

Article

Bridging the Gap: Law Students as Agents of Public Legal Education and Community Empowerment

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Abstract

This article explores the critical role of law schools in advancing Public Legal Education (PLE) and the unique contributions of law students in fostering a more legally literate society. By examining the impact of law students as 'Street Law' teachers, the article highlights how these programmes not only benefit communities through increased legal awareness but also enhance students' practical skills and legal consciousness. The discussion extends to PLE initiatives in non-traditional settings, such as prisons, where legal education contributes to rehabilitative cultures and supports reintegration efforts. The incorporation of legal capability and the Capabilities Approach into PLE is proposed as a means to enrich these programmes, ensuring they are more effective in empowering individuals. The article also addresses the challenges and importance of evaluating PLE programmes, reviewing successful models and offering recommendations for future assessments. Ultimately, the article calls on law schools to deepen their commitment to PLE, emphasising the need for strategic expansion and innovative partnerships to build a more legally literate society. Future research directions are suggested, focusing on the long-term impact of PLE and its potential to enhance legal education. Through these efforts, law schools can fulfil their vital role in promoting legal literacy and social justice.

Keywords: public legal education, clinical legal education, street law, legal literacy.

Introduction

Background and Significance of Public Legal Education

Legal education serves as the foundation for equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to engage with the law, advocate for justice and contribute to society. Within this broad context, Clinical Legal Education (CLE) emerges as a subfield that bridges academic learning and real-world legal practice. CLE programmes provide law students with opportunities to apply their knowledge in practical settings, fostering experiential learning and professional development.¹ Public Legal Education (PLE), a vital component within CLE, takes this a step further by focusing on endowing communities with legal knowledge. PLE initiatives aim to build a legally literate society where individuals can navigate the legal system, assert their rights and engage meaningfully in civic

¹June Chapman, "Why Teach Legal Ethics to Undergraduates?" (2002) 5 Legal Ethics 68.

processes.² By connecting law schools with their communities, PLE fosters mutual benefits: law students gain practical skills and societal awareness, while communities receive valuable legal insights. To enhance the effectiveness of PLE programmes, it is important to focus on building legal capability — the ability of individuals to understand, use and engage with the law. This article argues that law schools should integrate PLE as a core component of their curricula, adopting the Capabilities Approach, which emphasises individuals' empowerment and agency, to further enrich PLE initiatives. Evaluating PLE programmes is crucial for understanding their impact and ensuring continuous improvement. However, measuring the effectiveness of these initiatives presents challenges, such as quantifying intangible outcomes like increased legal confidence or changes in behaviour, which this article will also explore.

PLE refers to the efforts aimed at educating the general public about the law, legal processes and their legal rights and responsibilities. Although it is of course accepted that the purpose of legal education is not solely as preparation for professional practice,³ it is also fair to say that a significant amount of legal education is primarily focused on training individuals for legal professions. In contrast, PLE is designed to empower ordinary citizens by making legal knowledge accessible, relevant and understandable. This education serves as the foundation for promoting legal literacy, which is essential for enabling individuals to navigate the legal system effectively, make informed decisions and safeguard their rights. By demystifying the law and breaking down barriers to understanding, PLE democratises legal knowledge, fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry. This, in turn, equips individuals with the tools needed to participate actively in society, advocate for their interests and hold institutions accountable. Arthurs underscores the transformative potential of educational initiatives that build civic awareness and responsibility.⁴ He argues that fostering legal literacy is not merely about knowledge acquisition but about cultivating the skills and values needed for active citizenship. By aligning with these principles, PLE initiatives can go beyond disseminating legal facts to motivate individuals to become agents of change, capable of contributing to the strengthening of democratic institutions and promoting social equity. PLE therefore plays a vital role in nurturing a culture of accountability and engagement, which is critical for the health and resilience of democratic societies.

CLE initiatives, which encompass PLE as a key component, are pivotal in enabling law schools to integrate practical legal experience into their curricula. CLE programmes, such as legal clinics and law reform initiatives, provide students with hands-on experience in addressing real-world legal issues, allowing them to engage directly with community needs and contribute to broader societal goals.⁵ PLE, as a subset of CLE, focuses specifically on promoting legal literacy and access to justice by educating the public on their rights and the legal system. For instance, specialised clinics focusing on PLE might educate vulnerable populations, such as stateless individuals or victims of domestic abuse, equipping them with knowledge to navigate legal challenges.⁶ These initiatives not only address critical community needs but also enhance students' understanding of complex legal issues and the societal impact of legal interventions.

The adaptability of law schools is further demonstrated by their integration of digital tools and hybrid learning models into CLE and PLE initiatives. The shift to remote teaching during the pandemic

²Richard Grimes, 'Evaluating Legal Literacy Programmes - Aims, Challenges, Models and a Call to Action' (2018) 2 *International Journal of Public Legal Education* 28.

³Anthony Bradney, 'Elite Values in Twenty-first Century, United Kingdom Law Schools' (2008) 42 *The Law Teacher* 291.

⁴Sean Arthurs, 'Street Law: Creating Tomorrow's Citizens Today' (2015) 19 *Lewis & Clark Law Review* 925.

⁵Kris Gledhill and Robin Palmer, 'Law Reform Clinical Programmes Should Be Promoted in Law Schools: An Explanation' (2024) *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 6.

⁶Katie Robertson, 'The Stateless Legal Clinic: Innovative Models for Addressing Unmet Legal Need in Australia through Clinical Legal Education' (2024) 31 *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 5.

highlighted opportunities to make legal education more accessible and effective, with many institutions continuing to incorporate these methods into traditional instruction.⁷ Additionally, CLE modules often integrate themes of social justice, instilling values of service and advocacy in students and preparing them to address societal needs throughout their legal careers.⁸ By linking CLE and PLE, law schools can advance legal education in a way that integrates practical experiences, embraces innovation, supports social justice and equips students to contribute meaningfully to society.

Law schools are well placed to be at the forefront of PLE initiatives. As institutions dedicated to the study and teaching of law, they possess the expertise, resources and institutional credibility necessary to design and deliver impactful PLE programmes. By integrating PLE into their curricular and extracurricular activities, law schools can serve as vital bridges between the legal community and the general public, making legal knowledge accessible and encouraging individuals to navigate legal systems with confidence.⁹ This engagement benefits not only the community but also law students, who gain valuable practical skills through their involvement in PLE.¹⁰ Research on CLE highlights its positive impact on employability, with students developing essential competencies such as problem-solving, communication and client-centred thinking. For instance, Grimes has underscored how experiential learning through PLE initiatives prepares students for legal practice by exposing them to the complexities of real-world legal issues and fostering their sense of professional responsibility.¹¹ CLE programmes, incorporating PLE, enhance students' understanding of social justice, empathy and the societal role of the law, making them more well-rounded and socially conscious practitioners. Furthermore, the active participation of law schools in PLE aligns with their broader mission to serve the public good and promote justice within society. This civic role of universities, as discussed by Arthurs,¹² emphasises the responsibility of higher education institutions to contribute to societal advancement and address issues of access to justice. By committing to PLE, law schools can leverage their unique position to promote legal empowerment, enhance social equity and cultivate a legally literate society.

