Climate change and environmental justice should be integrated into necessary and relevant legal education to prepare Hong Kong law students for disputes and negotiations with significant environmental impact, such as those involving major polluters like industrial corporations [27]. Rather than incorporating climate change materials into all basic courses, legal education should strategically integrate environmental justice into relevant core subjects, such as property, tort, or corporate law, where environmental impacts are most pronounced. For example, teaching climate change cases in property law can highlight disputes over pollution from industrial activities.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature and the World Commission on Environmental Law recommend environmental legal education to build capacity among lawyers handling high-impact cases, not universally across all legal fields [28].

Developing an elective or specialized mandatory course on environmental law and justice for students interested in high-impact sectors, such as energy or finance, would better equip future lawyers to address major polluters without overburdening unrelated fields.

Having as many lawyers as possible come out with an understanding of environmental law frameworks and areas of substantive law is very valuable. It aims to develop legal competencies that targeting for future growth. It recognizes that it is devoted in curriculum to develop those competencies, instead of using cases on railroads from 100 to 120 years ago, use a case on more contemporary set of facts, where you can also discuss climate change.

6.2. Why compulsory environmental law and justice education in Hong Kong?

First, many law students in Hong Kong do not encounter climate change or environmental justice in their core classes which are mostly commercial focused, missing early opportunities to develop interest and skills in addressing these issues [29].

Second, law students at institutions, namely CUHK, HKU, and CityU are less motivated to take elective environmental law classes because of its low representation among all elective courses. Students pursuing commercial, bankruptcy, or insurance law often bypass these courses, unaware of the connections between environmental justice and their chosen specialties.

Third, other professions, such as medicine, are increasingly incorporating environmental justice principles into their curriculum, a trend from which Hong Kong's legal education can learn [30]. In medical education, environmental equity trains professionals to address health disparities caused by environmental injustices, such as higher rates of asthma or respiratory illnesses in low-income communities exposed to air pollution. In medical education, climate change and health (CCH) training equips professionals to address health disparities caused by environmental factors, such as higher rates of asthma or respiratory illnesses in low-income and minority communities exposed to air pollution. For example, medical curricula now integrate CCH content into existing activities, like case-based learning on asthma triggered by urban heat islands or pollution, enabling doctors to tailor patient interventions and collaborate with community resources to mitigate climate-related health risks. This approach prepares physicians to address the disproportionate impact of climate change on vulnerable populations [31]. Similarly, integrating environmental equity into legal education equips law students to address systemic environmental injustices, such as advising on regulations to protect marginalized communities from urban air pollution, ensuring they are prepared for practice in high-impact fields like corporate or environmental law.

Finally, environmental justice is a dynamic field where technology, legal models, and frameworks evolve rapidly. Lawyers trained in environmental equity can bridge gaps between emerging technologies and lagging regulations, creatively applying principles to promote sustainable outcomes.

6.3. Curriculum design recommendations

To address Hong Kong's gap in environmental justice education, this section outlines a curriculum that equips law students with theoretical and practical skills to advocate for equitable environmental outcomes. Each subsection below contributes to this goal by proposing specific modules, supported by local examples, to ensure relevance to Hong Kong's commercial and environmental context.

6.3.1. Case studies on justice for marginalized communities

It is proposed using case studies to teach students about environmental justice, focusing on Hong Kong-specific examples to illustrate disproportionate environmental burdens on marginalized communities. Studying local cases equips students to advocate for equitable solutions in their future practice. In Hong Kong's Kwai Chung district, a student-led initiative proposed urban design solutions, such as

cooling shelters and green spaces, to protect underprivileged elderly residents from extreme weather such as heatwaves and typhoons [32]. Discussions around new building plans in such areas highlight the need for proper legal processes to ensure community voices are heard, addressing the disproportionate climate vulnerabilities faced by low-income groups. Teaching these case studies at CUHK or HKU can help students analyze the legal and social dynamics of environmental inequity. Students will examine legal strategies, such as public interest litigation or regulatory advocacy, fostering skills to promote environmental equity in Hong Kong's urban context.

