

Developing Community Networks for Public Legal Education
Interim Project Report
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OVERVIEW

My academic fellowship has progressed well so far. As I describe below, significant progress has been made on all aspects of my original proposal. There have been some modifications that I anticipate will result in a more focused module and a better experience for students.

The module was approved by the Undergraduate Committee of the Law School and will run in 2018/2019, assuming that it recruits a minimum of ten students. The Law School has been especially supportive by allowing considerable flexibility in the delivery of the module, recognising that its organisation may shift to reflect the needs of our community partners. After discussions with the UG Committee, it was also decided to cap the module at 18 students for the first year, while we establish a working model for the clinical portion of the module.

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Central England Law Centre, Coventry

Part of my Academic Fellowship proposal included a partial teaching buy out in Term 2 of this academic year. This time has allowed me to focus on the development of the module. In particular, I have been able to develop close working relationship with Central England Law Centre in Coventry. In the first instance, this has involved me supporting them to redevelop the curriculum for their Syrian Integration Project, through which they deliver public legal education to newly resettled Syrian refugees in Coventry. This has had several benefits for the development of the new module. I have been able to demonstrate and share the specific methods of designing and teaching public legal education that I have developed in my own work and that will form the basis of the module. My partners at Central England Law Centre have acknowledged the value of these methods and in turn the value of the new module and the work that our students will do in Coventry. More generally, this has allowed me to establish the necessary trust and familiarity that will make for a constructive working relationship, and that students will ultimately benefit from.

More specifically, Central England Law Centre has also agreed to facilitate placements with local community organisations for our students on the Public Legal Education module. My original plan for the module did not necessarily depend on having this level of support from a local organisation, but it is undoubtedly a great benefit to both the students and the module as a whole. This means that students will be able gain better knowledge and familiarity with a specific organisation, instead of providing generalised support to a variety of groups, which will most likely make their contributions more meaningful and effective. It also means that we have the explicit endorsement of a trusted local law centre, which will make organisations more readily willing to participate in the module.

Our plan going forward is to wait to see how many students have signed up for the module, and then to approach as many organisations as needed based on the number of students (it is anticipated that the students will work in twos or threes at their placements). These

organisations will then be invited to an informal meeting where we discuss the parameters of the module, and how best to meet the needs of the organisations alongside the learning outcomes of the module. I will then follow up with each organisation with a needs assessment (below).

Needs Assessment

The needs assessment was planned to begin in January 2018. With the support of a particularly well-informed research assistant, we have identified local organisations that might be good partners for the module. We have also begun to form a picture of how access to legal services has changed in Coventry since the passage of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO; this is the act that significantly ‘cut’ legal aid). This information is important for structuring the clinical portion of the module and will allow us to train students with locally-specific information about available services.

The interview portion of the needs assessment has been postponed to June 2018-August 2018, in line with the observations noted above. This is more strategic than my original plan and allows us to approach organisations that have already committed to participating in the module. This means that the information and narratives we collect will be directly relevant to students on the module. It also means that we are not approaching organisations that we would be unable to provide with student placements. This has seemed an important precaution in that we are not promising more than we can deliver or raising expectations that we can’t meet.

In December 2017 I applied for ethics approval to undertake the needs assessments. This was to be approved by chair’s action pending confirmation of a few details. I put this aside as plans appeared to be shifting, but I will reopen the application before commencing the needs assessment. However, I would note that there is some ambiguity about the status of research for teaching purposes that might be good to discuss with IATL.

Training

I have signed up for two trainings. One is a foundation in Housing Law and Homelessness provided over four days by Shelter (April and September 2018); I have completed the first half of this training. The other is Benefits for Non-benefits Advisors provided by the Child Poverty Action Group (July 2018). I have chosen these trainings to help solidify my own knowledge and to observe the methods that practitioners use to organise these complex areas for general training purposes.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Ethics

As part of developing the curriculum for the Public Legal Education module, a question arose early on about ethics: what ethical frameworks are there for student-community engagement? How would students be prepared to work with potentially vulnerable communities? I was unable to find a general framework at Warwick that would govern these questions on an institutional level, so I decided we should make our own. Up to now, this has entailed tasking a research assistant with identifying best practice from other modules around the country, as well as from community-based social justice education and training. The research has been

completed and will feed into an ethics statement. I anticipate that this ethics statement will be reviewed annually by each new group of students and may be subject to amendment based on our experiences. It is also hoped that this could be useful to others who are developing community-based modules.

In addition, on the theme of ethics, Law for Life: the Foundation for Public Legal Education, who is consulting as part of this fellowship, is pursuing statements from the Law Society and the Bar Standards Board on the status of public legal education—that it is distinct from the provision of legal advice and that it is not an insurable activity. This would be helpful to have for the module, and also contributes to the public legal education field as a whole by providing some clarity on this relatively undefined, but growing field in the legal sector.

Curriculum Planning

Law for Life has been reviewing my draft curriculum and we will meet in early June 2018 to finalise it. The Law School has also agreed to fund the module initially at £1000. A student research assistant has also provided support with gathering resources on critical pedagogy to inform the curriculum design—both in terms of how the curriculum itself is organised and how we train students to use the methods of critical pedagogy in their own work. This has been useful for gaining an overview of how critical pedagogy has been used in legal education elsewhere, and how this work can be developed for the purposes of the module.

PLE in the Community Workshop

This workshop has been rescheduled for early October 2018. It will involve the students who are taking the module, the organisations who will offer them placements, Central England Law Centre, and potentially other interested or relevant groups. I will facilitate the workshop with the support of Law for Life. The purpose of this workshop has changed slightly from the initial proposal. Instead of being a general conversation about public legal education in the local community, it will be more directly tied to the module. It will offer the opportunity for students on the module to meet the organisations they will work with and learn first-hand about their needs. It will also support organisations to think about the potential place of public legal education in their communities, in anticipation of working with our students. Many of these organisations will not have done much formal public legal education previously, so it is hoped that the workshop will help everyone involved to imagine possibilities that may not be readily apparent.

BUDGET

The budget has shifted slightly (with agreement from Caroline Gibson) primarily to account for the fact that Law for Life now charges VAT and to accommodate a slightly higher training budget. The workshop in October 2018 will be more modest than the PLE in the Community workshop I originally proposed, but this seems to fit in line with making the overall intervention more focused.