The Evolving Role of Law Students in PLE

All too often, the role of law students has been confined to academic study and preparation for legal practice. However, there is a growing recognition of the potential for law students to serve as effective facilitators of PLE. Engaging in PLE activities allows students to step out of the classroom and into the community, where they can apply their legal knowledge in practical, impactful ways. As PLE facilitators, law students can help demystify the law for the public, making it more accessible and less intimidating. This role not only aids in the dissemination of legal knowledge but also helps students develop a deeper understanding of the law and its social implications. The involvement of law students as facilitators of PLE is underpinned by a growing body of literature that highlights the benefits of CLE more broadly.

CLE programmes provide students with practical, real-world legal experience, of which PLE is an

⁷Amy Wallace, 'Cyberspace Back to the Classroom: Taking Lessons Learned from Teaching Street Law During the Pandemic Back to In-Person Instruction' (2021) 28 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 149.

⁸Andrea Todd, 'Law Students as Active Citizens: Instilling a Career-Long Commitment to Pro Bono and Social Justice via the CLE Curriculum' (2023) 30 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 159.

⁹Ana Speed, 'Clinical Legal Education as an Effective Tool for Improving the Accessibility of Protective Injunctions for Victims of Domestic Abuse: A Case Study Example of the Models of Support Available at Northumbria University' (2021) 28 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 66.

¹⁰Liz Hardie, "'Training Is Everything": How to Prepare Students for Policy Clinic Projects' (2024) International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 72.

¹¹Grimes (n 2).

¹²Arthurs (n 4).

important component. Studies consistently show that participation in CLE initiatives enhances students' legal skills, including critical thinking, communication and the ability to translate complicated legal concepts into accessible language.¹³ Within this framework, PLE activities enable students to engage directly with community education efforts, which enriches their understanding of legal concepts while fostering a client-centred approach. Recent research underscores the positive impact of CLE on academic performance, as students apply their knowledge in clinical settings to address real-world legal issues ranging from environmental law to criminal appeals.¹⁴ By participating in these initiatives, students not only deepen their grasp of legal theory but also develop a sense of social responsibility and a commitment to public service.¹⁵ For instance, PLE activities often require students to explain legal principles in ways that enlightens communities, an experience that cultivates empathy and a broader awareness of societal issues.¹⁶

Law schools also recognise the importance of supporting students' well-being and resilience when working on emotionally challenging cases or sensitive issues.¹⁷ Training on managing vicarious trauma and fostering a supportive environment are essential to maintaining students' mental health and effectiveness in clinical settings. These experiences not only contribute to students' professional development, enhancing skills such as research, analysis and advocacy,¹⁸ but also align with the broader goals of PLE by promoting legal literacy and social responsibility.¹⁹ Smyth and others emphasise the importance of trauma-informed lawyering within student legal clinics, a practice that is highly relevant to the advancement of PLE.²⁰ Trauma-informed approaches equip law students with the empathy and skills necessary to support vulnerable clients effectively, ensuring that these clients receive both legal assistance and emotional understanding. This dual impact — on the students' development as socially responsible professionals and on the empowerment of community members — demonstrates the unique value of PLE as a vital component of CLE. By framing PLE within the broader context of CLE, the connection between hands-on student learning, community education and the promotion of legal literacy becomes clear and compelling.

The literature suggests that law students involved in clinics and pro bono work play a significant role in improving access to justice for underserved and vulnerable communities.²¹ Through these initiatives, students address systemic gaps in the legal system, providing crucial support to individuals who might otherwise be excluded from legal protections. A notable example is the 'Street Law'

¹³Andy Unger and others, 'Evaluating the Academic Benefits of Clinical Legal Education: An Analysis of the Final Average Marks of Five Cohorts of LSBU LLB Graduating Students, 2011-2015' (2024) 31 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 206.

¹⁴Tabea Wilkes and others, 'Not a Blueprint: Reflections on the Cardiff Environmental Law and Policy Clinic' (2024) Special Ed International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 34.

¹⁵Emma Curryer and Carol Edwards, 'The Impact of Policy Work on Employability Skills in the Policy Project Connected to the Criminal Appeals Clinic at the Open University' (2024) International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 109.

¹⁶Amy Lawton, Kathryn Saban and Sadie Whittam, 'Do We Want a Human First, and a Lawyer Second? Developing Law Student Empathy Through Clinical Legal Education' (2022) 29 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 4.

¹⁷Emma Curryer and Gillian Mawdsley, 'Navigating Vicarious Trauma: The Importance of Planning, Teaching, and Delivering Vicarious Trauma Training to Support Law Students and the Legal Profession' (2024) 31 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 126.

¹⁸Curryer and Edwards (n 15).

¹⁹Folakemi Olabisi Ajagunna and Ibijoke Byron, 'Clinical Legal Education and Social Justice: Assessing the Impact on Law Students in a Law Clinic in Nigeria' (2024) 31 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 44.

²⁰Gemma Smyth, Dusty Johnstone and Jillian Rogin, 'Trauma-Informed Lawyering In The Student Legal Clinic Setting: Increasing Competence In Trauma Informed Practice' (2021) 28 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 149.

²¹Speed (n 9).

programme, where law students take on the role of PLE facilitators by teaching legal concepts in schools, community centres and other public venues. Studies on such programmes highlight their transformative potential, demonstrating the dual impact of PLE on both the participating students and the communities they serve.²² In these programmes, law students are not only the primary deliverers of PLE but also provide valuable feedback on the initiatives they lead. Drawing from their direct experiences of engaging with diverse audiences, students offer insights that help refine teaching methods, identify challenges and enhance the overall effectiveness of PLE initiatives. For instance, they may observe areas where participants struggle to grasp complex legal concepts or suggest alternative teaching strategies to improve engagement and understanding. This feedback loop ensures that PLE programmes remain dynamic, responsive and better tailored to the needs of the communities they aim to serve, while also enriching the students' educational and professional development.²³

Law students can therefore contribute uniquely to advancing PLE by engaging in community legal education, applying their knowledge to real-world issues, developing empathy, advocating for access to justice and providing feedback for programme improvement. Together, these efforts foster a more legally literate society and enhance the impact of legal education on both students and the public. The evolving role of law students in PLE reflects a broader trend towards experiential learning in legal education, where students are encouraged to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. This shift has the potential not only to benefit the professional development of students but also to contribute to greater legal awareness. This article explores the critical role of law schools in advancing PLE and the unique contributions of law students in promoting legal literacy. By examining the impact of various PLE initiatives, this article highlights how these programmes not only benefit communities through increased legal awareness but also enhance students' practical skills and legal consciousness.