6.3.2. Legal ethics in environmental context

There is a fascinating work by the activist group Law Students for Climate Accountability that shows how, between 2018 and 2022, 55 firms facilitated £1.48 trillion in fossil fuel projects, more than 2.5 times the amount these firms facilitated for the renewable energy industry [33]. Still, those law firms were legal advisors on multiple times more work for the fossil fuel industry than the renewable energy industry. They had lobbied more for fossil fuel than renewable energy companies.

Hong Kong lawyers advising on high-carbon projects must balance client interests with societal responsibilities, guided by evolving ethical standards. The International Bar Association's (IBA) 2020 Climate Crisis Statement urges lawyers to integrate climate considerations, a principle Hong Kong law schools should teach through ethics courses that emphasizes environmental equity, ensuring fair environmental outcomes for marginalized groups. Professional independence, a cornerstone of legal ethics, requires lawyers to prioritize public interest and ethical duties over solely client-driven interests, particularly in environmental cases. This independence from clients, as referenced in the IBA's guidelines, means making decisions that align with broader societal goals, such as mitigating climate harm, even when clients prioritize short-term profits. Achieving such independence, despite lawyers being paid by clients, is challenging but feasible through several mechanisms:

- 1) **Ethical Training in Law Schools:** Hong Kong law schools should incorporate modules on environmental ethics, teaching students to weigh client interests against public interest obligations, such as protecting communities from pollution. For example, case studies on advising fossil fuel companies can train students to propose climate-conscious alternatives, fostering independent judgment.
- 2) **Professional Codes and Standards:** The IBA's Climate Crisis Statement and Hong Kong's Law Society guidelines encourage lawyers to advise on climate risks and liabilities, providing a framework for independent decision-making. Ethics courses should teach students to apply these codes to prioritize environmental equity
- 3) **Pro Bono Work for Public Interest:** Engaging in pro bono work, such as supporting grassroots organizations fighting air pollution in Hong Kong, allows lawyers to advocate for marginalized communities without financial dependence on high-carbon clients. Law schools can facilitate this through clinics.

While the Hong Kong Government support, such as funding for public interest law clinics, could enhance lawyer independence by reducing reliance on client payments, Hong Kong's legal education system currently faces limited government

investment in such initiatives. Instead, workable alternatives include establishing university-funded environmental justice clinics at institutions such as HKU and fostering partnerships with NGOs, such as the Clean Air Network, to provide students with opportunities to practice independent advocacy. These mechanisms, integrated into ethics curricula, will prepare Hong Kong law students to navigate client pressures while upholding environmental equity, ensuring their legal practice contributes to sustainable and equitable outcomes.

The Ethical Dilemma

A significant ethical dilemma arises from the traditional notion of professional neutrality, where lawyers often justify their actions by claiming they are merely facilitating legal activities, not making the decisions. This perspective, however, overlooks the substantial influence lawyers have in enabling environmentally harmful activities [34]. For example, when a lawyer assists in building a fossil fuel power plant, they are directly facilitating an activity that contributes to climate change. It is vital for legal professionals to acknowledge this role and reflect on the broader impacts of their practice. Many lawyers find this idea challenging as it confronts the traditional concept of professional neutrality [35].

Regulatory and Ethical Considerations

Legal services regulators play a crucial role in shaping the ethical framework within which lawyers operate. They must balance the interests of clients with broader societal concerns, including environmental considerations. Regulatory codes often emphasize principles such as independence, integrity, and acting in the public interest. In different jurisdictions, these principles are articulated differently, but a common thread is the expectation that lawyers act beyond merely serving their clients' interests. In England and Wales, for instance, the regulatory system includes principles such as upholding the rule of law, acting with honesty and integrity, and maintaining public trust, underscoring the special societal role that lawyers have [36].

Professional Independence

It is a key principle seen in most rulebooks governing lawyers. Practicing lawyers often interpret this as independence from the state, ensuring they can help their clients enforce legal rights without government interference. However, professional independence also entails being independent from the clients themselves. Lawyers are agents of the rule of law and bear a responsibility to act beyond their clients' immediate interests, considering the broader societal impact of their work [37].

