



## **STUDENTS AS PARTNERS: REPORT ON NATIONAL LAW STUDENT FORUM 2013**

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Late on Tuesday 18 June I found myself following the tram lines through a new and unknown city to Nottingham Trent University. I was immediately welcomed by staff and guided to a group of excitable students from a variety of universities across the country. After introductions, coffee and a thorough examination of the freebies, we arranged ourselves in a lecture room ready to begin the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual National Law Student Forum.

The NLSF is an annual conference run by the Higher Education Academy UK Centre for Legal Education. The aim of the forum is to develop and improve the running of law schools by holding lectures and discussions on topical issues for students to then report back to their universities. The theme this year was 'students as partners' in different aspects of law, and the lectures were provided by a number of law teachers and sponsors of the event such as LexisNexis and Oxford University Press. My purpose in attending the event was to absorb new ideas and information for Plymouth Law School to perhaps incorporate into the existing 'students as partners' ethic that the Plymouth University promotes. The lectures sparked interesting conversation and debate on some of the problems faced in legal education, and we were encouraged to share the methods of good practice from our universities with the view of helping others and improving general standards.

The conference panned out over two days and included a drinks reception and an annual dinner. Given the bright weather, an impressive barbeque was put on and provided us with a chance to socialise with the other students and guests. Talking with different professionals made it clear how far the legal education system has come over the last decade, and it was motivating to realise that I might be a part of that. The evening also confirmed to me that it is possible to maintain a respectable persona and still sample all of the available puddings!

The conference itself covered a diverse range of topics but some lectures particularly stood out to me as the most interesting and relevant to Plymouth. One greatly discussed area was 'students as partners in research'. The lecture on this area established the great importance of students having practice in genuine new legal research as opposed to researching law as part of assessed work. The discussions began with highlighting the long recognised benefits of real research for students. These included providing a deeper knowledge of legal issues, contextualisation of studies, preparation for the working world, not to mention the great sense of self-achievement. It was discussed in the forum that having a student involved in research is also beneficial to an academic as a student can provide an uninitiated mind, free time for researching, and the possibility that the research work may be continued into the future.

One of the main problems discussed with this type of partnership was the difficulty in motivating students to participate in non-curricular and time consuming activities. One solution to this potential problem was provided by the University of Lancashire Representative who explained that their university pays students to participate in research projects to which they must apply for the very limited spaces. Having the paid work element reportedly makes the project scheme notably popular. A further solution to attract students may be to ensure that the research projects are absolutely current and relevant to student interests. For example, Bradford University has a partially student run research project into community police work. I was proud to report in this session that Plymouth Law School has several projects run through the Law Clinic that are current and relevant, and which involve real legal research. For example, students at Plymouth have the opportunity to work alongside the South West Employment Rights Centre, the Citizens Advice Bureau and with the Red Cross in refugee work. Other student delegates were particularly interested to hear about the 'Innocence Project' in Plymouth. This project allows students to work with the charity Innocence UK in assisting victims of miscarriages of justice. The general consensus at the conference was that there is a need to further incorporate new legal research into law schools and create something of a 'research culture' by developing more projects. It was also acknowledged that where students and staff are both willing, effective partnership can take place but the levels of interest could be increased by further promotion of the idea to motivate students.

A second interesting area that stood out to me through the conference was the need to develop employability skills related to the legal profession. A lecture given by a representative of Lexis Nexis highlighted the importance of the foreseeable move away from the traditional solicitor/barrister route towards the concept of working for an Alternative

Business Structure. This lecture caused some amount of concern amongst the students, many of whom are planning to follow the traditional route. However, some of the other academics were quick to assure the disgruntled students that this was not a cause to abandon career paths, only to be prepared for a range of potential outcomes.