The Role of Law Schools in Building a Legally Literate Society

Law schools can play a crucial role in advancing PLE by leveraging their resources and expertise to make legal knowledge accessible and relevant to diverse communities. Beyond their traditional function of training future lawyers, law schools can design and deliver adaptable, research-informed programmes that enhance public understanding of the law, foster innovation in legal education and influence policy to support broader legal empowerment. By collaborating with policymakers, legal practitioners and community organisations, they can help shape the legal landscape in ways that promote greater legal literacy and empowerment.²⁴ This advocacy role is crucial for advancing the societal impact of PLE and ensuring that it is supported and sustained over the long term.

Collaborative Approaches

The effectiveness of PLE initiatives often hinges on the strength of partnerships between law schools and the communities they serve. Collaborative approaches ensure that PLE programmes are not only informed by academic expertise but are also grounded in the real-world experiences and needs of community members. These partnerships create a dynamic exchange of knowledge, where law schools contribute legal expertise while communities provide insights into the practical challenges and barriers to legal literacy. Collaboration with community organisations, local governments, schools and other stakeholders allows law schools to extend their reach and impact. For example, partnerships with non-profit organisations can facilitate the delivery of PLE programmes to underserved populations, such as

²²Wallace (n 7).

²³Louise Hewitt and Lucy Yeatman, 'Feeding up and Feeding Back: Exploring the Value of Peer Learning through a Law Clinic Setting' (2023) 30 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 102.

²⁴Saurabh Sood, 'Convergence in the Practice of Legal Aid to Improve Access to Justice' (2019) 6 Asian Journal of Legal Education 18.

low-income families, immigrants or rural communities. Bengtsson and others²⁵ have highlighted the effectiveness of integrating clinical legal education with community service in advancing PLE through partnerships like the one between their law school and the Citizens Advice Bureau. These collaborations can also help bridge the gap between legal theory and practice, making legal education more relevant and accessible to those who need it most.

Several successful case studies highlight the power of collaborative approaches in PLE. One notable example is the partnership between Georgetown University Law Centre and Washington D.C. public schools to implement the Street Law programme (see below). This initiative involves law students teaching practical law courses to high school students, covering topics such as constitutional rights, consumer law and criminal justice. The collaboration not only enhances the legal knowledge of the students but also provides law students with invaluable teaching and community engagement experience. Another example is the partnership between the University of Toronto Faculty of Law and local community organisations in their 'Access to Justice' initiative.²⁶ This programme offers free legal workshops and clinics to residents in low-income neighbourhoods, addressing issues like tenant rights, employment law and family law. By working closely with community groups, the law school ensures that its PLE efforts are responsive to the specific legal challenges faced by these communities, thereby maximising the programme's impact. Collaboration therefore not only amplifies the reach of PLE programmes but also ensures that they are deeply connected to the needs and realities of the people they are designed to serve.

In the UK, the University of Strathclyde has collaborated with local prisons to deliver PLE to inmates, focusing on legal rights, the criminal justice system and reintegration challenges.²⁷ This partnership has proven effective in reducing recidivism rates and empowering inmates with the knowledge needed to navigate their legal situations, both during incarceration and after release. The programme is a prime example of how law schools can contribute to social justice and rehabilitation through targeted legal education. These case studies demonstrate that when law schools and communities work together, PLE initiatives can be more effective, sustainable and impactful.

Law Students as 'Street Law' Teachers

Street Law, a form of PLE, is an innovative educational programme that brings legal education directly to the community by having law students teach non-lawyers about the law, democracy and fundamental rights.²⁸ The primary goal of Street Law is to make legal knowledge accessible to everyone, particularly those who may not have easy access to legal resources or education. What sets Street Law apart is its distinctive learner-centred teaching methodology, which emphasises interactive, participatory and practical learning.²⁹ Lessons are designed to engage participants through role-playing, case studies and problem-solving exercises, enabling them to actively apply legal concepts to

²⁵Lyndsey Bengtsson, Callum Thomson and Bethany A Court, 'The Law In The Community Module At Northumbria University- Working In Partnership With Citizens Advice As An Effective Teaching Tool' (2021) 28 *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 111.

²⁶University of Toronto, 'Access to Justice: Downtown Legal Services, U of T's Community Legal Clinic, Celebrates 50 Years' <<https://www.utoronto.ca/news/access-justice-downtown-legal-services-u-t-s-community-legal-clinic-celebrates-50-years#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20Downtown%20Legal%20Services,%20criminal%20refugee%20and%20immigration>> accessed 31 August 2024.

²⁷University of Strathclyde Law Clinic, 'Providing Access to Justice in Glasgow and the Surrounding Areas' <[https://www.lawclinic.org.uk/beyond-casework/projects/public-legal-education/prisons#:~:text=Since the pilot in 2010,how to re-enter employment](https://www.lawclinic.org.uk/beyond-casework/projects/public-legal-education/prisons#:~:text=Since%20the%20pilot%20in%202010,how%20to%20re-enter%20employment)> accessed 31 August 2024.

²⁸Brandon Golob, 'Student in the Seats, Teacher in the Streets: Evaluating the Impacts of Law Students Becoming "Street Law" Teachers' (2021) 5 *International Journal of Public Legal Education* 37.

²⁹Seán Arthurs and others 'From zero to 60: Building belief, capacity and community in Street Law instructors in one weekend' (2017) 24 *International Journal of Public Legal Education* 118.

real-life situations. Law students, under the guidance of their law schools, deliver lessons on a variety of legal topics, such as consumer rights, criminal law, family law and human rights, often tailored to the needs and interests of specific community groups. The programme typically operates in schools, community centres, prisons and other public spaces where legal literacy is needed. By focusing on practical, everyday legal issues, Street Law aims to empower individuals with the knowledge they need to navigate legal challenges and engage more fully as informed citizens.

The Street Law programme originated in the early 1970s at Georgetown University Law Centre in Washington D.C. during a period of significant social change in the USA.³⁰ Initially conceived as a response to the civil rights movement's call for greater legal empowerment of marginalised communities, the programme was designed to provide high school students in underserved areas with basic legal knowledge and skills. Over the decades, Street Law has expanded globally, with numerous adaptations in various countries, reflecting different legal systems and cultural contexts. The core principles of the programme – teaching practical law and fostering active citizenship – have remained consistent, even as the content and delivery methods have evolved. Today, Street Law is a well-established model for PLE, with a strong network of programmes in law schools around the world, each contributing to the broader mission of legal empowerment and social justice.