Best Interest of the Client

Acting in the best interest of the client is also evolving, particularly with the rise of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) considerations. It means to act in a client's best interests which includes accounting for the long-term impacts of environmental harm [35]. Lawyers must navigate these complexities, balancing their clients' immediate needs with broader societal responsibilities. This evolution reflects a growing recognition that the legal profession must adapt to address the pressing challenges posed by climate change, ensuring that legal practice contributes to, rather than detracts from, environmental sustainability.

6.3.3. Interdisciplinary approaches

The goal of Hong Kong's legal education is to integrate environmental justice into relevant subject areas, as much as possible, to prepare law students for addressing climate change and environmental inequalities, particularly in fields with significant environmental impact, such as corporate, energy, or property law. Climate change, a major existential threat, increases socioeconomic and environmental inequalities, requiring targeted interdisciplinary approaches. Rather than integrating environmental justice across all legal courses, it is most effective to embed it in subjects where environmental impacts are strong, such as property law such as disputes over industrial pollution or corporate law such as climate-related disclosures. Human rights law may also intersect with environmental justice, as climate change affects rights like access to clean water or health, making it relevant for curriculum inclusion. However, fields like family law, including child protection, or criminal law are generally less directly relevant to environmental justice unless specific cases involve environmental harm, such as pollution impacting family health or criminal violations of environmental regulations. Curriculum integration can be achieved by connecting historical and current environmental cases, broadening students' perspectives.

There is a connection between practicing law in all these areas and understanding climate change or advising clients on the risks and opportunities associated with climate change. An example is when a securities lawyer advises on climate related disclosures, it represents the rising demands for disclosure from the regulators, companies, industry groups. However, the clients and their lawyers are usually struggling with what to disclose as well as concerns about costs, opportunities or strategies in relation to climate related disclosure.

There are two aspects of climate change education in law school. First, it is to make people aware of what the issues are. They behave in a different way themselves to the future more responsibly. Second, it is to upgrade their skills or make sure that the skills in the curriculum that exists are fit for whatever it is that law students want to practice as a lawyer in the future.

6.3.4. Proposed environmental equity curriculum

Hong Kong law schools should implement a comprehensive environmental justice and equity curriculum to equip students with the knowledge and skills to ensure equal access to a clean environment and address disproportionate environmental burdens. This curriculum, designed as a specialized elective or integrated into relevant core courses (e.g., environmental or corporate law), should include the following modules:

- 1) **Understanding Disproportionate Environmental Burdens:** This module examines how low-income and marginalized communities in Hong Kong, such as those in densely populated areas like Kwun Tong, face higher exposure to air pollution and waste facilities. Students will analyse local data (e.g., Hong Kong's Air Quality Health Index) and case studies, such as grassroots campaigns against incinerator projects, to understand inequitable environmental impacts.
- 2) **Legal Frameworks for Environmental Equity:** Students will study international and local frameworks, including the UN Human Rights Council's 2009 resolution on climate change and human rights, and Hong Kong's Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance, to learn how laws can promote equitable

environmental outcomes. The module will cover strategies to advocate for marginalized communities in regulatory processes.

- 3) **Skills for Climate-Conscious Practice:** This practical component will train students in drafting climate-conscious contract clauses, such as those from the Chancery Lane Project, to enforce net-zero targets or renewable energy use. Students will also learn to assess the environmental impacts of commercial transactions, ensuring equity considerations are embedded in legal agreements.
- 4) **Interdisciplinary Perspectives:** This module will explore intersections with human rights law, focusing on rights to health and a clean environment, to address climate-related disparities. Unlike family or criminal law, which are less directly relevant unless cases involve environmental harm (e.g., pollution affecting child health), human rights law provides a critical lens for equity advocacy.