With this pretext, the topic was raised that law schools may potentially need greater focus on developing skills for the workplace. There was particular positive interest from several university representatives in the fact that Plymouth has a compulsory module that focuses on developing useful skills. It was agreed that universities which include legal skills on their programme must ensure they are appropriately proportionate to the regular legal studies that the students are expecting. One student representative explained that their university has a session in which the students are provided with a legal problem and no pre-explanation as to which area of law it is dealing with. Other students discussed how they are usually provided with some guidance as to the area of law when given a problem question by a tutor. It was agreed that in learning through the first method, in which they have to identify the area of law themselves, they would possibly be gaining more effective preparation for the workplace. Generally it was felt that given the unpredictable future of the field, the correct approach to all law degrees ought to be to develop general employability skills, as well as those strictly relevant to the traditional route, in a way that can be directly applied.

Another prominent theme during the conference was the importance of social media for creating a virtual profile in building a career. Conference members were actively encouraged to post on Facebook and tweet about the event. This was both for the benefit of raising awareness of the forum and also for personal gain in showing an active interest in the legal profession and its system of education. A talk entitled 'students as virtual partners' broadly reported on ways in which students may enhance their employability by creating professional social media profiles. The talk explained the importance of etiquette in respect of using appropriate language and topics, and the benefits of having a strategy for your profile regarding who and what you choose to engage with. Furthermore, the speaker also recommended particular people and pages within legal education that might be beneficial to follow on Twitter as a starting point. These included the twitter pages for 'LegalEd', 'The Higher Education Academy' and 'The Society of Legal Scholars'. It was also stressed that following the twitter pages of the lecturers and professors who were attending the conference could be useful in building contacts and keeping up to date with relevant information which further demonstrated the applicability of students as partners in a range of contexts.

A final key point of interest from the conference was the lecture 'students as partners in an online pilot'. This was given by a representative of Oxford University Press about the introduction of a potential new tool for students. In the lecture it was openly discussed among student and professional guests that with the current development of technology, transporting several large heavy textbooks can be a nuisance for staff and students. The statistic that 85% of students already use some kind of device to read their course materials came as no surprise to most members of the conference. OUP have considered this issue and consequently developed the pilot of 'Law Trove' which is an online platform holding many of the essential reading materials that are required for studying law. The Law Trove would allow students to search, download, read, annotate and highlight texts from their different subject areas online. As could have been predicted, there was a very positive response from the student audience in the lecture. On the theme of using students as partners, OUP had the request that the students attending the lecture participate in the trial use of the new pilot programme. The student guests will be given access to the Law Trove pilot for one year to use in conjunction with their studies after which they will report their experience back to OUP, along with any recommendations. This involvement of student test-subjects for a potentially new base of legal sources demonstrates an excellent illustration of students as partners, not only can the OUP benefit from very suitable critics, but I am able to access an area of law all year for free! The Law Trove is something I look forwards to testing out as it might be the future source of educational materials for students.

Many other conference sessions discussed matters of general interest to law students, such as the skill of giving a good presentation, the consideration of ethics in law and also advocacy skills. The sessions were useful, interesting and again incited thought about the gamut of transferable skills that studying law provides. In relation to Plymouth Law School, one of the first points I feel was most relevant is the continuation of projects in the Law Clinic that allow students to experience genuine legal research and application. However, the NSLF made clear that ensuring that students are well informed on the available projects is essential as well as providing information to encourage. A second important point that the conference raised was to make sure that professional legal skills, covering a broader focus than the traditional solicitor/barrister roles, continue to be developed and provided in a way that prepares students for a changing future. Thirdly, I feel that really encouraging students to develop their online professional profiles via social media and to be proactive in creating networking strategies is something that Plymouth Law School could take on board. The forum made clear that social media is a constantly growing source that all professions are relying upon and this practice will only continue to develop. Lastly, I think that it is essential that students continue to be involved in the decision making process that involves the

content, method and sources of their education and that this is perhaps something which Plymouth University as a whole could factor into their 'Students as Partners' ethos.

Overall the NLSF covered a wide variety of subjects integral to being a law student and part of a law school. In bringing students and academics together, the conference itself demonstrates the effectiveness of student involvement in developing legal education. Following the thought provoking discussions and suggestions made, I will be interested to see what the NSLF 2013 sets in motion and what role it might play in changing important features of legal education.