Studies have shown that participation in Street Law and similar PLE programmes fosters a sense of social responsibility and public service among law students.³¹ Furthermore, the hands-on nature of Street Law provides students with early exposure to teaching, mentoring and advocacy, all of which are valuable skills in legal practice. For instance, Ridout and Thomas³² highlight how Street Law enhances students' ability to communicate complex legal principles effectively and develop empathy through their interactions with diverse communities. As a result, students emerge from the programme not only as more skilled legal professionals but also as more socially conscious and engaged citizens. The impact of Street Law extends beyond the law students involved – it also significantly benefits the communities they serve. By providing accessible legal education, Street Law helps demystify the law for community members, many of whom may have little prior exposure to legal concepts.³³ This education emboldens individuals to make informed decisions, assert their rights and avoid legal pitfalls. In particular, Street Law often targets vulnerable populations, such as low-income individuals, youth and incarcerated persons, who may be at a greater risk of being marginalised by the legal system. By equipping these groups with legal knowledge, Street Law helps to level the playing field, enabling them to navigate legal challenges with greater confidence and autonomy.³⁴

Numerous examples demonstrate the success of Street Law initiatives in empowering communities. For instance, in the USA, Street Law programmes in high schools have been credited with increasing students' understanding of the legal system, improving their critical thinking skills and fostering a sense of civic responsibility.³⁵ In the Czech Republic, the Prague Street Law programme has played a crucial role in educating citizens about their rights under the country's constitution, contributing to a more informed and engaged populace.³⁶ Similarly, in the UK, Street Law projects in prisons have helped

³⁰Lydia Bracken, 'A Case Study on the Impact of a Capstone Street Law Teaching Project' (2022) 56 *The Law Teacher* 206.

³¹Richard Roe and others, 'Teaching with Justice: Global Perspectives on Clinical Legal Education and Rebellious Lawyering' (2022) 68 *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 141.

³²Frances Ridout and Linden Thomas, *Street Law: Theory and Practice* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

³³Arpeeta Shams Mizan, 'Challenges of Human Rights Literacy in Developing Countries: Lessons from South Africa and Bangladesh on Conducting Street Law for the School Students' (2018) 5 *Asian Journal of Legal Education* 40.

³⁴Arthurs and others (n 29).

³⁵Bracken (n 30).

³⁶Michal Urban and Tomáš Friedel, 'Ten Years of Prague Street Law: Lessons to Learn from Our First Decade' (2019) 26 *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 177.

inmates understand their legal rights and responsibilities, aiding in their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.³⁷ LawWorks, a charity committed to enabling access to justice through free legal advice, has documented the widespread adoption of PLE initiatives, highlighting their effectiveness in reaching underserved populations. The findings of a survey in 2020 show that Street Law has now become a mainstream part of legal education, as well as law schools' wider community engagement.³⁸ During the pandemic, as Wallace highlights, Street Law initiatives demonstrated remarkable adaptability by transitioning to virtual environments, ensuring continued access to legal education.³⁹ This flexibility not only sustained PLE efforts during a crisis but also opened new possibilities for integrating virtual methods alongside in-person instruction, broadening the reach and accessibility of Street Law programmes. These examples highlight the transformative potential of Street Law, not only in terms of legal education but also in promoting broader social change.

It must be recognised that Street Law initiatives face several challenges: they often struggle with limited financial resources, which can impact the quality and reach of the initiatives;⁴⁰ access to teaching materials, venues and technology can be constrained, limiting their effectiveness;⁴¹ and reaching the remote or marginalised communities that may benefit the most from Street Law can be hampered by geographic and infrastructural barriers.⁴² Furthermore, law schools face significant resource constraints and funding challenges, e.g. budget cuts, increased student-to-staff ratios and pressures to prioritise revenue-generating programmes, which can make it difficult to sustain PLE initiatives.⁴³ Strategies to address these difficulties include collaborating with community organisations, NGOs and legal aid clinics to obtain additional resources, expertise and funding; encouraging law students to take leadership roles in PLE programmes to reduce staffing costs, while providing valuable experiential learning opportunities; and seeking funding from charitable foundations, government grants and alumni donations to help sustain and expand PLE efforts.⁴⁴ By adopting such innovative strategies law schools can overcome financial barriers and continue to advance PLE, fostering both community empowerment and student development.

PLE in Non-Traditional Settings: The Case of Prisons

Law schools have increasingly recognised the importance of extending PLE to non-traditional settings, such as prisons, where access to legal knowledge is often limited. In these environments, PLE programmes are designed to educate inmates about their legal rights, the justice system and the law's role in society. Law schools are well positioned to spearhead these initiatives due to their access to legal expertise, academic resources and motivated student bodies. These programmes typically involve law students and faculty delivering tailored legal education courses within correctional facilities,

³⁷Rachael Kirkup, 'Collaborative Public Legal Education: A Case of "Many Hands Make Light Work", or "Too Many Cooks"?', (2019) 3 International Journal of Public Legal Education 75.

³⁸LawWorks, 'Public legal education: a new vision statement' <<https://www.lawworks.org.uk/solicitors-and-volunteers/resources/lawworks-law-school-pro-bono-and-clinics-report-2020>> Accessed 17 January 2025.

³⁹Wallace (n 7).

⁴⁰Richard Owen, 'Sustainability and University Law Clinic' (2020) 27 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 77.

⁴¹Anne Hewitt and Natalie Skead, 'The Resource Implications of Work Integrated Learning and Legal Clinics in Australian Legal System: Managing Workload, System Support and Recognition' (2023) 30 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 4.

⁴²Alex Nicholson and Alireza Pakgozar, 'Lean Thinking in a UK University Law Clinic: A Reflective Case Study' (2020) 27 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 171.

⁴³Lucy Blackburn, 'Qualifying Work Experience: Do Street Law Projects Provide a "Legal Service"?', (2023) 57 The Law Teacher 84.

⁴⁴Amy L Wallace, 'Classroom to Cyberspace: Preserving Street Law's Interactive and Student-Centered Focus During Distance Learning' (2020) 27 International Journal of Public Legal Education 83.

focusing on topics relevant to the incarcerated population, such as criminal law, human rights, family law and post-release legal challenges.⁴⁵

PLE in prisons plays a critical role in promoting a rehabilitative prison culture. By educating inmates about the law and their rights, PLE helps to empower them, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility that is crucial for successful rehabilitation.⁴⁶ Studies have shown that understanding legal processes can reduce feelings of helplessness and resentment, which are often barriers to rehabilitation.⁴⁷ Instead, informed inmates are better equipped to engage constructively with the legal system, advocate for themselves and make decisions that align with their best interests. For example, programmes such as those offered by Nottingham Law School's Legal Advice Centre in the UK demonstrate how prison-based PLE initiatives can provide inmates with actionable knowledge about family law, housing rights and employment disputes, aiding in their reintegration.⁴⁸ Providing legal education within prisons aligns with the broader goals of rehabilitation and reintegration by helping prisoners develop skills that may be beneficial upon their release.⁴⁹ Law schools have contributed directly to these goals through initiatives like prison-based business law and tax clinics, which have shown potential in addressing financial literacy gaps among inmates and preparing them for life outside prison.⁵⁰ These efforts also underscore the importance of integrating commercial awareness into legal education, as it equips students to deliver PLE on legal issues that intersect with commerce, such as consumer rights or tax obligations.⁵¹ This approach not only enhances legal literacy but also contributes to a more informed and empowered society, which aligns with the overarching objectives of PLE.