These modules will be delivered through lectures, seminars, problem-based learning, and simulations, with assessments designed to evaluate students' ability to apply environmental equity principles in Hong Kong's commercial and regulatory contexts. For example, students might draft a contract clause addressing air pollution impacts or propose policy reforms to protect low-income communities from excessive air conditioning heat emissions. This curriculum complements the experiential learning opportunities in next Section, ensuring a robust approach to teaching environmental equity that prepares students to address local inequities effectively.

7. Experimental learning and implementation

7.1. Experiential learning opportunities

Hong Kong law schools should integrate environmental justice and equity, into experiential learning opportunities to train students in addressing disputes and negotiations that mitigate disproportionate environmental burdens. These opportunities should focus on high-impact areas, such as property or corporate law, where environmental inequities are most evident. Specific experiential components include:

- 1) **Environmental Justice Clinic:** HKU could establish a clinic where students handle local cases, such as litigation against industrial polluters contributing to air pollution in low-income areas like Sham Shui Po or Kwai Chung. Under supervision, students will draft legal documents, engage with affected communities, and advocate for equitable remedies, applying the legal frameworks and skills.
- 2) **Moot Courts on Environmental Equity:** Students will participate in moot court exercises simulating high-impact disputes, such as defending marginalized communities against pollution from waste facilities. These exercises will teach advocacy skills and emphasize equitable outcomes, reinforcing the curriculum's focus on disproportionate burdens.
- 3) **Workshops with Grassroots Organizations:** Partnerships with local groups, such as Hong Kong's Clean Air Network, will allow students to support community-led initiatives through legal research and policy advocacy. Workshops will focus on empowering communities to address environmental inequities, aligning with the curriculum's interdisciplinary perspective.

These experiential components complement the theoretical and practical modules, ensuring students develop a precise understanding of environmental equity through hands-on application in Hong Kong's context.

7.2. Community engagement in legal education

Hong Kong law students should engage with local communities to address environmental inequities, fostering a community-oriented approach to legal practice.

Recommendations include integrating community engagement into clinic activities and ethics courses, ensuring students learn to prioritise community needs in Hong Kong's urban context. This approach prepares future lawyers to practice with community awareness and cultural competence, essential qualities for effective environmental justice advocacy.

8. Challenges and opportunities

8.1. Advising clients on environmental matters

A growing topic of conversation in various jurisdictions is whether lawyers should advise clients on certain matters, especially when those matters might contribute to climate change. This is a complex issue that involves balancing the principles of access to justice and the ethical responsibilities of lawyers.

In the United States, there is increasing pressure on law firms to consider the broader implications of their work. For example, young lawyers and students are increasingly scrutinizing which law firms are representing fossil fuel companies [38].

Hong Kong's legal education must prepare students to navigate these ethical considerations, teaching them to balance traditional client service with emerging environmental responsibilities. Curriculum modules on professional ethics should address these tensions directly, using case studies to illustrate potential approaches to balancing competing values.

8.2. Aligning legal practice with climate goals

Globally, law firms are already adopting policies around the types of clients they take on. This trend reflects a growing awareness of the need to align legal practice with climate goals. For example, firms are considering the concept of "advised emissions" which involves calculating the emissions associated with the legal advice they provide [39]. This approach encourages lawyers to consider the environmental impact of their work and advise clients accordingly.

Implementation challenges for Hong Kong's legal education include:

- 1) Curricula Constraints: Limited space in existing curricula makes adding environmental justice content challenging without removing other material.
- 2) Faculty Expertise: Few current faculty members specialize in environmental justice, requiring professional development or new hiring.
- 3) Student Interest: Without mandatory components, student engagement may be limited by perceptions that environmental justice is peripheral to commercial practice.

- 4) Institutional Support: Law schools may prioritize traditional commercial subjects over emerging environmental justice topics.

By addressing these challenges strategically, Hong Kong law schools can successfully integrate environmental justice into their curricula, preparing graduates for practice in an increasingly climate-conscious legal landscape.

