

## How can law students influence governmental decisions and contribute to law reform?

*By Liz Hardie*

*Open Justice Policy Clinic Co-ordinator*

*Open University Teaching Director (Law School) and Lecturer (Open Justice Centre)*

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Learning about what the law is and how to apply it to fictional scenarios is the bread and butter of a law degree. Law students spend many hours reading about the law, learning how to read statutes and cases and honing their skill in applying the law to a set of facts through legal problem questions. They may get the opportunity to put what they have learned into practice through voluntary legal work, by advising and supporting members of the public in a law clinic or through national charities such as the Citizens Advice or Support Through Court. The Open Justice Centre provides all of these opportunities, but in autumn 2019 it challenged some of our students to consider an alternative approach to pro bono work and use their skills to influence national debate about law reform.

A law degree challenges students to understand how the law affects society and to identify where the law fails to ensure fairness and justice. OU law students used these skills in the Open Justice Policy Clinic to provide legal and policy consultancy to a charity under the supervision of legal academics. Their work will be used to contribute to the debate in Scotland on changing the law relating to female genital mutilation (FGM) and advocate for stronger education and protection for victims of FGM.

### What is policy and advocacy work?

Many charities, non-governmental organisations and third sector organisations seek to influence governmental decisions, policies and laws for the benefit of the people they work with. Following research into the law and how it impacts on their clients, they suggest relevant, constructive and realistic policy options to decision makers and the wider public.

Students working in the Policy Clinic research an area of law on behalf of a charity or other organisation to provide analysis and evidence to influence policy and initiate law reform. As the students who have just completed their work in the Policy Clinic explained: "It has come to our attention that policy alone cannot administer social justice without the right organisations who are well informed".

### How does the Open Justice Policy Clinic work?

In the Policy Clinic students are given a brief from a charity or organisation to research and analyse a specific area of law. Students carry out desk-based research to identify any issues or concerns in the way in which that law operates and to highlight evidence relating to the impact of the law on the public. They analyse the evidence they have found to produce a report for the charity which can be used to inform their policy and advocacy work.

Students working in the Policy Clinic are supported by two academics, one with experience of policy and advocacy work in the charitable sector and one with experience of policy and advocacy work in the public sector. The students are therefore uniquely placed to gain experience from those working in a wide range of different policy arenas.

As with all Open Justice projects, our students live in all four nations of the UK and abroad and so they work and collaborate virtually on the research, analysis and report writing using a range of technological tools to support them.

## What was the project on FGM?

In 2019/20 three law students, Joseph Uzamere, Silbene Lott and Bob Jolly, worked with [JustRight Scotland](#), a human rights charity. JustRight Scotland are experienced in working with survivors of female genital mutilation (FGM) and women at risk of FGM, and engage in policy work on behalf of these service user groups, to improve protection and support.

In 2019, the Scottish Parliament brought forward the FGM Protection (Scotland) Bill, to strengthen and improve protection for women at risk of FGM in Scotland. The bill became law in March 2020 in Scotland. JustRight Scotland gave written and oral evidence to the Scottish Parliament in respect of the draft legislation and worked with legislators and Scottish civil society organisations during the passage of the bill. The Policy Clinic was asked to produce a report on the draft bill and to provide policy recommendations to strengthen and improve protection in Scotland for victims of FGM.

## The impact of the work of the Policy Clinic

Joseph, Silbene and Bob produced a report for JustRight Scotland which concluded that enforcement through prosecution is one route to protect victims of FGM, but the evidence suggests that on its own it will not be effective, as successful prosecution relies on reporting. Their report stressed the vital role education plays in protecting victims and suggested the Scottish government introduce a comprehensive educational programme including education targeted at professionals alongside grass roots initiatives and school-based initiatives. The report also stressed the importance of support for victims, so they receive appropriate financial, emotional and social support.

To answer the question posed at the start of this blog, these students have the satisfaction of knowing that their work will influence governmental decisions and contribute to law reform. The evidence and analysis in their report will be used by JustRight Scotland in their continued policy and advocacy work with the Scottish government around FGM issues.

After completing the report Silbene reflected that “in developing my pro bono work I have come to a realisation that you don’t need to belong to a major, big or wealthy company to contribute with pro bono and charity work. We can all make a difference however small.” Joseph felt that his work in the Policy Clinic had affected his view of pro bono work and the law: “Pro bono does not only instil a sense of public-spiritedness and compassion among the student community, of the countless benefits I have derived from the Open Justice activity so far is that it has mostly humanised the law for me”. And the final word goes to our third student Bob, who said “Pro-bono shows you, that whatever you do, whoever you are, you can help others, with a little of your time on a daily basis, you can make a difference in someone's life and that is priceless. This module showed me within the context, that education and knowledge are the bridges that can connect us as one”. For further information from the students involved in the project, please read [these reflections](#).

We are planning future projects for the Policy Clinic in the next year. If you are an OU law student wanting to become involved in the Policy Clinic, a charity or non-governmental organisation who would like to propose a brief for our students, or have general questions about the Policy Clinic please contact me (Liz Hardie) at [open-justice@open.ac.uk](mailto:open-justice@open.ac.uk). I would be happy to discuss the work of the Policy Clinic with you.