Implementing PLE in prison settings presents several challenges, ranging from logistical issues to institutional resistance. Restricted access to prisons is one of the most significant barriers, as it limits the frequency and duration of educational programmes.⁵² Security protocols and the need to maintain order within the facility often impose strict constraints on what can be taught, how classes are conducted, and even who is allowed to participate. For instance, some programmes have reported difficulties in obtaining approvals for external facilitators, which can delay or disrupt the delivery of PLE initiatives.⁵³ Institutional resistance from prison staff or administrators is another challenge. This resistance often stems from a perception that education is secondary to security and control, or from scepticism regarding the potential benefits of legal education for inmates. Research by Edgar, O'Donnell and Martin highlights how prison staff sometimes view rehabilitative programmes as

⁴⁵Keren Lloyd Bright and Maria McNicholl, 'The Open University Law School's Public Legal Education in Prisons: Contributing to Rehabilitative Prison Culture' (2021) 5 International Journal of Public Legal Education 94.

⁴⁶Kimmet Edgar and Tim Newell, *Restorative Justice in Prisons: A Guide to Making it Happen* (Waterside Press, 2006).

⁴⁷Gwen Robinson, Fergus McNeill and Shadd Maruna, 'Punishment in society: the improbable persistence of probation and other community sanctions and measures' in Jonathan Simon and Richard Sparks (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Punishment and Society* (SAGE, 2012) 1-26.

⁴⁸Nottingham Law School Legal Advice Centre, 'Annual Report' <https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/nls/document_uploads/181404.pdf> Accessed 16 January 2025.

⁴⁹Cecilia Blengino, 'Interdisciplinarity and Clinical Legal Education: how synergies can improve access to rights in prison' (2018) 25 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 210.

⁵⁰Helen Codd and others, '"The Best of Times and the Worst of Times": Reflections on Developing a Prison-Based Business Law and Tax Clinic in the Midst of a Global Pandemic' (2020) 27 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 39.

⁵¹Siobhan McConnell, 'A Study of Supervisor and Student Views on the Role of Clinical Legal Education in Developing Commercial Awareness' (2022) 29 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 4.

⁵²Bright and McNicholl (n 45).

⁵³Roe and others (n 31).

conflicting with their primary duty of maintaining discipline.⁵⁴ Addressing these attitudes requires evidence-based advocacy to demonstrate the value of PLE in reducing recidivism and improving prison culture.⁵⁵ Designing a curriculum for inmates presents additional difficulties due to the diverse levels of educational attainment and legal literacy within the inmate population. According to the UK Ministry of Justice, a significant proportion of inmates have literacy and numeracy skills below Level 1, equivalent to that of an 11-year-old.⁵⁶ This disparity necessitates a curriculum that is accessible for individuals with limited educational backgrounds while remaining meaningful for those with more advanced knowledge. Programmes in the USA (such as the 'Prison Education Project' – see below) have successfully addressed this issue by using modular approaches that allow for differentiation in content delivery.⁵⁷

Despite these challenges, there are examples of successful PLE initiatives in prisons that demonstrate the positive impact of these programmes. For instance, the Open University Law School's prison education programme in the UK has been widely recognised for its contributions to rehabilitative prison culture.⁵⁸ This programme offers inmates courses in legal studies, helping them to develop critical skills and knowledge that support both their rehabilitation and reintegration. Evaluations of the programme have shown that participants gain a greater understanding of their legal rights, experience improved self-esteem and develop a stronger sense of purpose. Another successful example is the Prison Education Project (PEP) in California, which partners with law schools to provide legal education to inmates.⁵⁹ This programme has not only improved legal literacy among inmates but has also fostered a more positive learning environment within the prison. Participants have reported feeling more empowered to handle legal issues, both during and after their incarceration and have expressed a greater sense of hope for their futures. Research has also highlighted the broader social benefits of PLE in prisons, including reduced recidivism rates.⁶⁰ For instance, studies have found that inmates who participate in educational programmes, including PLE, are statistically 43% less likely to re-offend compared to those who do not have access to such programmes.⁶¹ These findings underscore the potential of PLE to contribute to both individual transformation and public safety.

Strategic Directions for the Future

To expand their role in PLE, law schools can consider several strategic directions. First, they can integrate PLE more fully into their curricula by offering specialised courses or clinics that focus on community-based legal education. These courses could involve students working directly with community partners to design and deliver PLE programmes, providing them with practical experience while also serving the public good. Law schools could also expand their partnerships with non-legal disciplines, such as education, social work and public health, to create interdisciplinary PLE programmes. These collaborations can enrich the content of PLE initiatives, addressing the legal

⁵⁴Kimmet Edgar, Ian O'Donnell and Carol Martin, *Prison violence: The dynamics of conflict, fear and power* (Willan Publishing, 2003).

⁵⁵Robinson and others (47).

⁵⁶Ministry of Justice, 'Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons' <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons/prison-education-a-review-of-reading-education-in-prisons>> Accessed 16 January 2025.

⁵⁷Jeremy Travis, Bruce Western and Steve Redburn, *The growth of incarceration in the United States: Exploring causes and consequences* (National Academies Press, 2014).

⁵⁸Curryer and Edwards (n 15).

⁵⁹PEP, 'Prison Education Project' <<https://www.prisoneducationproject.org/>> accessed 31 August 2024.

⁶⁰UK Parliament, 'Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: Why Prisoners Need an Education to Climb the Ladder of Opportunity' <[https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html#:~:text=Research by the Ministry of Justice, year reoffending rate of 40.1%25](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/56/report.html#:~:text=Research%20by%20the%20Ministry%20of%20Justice,year%20reoffending%20rate%20of%2040.1%25)> accessed 31 August 2024.

⁶¹RAND, 'Education and Vocational Training in Prisons Reduces Recidivism, Improves Job Outlook' <<https://www.rand.org/news/press/2013/08/22.html>> accessed 31 August 2024.

aspects of issues like healthcare access, social services and educational rights. Interdisciplinary approaches can make PLE more comprehensive and relevant, helping individuals navigate complicated, multi-layered challenges in their lives.