9. Conclusion

This study reveals critical deficiencies in Hong Kong's legal education, which fails to integrate environmental justice principles essential for addressing the city's environmental inequities. Analysis of 2023–2024 course from CUHK, HKU, and CityU shows that environmental law courses are offered only as electives, and lack focus on justice and equity issues. Historical policy fragmentation, prioritizing economic growth over equity since the 1990s, further extends this gap, as environmental concerns are treated as technical rather than justice-driven challenges.

To address these deficiencies, this study argues for a comprehensive curricula reform, integrating environmental justice into Hong Kong's legal education through core courses, experiential learning, and advocacy training. Proposed modules on disproportionate environmental burdens, legal frameworks, and climate-conscious contract drafting equip students to advocate for marginalized communities, while ethics training ensures they balance client interests with societal responsibilities. Experiential components, such as Environmental Justice Clinics and moot courts addressing local issues, provide practical skills. The framework of lobbying, lubricating, legislating, and litigating highlights critical legal activities absent from current curricula.

This study's contribution lies in its tailored approach, addressing Hong Kong's unique urban and commercial challenges through a locally relevant environmental justice curriculum. By equipping law students to tackle inequities, such as PM2.5 exposure in low-income districts, this reform can cultivate climate-conscious lawyers capable of driving sustainable and equitable change in Hong Kong's legal landscape. The urgency of this transformation is clear, as environmental justice is essential for effective climate solutions and social equity in the face of escalating environmental crises.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Net Zero Lawyers Alliance. About Us. Available online: <https://www.netzerolawyers.com/about-us> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
2. Environment and Ecology Bureau, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, Hong Kong's Climate Action Plan 2030+ (Environment and Ecology Bureau, HKSAR Government, 2017). Available online: https://cnsd.gov.hk/wp-content/uploads/pdf/HK_Climate_Action_Plan_2030+_booklet_En.pdf (accessed on 2 June 2025).
3. The Law Society of Hong Kong. Annual Report 2024: Reforming for Sustainability. The Law Society of Hong Kong; 2024.
4. Schlosberg D, Collins LB. From Environmental to Climate Justice: Climate Change and the Discourse of Environmental Justice. *WIREs Climate Change*. 2014; 5(3): 359–374.
5. White R. Environmental Harm: An Eco-Justice Perspective. Policy Press; 201.

