

Valuing difference? Experiences in two clinical environments

Martin Wilson

Northumbria University Exempting Law Degree, Year 4

What do most people think of a law degree – plentiful amounts of hard work, boundless reading, an expensive Legal Practice Course or Bar Vocational Course followed by an extremely competitive application process to secure a job in the graduate's respective field of work? What if students were given the opportunity to work in another jurisdiction, such as Australia, for one month in a student run law office, during the summer, with £1000 to get them on their way? 'Sounds good', I thought. 'So what do I have to do to get the chance?' And then the one catch is divulged – the students must complete a compulsory piece of coursework and achieve one of the top 10 marks in their year. (The writer expects a few raised eyebrows at this stage!)

Last summer, Northumbria University in partnership with Irwin Mitchell and Monash University, in Melbourne Australia, offered one Northumbria student a pro bono scholarship to work in the Springvale Monash Legal Service (SMLS) for one month. Irwin Mitchell kindly sponsored this scholarship and provided £1000 to the lucky student. To get the chance of participating in this pro bono scholarship, the chosen student had to complete a compulsory piece of legal research coursework and attain one of the top ten marks in the year. The top students were then invited for interview before a panel of three comprising two Northumbria Student Law Office staff and one partner from Irwin Mitchell, whose selection criteria proved to be which student demonstrated a commitment to pro bono work in the Student Law Office.

Technically, when I was selected for the scholarship, following the high I experienced and the come down to normality, I should not have been anxious whatsoever. I had spent a great deal of my undergraduate studies in preparation for working in Northumbria University's pro bono Student Law Office and besides, Australia's legal system is a common law system partly based upon our system, what could be so different? But I was about to travel to the other side of the world alone and work in a completely different jurisdiction where I knew nobody. The experience however proved to be very different to my anxieties. Working in the Springvale Monash Legal Service was unique in terms of the diversity of experience I managed to encounter and the skills I acquired regarding working in a law office, client care and giving advice to live clients.

Each day provided a different experience to any other. For two days of the week, I worked in the Springvale Monash Legal Service in a client drop in session, in which four hours student time was

dedicated to meeting members of the community on a one to one basis. The legal problems that students were confronted with proved to be more extensive than those that a busy high street law firm would be presented with daily. These ranged from fencing disputes, matrimonial matters, child residency issues, minor criminal offences, employment matters, through to a request to complete a change of address form due to language difficulties. Springvale Monash Legal Service, in terms of the diversity of legal and non-legal matters presented on a daily basis had similarities with a Citizens Advice Bureau in Britain. Moreover, a significant proportion of clients required the assistance of a telephone interpreter due to language difficulties, which posed its own interesting problems when interviewing and advising a client.

During another day in the working week, I had the opportunity to work at the Family Law Courts in a suburb in Melbourne through another Monash University pro bono programme aptly named the Family Law Assistance Programme (FLAP). Students and qualified solicitors provided a mainly advisory service to any Family Court attendees who required it and this could occasionally extend to representation if circumstances so required. Through this programme, students not only had to deliver immediate advice on a quick turnover basis but also had the opportunity to observe the procedural workings of the Family Courts.

During the fourth day of the weekly programme, I was sent to participate in Monash's Intervention Order Support Scheme (IOSS) at the Criminal Law Courts in another suburb in Melbourne. Through this excellent programme students and qualified solicitors manned a drop in session for unrepresented applicants who often found the entire experience of applying for an intervention order extremely distressing and traumatic. It was through this scheme that I gained the greatest amount of personal accomplishment specifically when I sat with an applicant in court providing emotional support for her in the traumatic experience of meeting the respondent in open court.

The final day of the week saw me engage with other students in various lectures and seminars regarding their pro bono course of studies.

Overall, the Monash pro bono programme, encompassing SMLS, FLAP, IOSS and other schemes, proves to be of significant value to both the local community and students who participate in it. Irrespective of the warmth and friendliness of the staff and students at Monash, the programme of events that I experienced during the scholarship were excellent in terms of the professionalism of those involved, the sheer diversity of experience one can take from it and the benefit to all who came into contact with it. However, to make a like for like comparison between Northumbria University's pro bono programme and that at Monash University would be ignorant of the fact that the two programmes seem to be aimed at achieving different objectives and are situated in two wholly different legal climates.

On the one hand Springvale Monash Legal Service is situated in a strategic suburb in Melbourne and is aimed at providing a high turnover of advice to members of the local community, with some varying degrees of language difficulties, and is also intended to take on those more in depth cases requiring more detailed levels of research and student input. There are numerous similar University run schemes around Australia, such as those run by neighbouring Melbourne University. Furthermore, Victoria Legal Aid (the Australian state legal aid provider) see work such as that undertaken by Victorian student run law offices as strategic in delivering legal services to the general public and consequently appear to be much more involved in the funding of certain

aspects of the schemes than occurs at Northumbria's Student Law Office. The students at Monash elect to work in the pro bono law office and spend a period of 3 months in doing so, which differs further from its English counterpart. Students encounter an exceptionally varied range of legal problems spanning across numerous areas of law also.

In comparison, Northumbria University's Student Law Office is situated on campus in the City Centre and seeks to serve a very different legal need. Drop in 'advice on demand' style centres already exist in England and Wales, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, and therefore the Student Law Office has not been set up to, nor is it required to provide such a service. Another marked difference between the two law pro bono programmes is that the Northumbria model is unique in England and Wales, in terms of the depth of the programme. Australia already has caught onto the idea of student run law offices but England and Wales are yet to follow suit. Students studying on the exempting law degree find working in the Student Law Office a compulsory and extremely important part of their final year. Cases can be taken on and sometimes followed through to fruition due to the greater time available over the academic year to work on specific cases. Additionally, students are placed into firms of students with one supervisor that specialise in a particular area of law and they subsequently focus on one area of law rather than experiencing the wide ranging areas that the SMLS students will encounter. This provides a distinctly different educational experience to that gained at Monash and that is the thrust of the writer's conclusion.

Monash and Northumbria University's pro bono programmes are different; they both intend to serve different legal and educational needs. The Monash model is typically Australian in the way that it has a student atmosphere about the law office, but that it still retains its professional outlook. Upon entering the office one can hear the chorus of 'G'day mate' as the custom welcome and the discussions of where some intend to go surfing later. Whereas the Northumbria office has a typically English feel to it – a professional outlook coupled with a desire to sound professional and look professional in every task. And it is these closing points that ensured that my experience was so interesting; to be able to see, hear and experience the differences between two student run law offices at opposite ends of the world!