The vision for a more legally literate society, as articulated by advocates of PLE such as Grimes and Arthurs, hinges on the proactive and sustained involvement of law schools in PLE. In this vision, law schools are not just training grounds for future lawyers but are active participants in the broader social mission of legal empowerment. Through ongoing PLE initiatives, law schools can help build a society where individuals are informed about their rights, capable of advocating for themselves and others and equipped to engage with legal and civic processes. By facilitating these efforts, law schools directly contribute to PLE by ensuring that legal knowledge and services are accessible to those most in need. CLE can thus be an effective tool for enhancing social justice teaching, thereby aligning with the broader goals of PLE.⁶²

A legally literate society is one where citizens understand the law not as a distant or intimidating system but as a set of tools that can be used to achieve justice and equity. Law schools, through their PLE efforts, can play a crucial role in demystifying the law and making it more accessible to everyone. This involves not only teaching legal principles but also fostering a culture of legal inquiry, critical thinking and civic engagement. To achieve this vision, law schools must continue to innovate and expand their PLE efforts, embracing new initiatives, forging stronger community partnerships and integrating PLE more deeply into their educational missions. By doing so, they can help create a society where legal literacy is widespread and where the law is seen as a shared resource that everyone has the power to understand, use and shape.

Enhancement and Evaluation of PLE

Integrating Legal Capability and the Capabilities Approach in PLE

Legal capability refers to an individual's ability to recognise and address legal issues, make informed decisions about legal matters and take effective action to resolve them.⁶³ Unlike legal knowledge, which focuses on understanding laws and legal principles, legal capability emphasises the practical application of this knowledge in real-world situations. It encompasses a range of skills, including the ability to identify when a problem is legal in nature, seek out and use relevant information, communicate effectively in legal contexts and navigate the legal system. In the context of PLE, legal capability is a critical goal. PLE aims not just to inform the public about the law, but to empower individuals to use this knowledge to protect their rights, fulfil their responsibilities and participate more fully in society. By focusing on legal capability, PLE programmes can move beyond traditional forms of legal instruction to foster a deeper, more practical understanding of the law and its relevance to everyday life. This approach helps ensure that individuals are not just passive recipients of legal information, but active participants in the legal process, capable of advocating for themselves and others.

The Capabilities Approach, developed by economist Amartya Sen and further refined by philosopher Martha Nussbaum,⁶⁴ is a framework for evaluating individual well-being and social justice. It emphasises the importance of enabling individuals to achieve the attributes they value – such as being

⁶²Jacqueline Weinberg, 'Preparing Students For 21st Century Practice: Enhancing Social Justice Teaching In Clinical Legal Education' (2021) 28 International Journal of Clinical Legal Education 5.

⁶³Dawn Watkins, 'Reimagining the Relationship between Legal Capability and the Capabilities Approach' (2021) 5 International Journal of Public Legal Education 4.

⁶⁴Ingrid Robeyns, *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined* (Open Book Publishers, 2017).

healthy, educated and able to participate in social and political life – by expanding their capabilities or real opportunities to achieve these attributes. When applied to legal education, the Capabilities Approach shifts the focus from merely imparting legal knowledge to enhancing individuals' abilities to use this knowledge to improve their lives. It advocates for a holistic view of education, where the goal is not just to create competent legal professionals, but also to cultivate individuals who can use their legal understanding to contribute to social justice and the public good. This approach recognises that legal knowledge alone is insufficient unless it is coupled with the freedom and opportunity to apply it meaningfully in various life contexts.

In PLE, the Capabilities Approach can help educators design programmes that not only teach legal content but also develop the broader capabilities that individuals need to use this knowledge effectively. This includes critical thinking, problem-solving, ethical reasoning and the ability to engage in legal and civic processes.⁶⁵ Integrating the concepts of legal capability and the Capabilities Approach can significantly enhance the effectiveness of PLE programmes by making them more responsive to the real-world needs of learners.⁶⁶ This integration encourages PLE initiatives to focus on developing a comprehensive set of skills and abilities that empower individuals to navigate legal challenges, rather than just transmitting legal information. By adopting the Capabilities Approach, PLE programmes can tailor their content and delivery methods to the diverse needs of different communities. For example, a PLE programme designed for low-income individuals might not only cover basic legal rights but also provide practical tools for accessing legal services, understanding bureaucratic processes and advocating for policy changes. Similarly, PLE initiatives in law schools might focus on developing students' critical thinking and ethical reasoning, enabling them to engage thoughtfully with legal issues and contribute to a more just society.

The Capabilities Approach also encourages a participatory model of education, where both community participants in PLE sessions and law students are actively involved in the design and implementation of PLE programmes. For community participants, this means that their voices and experiences are valued in shaping the content and delivery of the sessions, ensuring the programmes address their specific needs and lived realities. For law students, the participatory approach enables them to collaborate with community members, fostering a deeper understanding of the legal challenges faced by those they aim to serve. This approach is already evident in many Street Law projects, where community members are engaged in the process of identifying the legal topics most relevant to their circumstances. For example, in Street Law programmes focused on housing rights, facilitators often work closely with tenant groups to co-develop session content that directly addresses the participants' concerns. Such collaboration not only enhances the relevance and impact of the PLE sessions but also exemplifies the principles of the Capabilities Approach by empowering both community members and law students to be active agents in the educational process.

Practical implementation of the Capabilities Approach in PLE often involves tailoring programmes to the specific needs and priorities of the target audience. For instance, PLE workshops could focus on legal issues such as housing rights, consumer protection or employment law, as determined through consultation with the community. This approach is not entirely new, as many PLE initiatives — particularly Street Law projects — already emphasise engaging with community stakeholders to identify relevant legal topics. For example, facilitators of Street Law sessions commonly collaborate with schools, prisons or community organisations to shape their workshops around the most pressing concerns of the participants. However, adopting the Capabilities Approach could further refine and expand this practice by emphasising a deeper level of co-design with the community. Rather than

⁶⁵Abiodun Michael Olatokun, 'The Journey To Legal Capability: Challenges for Public Law from Public Legal Education' (2022) 6 *International Journal of Public Legal Education* 28.

⁶⁶Ann Katrin Habbig and Ingrid Robeyns, 'Legal Capabilities' (2022) 23 *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 611.

merely responding to identified needs, PLE programmes could involve community members more actively in designing the curriculum, delivery methods and evaluation criteria. This would ensure that the programmes are not only relevant but also empowering, fostering a sense of agency among participants as they develop the legal knowledge and skills to navigate challenges in their lives.

PLE programmes could offer workshops that are specifically designed to address the legal issues most relevant to particular communities. For instance, workshops for immigrant communities might focus on navigating immigration law, understanding workers' rights and accessing public services. These workshops would not only provide legal information but also help participants develop the skills and confidence needed to advocate for themselves in legal contexts. In schools, PLE programmes could be integrated into the broader curriculum to teach students about their legal rights and responsibilities in a democratic society. These programmes could include mock trials, debates and service-learning projects that encourage students to apply their legal knowledge in real-world situations. Such practices, widely associated with the Street Law methodology, already reflect the principles of the Capabilities Approach, even if they are not explicitly framed as such. By emphasising critical thinking, civic engagement and active participation, these programmes align with the Capabilities Approach's focus on empowering individuals to take charge of their own lives and contribute meaningfully to public life.