6. Nardone M, Oscars ED. Incorporating Environmental Justice into Environmental Law School Curricula. *West Virginia Law Review*. 2018; 121(2): 801–832.
7. Guevara-Herrero I, Bravo-Torija B, Pérez-Martin JM. Educational Practice in Education for Environmental Justice: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Sustainability*. 2024; 16(7): 2805. doi: 10.3390/su16072805
8. Li VOK, Han Y, Lam JCK, et al. Air pollution and environmental injustice: Are the socially deprived exposed to more PM2.5 pollution in Hong Kong? *Environmental Science & Policy*. 2018; 80: 53–61. doi: 10.1016/j.envsci.2017.10.014
9. Schlosberg D. *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*. Oxford University Press; 2007.
10. Standing Committee on Legal Education and Training. *Comprehensive Review of Legal Education and Training in Hong Kong: Consultation Responses*. Standing Committee on Legal Education and Training; 2018.
11. Standing Committee on Legal Education and Training. *Annual Report 2023*. Standing Committee on Legal Education and Training; 2023.
12. Hills P, Barron W. Hong Kong: The challenge of sustainability. *Land Use Policy*. 1997; 14(1): 41–53.
13. Marmot M, Woo LF, Yeoh EK, et al. *The environment and health inequalities in Hong Kong*. UCL Institute of Health Equity; 2024.
14. Shah S, Paul H, Tan C. *Law School and the Climate Crisis: Workshop and Steps Forward*. University of Warwick School of Law; 2021.
15. SOAS University of London. NLUD-SOAS Joint LLM/MA in Environmental Justice in South Asia. Available online: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/study/find-course/nlud-soas-joint-llm-ma-environmental-justice-south-asia> (accessed on 14 March 2025).
16. United Nations Human Rights Council. Human Rights and Climate Change. Resolution 10/4, 25 March 2009. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/climate-change/human-rights-council-resolutions-human-rights-and-climate-change> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
17. Preston BJ. Climate Conscious Lawyering. *Australian Law Journal*. 2021; 95: 51–66.
18. United Nations. Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights. U.N. Doc. A/HRC/17/31; 2011.
19. International Bar Association. Climate Crisis Statement. Available online: <https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=822C1967-F851-4819-8200-2FE298164922> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
20. Legal Services Act, 2007, c. 29, s. 1(1) (UK). Available online: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/29/contents> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
21. The Law Society. Corporate Strategy 2022/2025. Available online: <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/about-us/our-strategy-and-business-plan> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
22. The Law Society. Creating a Climate-Conscious Approach to Legal Practice. Available online: <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/climate-change/creating-a-climate-conscious-approach-to-legal-practice> (accessed on 2 December 2024).
23. The Chancery Lane Project. Clauses. Available online: <https://chancerylaneproject.org/clauses/> (accessed on 7 August 2024).
24. Vaughan S. Climate Change and the Rule of Law(ers): What Thinner and Thicker Accounts Might Require of Those in Practice. *UCL Research Paper Series*. 2022; 11.
25. Ramos J. Shifting the Mindset of Commercial Lawyers to Rewire Contracts, to Mitigate Climate Change More Effectively in Practice: The Chancery Lane Project. *Environmental Law Review*. 2021; 23: 3.
26. Peel J, Osofsky H, Foerster A. Shaping the Next Generation of Climate Change Litigation in Australia. *Melbourne University Law Review*. 2017; 41(2): 793–844.
27. Young MA. Climate Change and Law: A Global Challenge for Legal Education. *University of Queensland Law Journal*. 2021; 40(3): 351–370.
28. IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law. *IUCN World Declaration on the Environmental Rule of Law*. IUCN; 2017.
29. Bouwer K, John E, Luke O, Rozhan A. Climate Change Isn't Optional: Climate Change in the Core Law Curriculum. *Legal Studies*. 2023; 43(2): 240–258.
30. Conrad K. The Era of Climate Change Medicine—Challenges to Health Care Systems. *Ochsner Journal*. 2023; 23(1): 7–8.
31. Sullivan JK, Lowe KE, Gordon IO, et al. Climate Change and Medical Education: An Integrative Model. *Academic Medicine*. 2022; 97(2): 188–192.

32. The Chinese University of Hong Kong, ‘Striving for Climate Justice for the Underprivileged: Mitigating Extreme Weather with Urban Design and Elderly Support’ (CUHK SD Matters, undated). Available online: <https://sdmatters.cuhk.edu.hk/striving-for-climate-justice-for-the-underprivileged-mitigating-extreme-weather-with-urban-design-and-elderly-support/> (accessed on 25 May 2025).
33. Law Students for Climate Accountability. The Carbon Circle: The UK Legal Industry’s Ties to Fossil Fuel Companies. Law Firm Climate Change Scorecard. 2023.
34. Bogojević S. Legal Dilemmas of Climate Action. *Journal of Environmental Law*. 2023; 35(1): 1–9. doi: 10.1093/jel/eqa0007
35. Holmes V. Ethical Lawyering in the Anthropocene. *Legal Ethics*. 2023; 26(2): 201–218.
36. Solicitors Regulation Authority. Standards and Regulations. Available online: <https://www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/standards-regulations/> (accessed on 10 July 2025)
37. Vaughan S. Existential Ethics: Thinking Hard About Lawyer Responsibility for Clients’ Environmental Harms. *Current Legal Problems*. 2023; 76(1): 1–34. doi: 10.1093/clp/cuad005
38. Law Students for Climate Accountability. Fueling the Climate Crisis: Measuring T-20 Law School Participation in the Fossil Fuel Lawyers Pipeline. Available online: <https://www.ls4ca.org/fossil-fuel-lawyers> (accessed on 27 April 2024).
39. Hunter D. Advised Emissions—Assessing the Impact. *Law Gazette*. Available online: <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/practice-points/advised-emissions-assessing-the-impact/5115871.article> (accessed on 2 December 2024).