The use of online platforms can make PLE more accessible and flexible, particularly for individuals who face barriers to attending in-person sessions, such as those in rural areas, those with mobility challenges or those with caring responsibilities.⁶⁷ These platforms could operate in several ways to meet diverse needs. For example, some platforms might deliver live, interactive sessions via video conferencing tools, allowing participants to engage directly with facilitators and peers in real-time discussions or Q&A sessions. Others could offer pre-populated interactive content, such as legal self-assessment quizzes, virtual simulations of legal scenarios or guided pathways that walk users through common legal processes, like filing a small claims case or addressing housing disputes. By incorporating elements of the Capabilities Approach, these platforms would go beyond providing static information to actively engage users in the learning process, helping them build the skills and confidence needed to navigate the legal system. For incarcerated individuals, PLE programmes could be designed to support their reintegration into society by focusing on practical legal issues they are likely to face upon release. These programmes might include lessons on securing housing, understanding employment law and accessing social services. By equipping inmates with the legal knowledge and skills needed to overcome these challenges, PLE programmes can help reduce recidivism and support successful reintegration.

In each of the above examples, the integration of legal capability and the Capabilities Approach ensures that PLE programmes are not just about imparting legal knowledge but about enabling individuals to use this knowledge to improve their lives and contribute to a more just society. This reimagined approach to PLE recognises the importance of fostering both the knowledge and the capabilities that individuals need to navigate the complexities of the legal system and engage meaningfully in civic life.

Evaluating PLE Programmes: Aims, Challenges and Models

Evaluating PLE programmes is essential for several reasons. First, it provides a mechanism for assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives in achieving their intended outcomes, such as increasing legal literacy, enhancing legal capability and empowering individuals to engage with the legal system. Through systematic evaluation, stakeholders can determine whether the educational content is being

⁶⁷Freda Grealy and others, 'Education, Empowerment and Access to All - Public Legal Education and Massive Open Online Courses at the Law Society of Ireland' (2019) 3 International Journal of Public Legal Education 24.

understood and applied by participants and whether the programme is reaching its target audience effectively. Second, evaluation serves as a tool for continuous improvement. By identifying what works well and what does not, programme designers and educators can refine their approaches, develop more targeted interventions and allocate resources more efficiently. This process is crucial for ensuring that PLE programmes remain relevant, responsive to community needs and capable of adapting to changing legal and social environments. Finally, evaluation is important for accountability and advocacy. Funders, policymakers and the public often require evidence of the impact and value of PLE initiatives. A robust evaluation process can provide this evidence, demonstrating the programme's contributions to legal empowerment and social justice. This, in turn, can help secure ongoing support and funding and inform broader policy decisions regarding the role of PLE in society.

Evaluating the impact of PLE programmes presents several challenges, many of which stem from the complex and multifaceted nature of legal education and its outcomes. One significant difficulty lies in measuring intangible outcomes, such as increased legal confidence, empowerment and changes in behaviour. Unlike traditional education programmes, where success can often be gauged through quantifiable measures like test scores, the outcomes of PLE are more diffuse and harder to capture. Grimes emphasises this challenge, noting that while knowledge acquisition can sometimes be measured, evaluating shifts in attitudes or the application of skills requires more nuanced approaches.⁶⁸ He suggests that mixed-methods evaluations, combining quantitative and qualitative data, may be the most effective way to capture the broad spectrum of PLE impacts. Another challenge is the variability in participants' prior knowledge, cultural backgrounds and learning needs. PLE programmes often serve diverse groups, making it difficult to establish a standardised baseline for evaluation. For example, a participant with prior exposure to legal concepts may progress differently from someone encountering these ideas for the first time. As McQuoid-Mason highlights, tailored approaches to pre- and post-programme assessment are necessary to accommodate this diversity and ensure evaluations are meaningful.⁶⁹

Additionally, the delayed impact of PLE complicates efforts to measure its effectiveness. Participants may not immediately apply the legal knowledge and skills they gain, and the true value of a programme may only become evident months or even years later when faced with a legal challenge. Grimes argues for longitudinal studies to address this issue, though he acknowledges the logistical difficulties involved, including the need for sustained funding and participant retention over time.⁷⁰ Resource constraints also pose a significant barrier, particularly for community-based or volunteer-driven PLE initiatives. Limited funding, time and expertise often restrict the scope and depth of evaluations, leading to gaps in data collection and analysis. McQuoid-Mason suggests that embedding evaluation into the design of PLE programmes from the outset can help mitigate these challenges by ensuring that data collection is systematic and ongoing rather than an afterthought.⁷¹

Despite these challenges, several evaluation models have proven effective in assessing PLE programmes, offering ways to navigate the inherent complexities of measuring impact. One such model is the Logic Model, which maps out the relationship between a programme's resources, activities, outputs and outcomes.⁷² By breaking down the programme into these components, the

⁶⁸Richard Grimes, *Public Legal Education: The Role of Law Schools in Building a More Legally Literate Society* (Routledge, 2021) 132-155.

⁶⁹David McQuoid-Mason, *Street Law and Public Legal Education: A collection of best practices from around the world* (Juta & Co Ltd, 2019) 28-32.

⁷⁰Grimes (n 68) 105-131.

⁷¹David McQuoid-Mason, 'Street Law as a Clinical Programme: The South African Experience with Particular Reference to the University of Kwazulu-Natal' (2008) 17 Griffith Law Review 27.

⁷²Sara Carpenter, "'Modeling" Youth Work: Logic Models, Neoliberalism, and Community Praxis' (2016) 26 International Studies in Sociology of Education 105.

Logic Model provides a structured framework for identifying key metrics of success. For example, a PLE programme in a prison might use the Logic Model to track the number of workshops delivered (outputs), assess increases in participants' legal knowledge (short-term outcomes) and evaluate the long-term impact on recidivism rates (long-term outcomes). While the challenge of measuring intangible outcomes like empowerment persists, the Logic Model allows for a stepwise assessment, where each stage is linked to specific, observable indicators. This clarity helps evaluators focus on both immediate and eventual impacts, even if the latter require longitudinal tracking.

Another effective approach is Participatory Evaluation, which involves stakeholders — such as programme participants, community members and educators — in the evaluation process.⁷³ This model directly addresses challenges like the diversity of participants' backgrounds and the difficulty of measuring intangible outcomes. By engaging participants in co-creating evaluation tools (e.g. surveys or focus groups), the process becomes more inclusive and responsive to the unique experiences and needs of the community. For example, participants in a Street Law project could provide feedback on whether the content resonated with their lived experiences and how it has influenced their confidence in addressing legal issues. This feedback enriches the evaluation process by offering qualitative insights that complement quantitative measures, helping to overcome the gaps in data caused by relying solely on numerical metrics.

Outcomes-Based Evaluation is another valuable model, focusing on the specific changes or benefits that result from the programme.⁷⁴ This approach is particularly useful in addressing the challenge of delayed impact, as it emphasises long-term outcomes such as participants' ability to resolve legal issues, access justice or advocate for their rights. By setting clear, actionable goals at the outset — such as increasing participants' ability to complete legal forms or access legal advice independently — the model allows for targeted tracking of these outcomes over time. For instance, follow-up surveys or interviews conducted months after programme completion can capture delayed effects, offering insights into how participants have applied their learning in real-life scenarios. While resource constraints can make long-term tracking difficult, partnerships with community organisations or leveraging technology (e.g. automated follow-up surveys) can help mitigate these issues.

These three models collectively address some of the challenges inherent in evaluating PLE. While no single model can fully overcome all difficulties, combining elements from multiple frameworks can create a more robust and nuanced evaluation strategy. For example, the Logic Model can provide structure, Participatory Evaluation can ensure inclusivity and Outcomes-Based Evaluation can focus on tangible, long-term impacts. By integrating these approaches, PLE programmes can generate meaningful insights into their effectiveness, demonstrating their value while identifying areas for refinement.

To improve the evaluation of PLE programmes, such programmes should begin with clearly defined goals and objectives that are both specific and measurable. This clarity helps in selecting appropriate evaluation metrics and tools, making it easier to assess the programme's success. Combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods can provide a more comprehensive view of the programme's impact. Surveys, interviews, focus groups and case studies can be used together to capture both statistical trends and in-depth personal experiences. Given that the impact of PLE programmes may emerge over time, longitudinal studies that track participants' progress over months or years can provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of these initiatives. Such studies can help identify sustained changes in legal capability and behaviour. Involving participants in designing

⁷³Cristina Aragon and others, 'Participatory Evaluation: A Useful Tool for Contextualising Cluster Policy?' (2014) 35 *Policy Studies* 1.

⁷⁴Gillian Nisbet and others, 'Interprofessional Learning for Pre-Qualification Health Care Students: An Outcomes-Based Evaluation' (2008) 22 *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 57.

and implementing the evaluation process can ensure that their perspectives are central to the assessment. This engagement can lead to more relevant and accurate measures of the programme's impact and foster a sense of ownership and investment in the outcomes. Digital tools and platforms can streamline the evaluation process, making it easier to collect, analyse and interpret data. Online surveys, mobile apps and data visualisation tools can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of PLE evaluations. To contribute to the broader field of PLE, programmes should share their evaluation findings and lessons learned with other educators, policymakers and stakeholders. This exchange of information can help build a body of knowledge on effective PLE practices and encourage the adoption of successful evaluation models across different contexts.

Ultimately, while evaluating PLE programmes poses certain challenges, adopting effective evaluation frameworks and strategies can significantly enhance the understanding of these initiatives' impact. By focusing on clear objectives, using diverse methodologies and involving participants in the evaluation process, PLE programmes can ensure they are making a meaningful contribution to legal empowerment and social justice.

Conclusion

Throughout this discussion, the transformative potential of the Capabilities Approach in PLE has been underscored, alongside the pivotal role of law schools as hubs for legal empowerment. Law students have emerged as important facilitators of PLE, with programmes like Street Law and other community-based legal education initiatives demonstrating their capacity to bridge the gap between theoretical legal knowledge and its real-world application. By equipping communities with accessible legal knowledge and fostering legal confidence, these students not only enhance the legal literacy of those they serve but also develop critical skills and a deeper sense of social responsibility that are essential for their growth as future legal professionals. This dual impact — on both students and communities — is a compelling testament to the enduring value of embedding PLE within the fabric of legal education.

The discussion has also emphasised the unique position of law schools as central drivers of PLE. As institutions that combine academic expertise, societal credibility and community engagement, law schools are well placed to lead the charge in promoting legal literacy. By engaging actively with communities through partnerships with schools, prisons and other organisations, law schools can expand the reach of PLE, ensuring it addresses the needs of diverse populations. This reinforces the notion that legal education should not be confined to classrooms or courtrooms but must extend into the broader society, fulfilling a civic mission to empower individuals to navigate the complexities of the legal system.

The integration of the Capabilities Approach offers a useful opportunity to enhance the impact of PLE by shifting the focus from merely delivering legal knowledge to fostering the capabilities that enable individuals to engage effectively with the law. This learner-centred, participatory model not only builds confidence and legal literacy but also aligns with broader goals of social justice and empowerment. By tailoring programmes to meet the specific needs of underserved or vulnerable groups, such as immigrants, youth and prisoners, PLE can play a transformative role in addressing inequities and fostering greater access to justice.

The importance of evaluating and refining PLE programmes has also been highlighted as crucial to their long-term success. Challenges such as measuring intangible outcomes, accounting for diverse participant needs and tracking delayed impacts require robust, evidence-based evaluation frameworks. Models such as the Logic Model, Participatory Evaluation and Outcomes-Based Evaluation offer promising pathways for assessing the effectiveness of PLE initiatives while ensuring

that programmes remain responsive, inclusive and impactful. Such evaluations are essential not only for demonstrating the value of PLE but also for identifying best practices, guiding improvements and securing the resources needed to sustain these efforts.

Moving forward, law schools must deepen their commitment to PLE, recognising it as a core pillar of legal education and a vital mechanism for societal empowerment. This involves integrating PLE programmes into curricula, encouraging student participation and fostering partnerships with communities to deliver inclusive and accessible legal education. Law schools are uniquely positioned to act as catalysts for legal empowerment, ensuring that legal knowledge is not an exclusive privilege but a widely shared resource that enables individuals to advocate for their rights and navigate legal systems with confidence.

To sustain and expand PLE, there is a pressing need for further research. Future studies should investigate the long-term impacts of PLE on participants and communities, exploring how enhanced legal literacy translates into meaningful legal empowerment and broader social change. Research should also focus on identifying the most effective methodologies for delivering PLE to diverse audiences and examine the role of technology in broadening access to legal education. As digital tools and platforms become increasingly integral to education, exploring their potential to deliver innovative, interactive and tailored PLE programmes will be essential.

In terms of programme development, law schools should consider expanding their PLE offerings to address emerging legal challenges and reach underrepresented audiences. Specialised programmes targeting contemporary issues like digital privacy, environmental law or human rights could equip communities with the knowledge needed to navigate complex modern challenges. Additionally, interdisciplinary PLE initiatives that integrate legal education with fields such as public health, education or social work could offer holistic solutions to the complicated issues individuals face in their daily lives.

Ultimately, the future of PLE is both bright and deeply interconnected with the efforts of law schools to embrace their civic role as champions of legal literacy. By committing to sustained innovation, rigorous evaluation and inclusive practices, law schools can help build a more informed, empowered and just society. This vision is not only achievable but essential in ensuring that the law serves as a tool for empowerment, equality and social progress.