

50 Years of The OU, 3 years of Open Justice

Hugh McFaul, founding member of the Open Justice Centre, looks back at the progress it has made in the last three years.

2016 brings back mixed feelings for many, as their thoughts often turn to the Brexit Referendum or the election of Donald J Trump as president of the United States. However, for staff and students at the OU, it has at least one unequivocally positive association, as it marks the inception of the Open University Law School's Open Justice Centre.

The aim of the Centre was to further the social justice mission of The Open University by empowering some of our 6000 undergraduate law students to provide a range of free legal services to the public. Our objective was to develop a law module to provide a framework for students to gain the necessary skills and supervision to deliver these projects. W360: Justice in Action was launched in October 2017 and since then over 320 law students have taken part in public facing legal projects all across the UK.

Particular highlights have included our creative and innovative use of technology. We developed the Open Justice Law Clinic, providing free, professional-standard, fully insured legal advice to the public using. We have completed 51 cases and signposted a further 200, which is the equivalent of £84,806.40 worth of professional legal work, based on commercial rates.

The experience I have had undertaking the Open Justice activities, and in particular the Legal Advice Clinic, has been some of the most rewarding of any other during my law degree and I am hoping that I can continue to be involved after I graduate. Working on live cases has given me the opportunity not only to make a practical difference to people's lives, but also to test my legal knowledge and skills. (Student)

The free service is comprehensive and invaluable in guiding people towards understanding a stressful legal situation when they do not have the financial means to pay for advice. (Client)

We have also developed another innovative online collaboration with the Freedom Law Clinic. FLC is a not-for-profit company providing pro bono research and advice on appeals for people who have been convicted of very serious criminal offences but who are maintaining their innocence. Over 40 OU students have taken part, researching grounds for criminal appeals.

The whole process of working with FLC felt like a professional collaboration rather than an academic exercise so this was a great motivator and certainly helped me to feel like I was contributing to a case and a client, rather than being treated as a student helper.

Another important aspect of our work is our collaboration with national organisations. A good example of this is our support for the important work of the St.Giles Trust

which works to support ex-offenders. We have developed a strong partnership with the St Giles Trust to develop OU student-led prison-based projects. We have run projects with over 70 students with serving prisoners in nine prisons across England and Wales. Projects consist of between three and six half-day visits over a three-month period, and have included legal research and guidance projects in collaboration with prison-based peer advisors, and an innovative prison radio project.

I didn't anticipate, the effect that this journey that I was about to embark upon would have upon my life as both a law student and a person. My fellow students, The Open University tutor, the inmates who we worked with and the staff at the prison, made this experience one that I will never forget, and the experience is a must for any law student. (Student)

The Open Justice students have given our Peer Advisors in the prisons a real opportunity to develop, learn and become more professional but more than anything they have provided a forum where students and prisoners can meet as equals, learn from each other and discuss a whole range of relevant issues. The sessions I have observed have been the liveliest and most stimulating I have ever witnessed inside a prison. (St. Giles)

Our partnership work with the Personal Support Unit has also been highly successful. PSU projects are court based and involve our students giving one-to-one support to litigants in person at courts in London, Manchester, Exeter, Birmingham and Sheffield.

What have I gained from this experience as a law student? The concept of supporting clients through legal proceedings has never seemed less intimidating than now. The fascinating experience of seeing how judges interact with counsel in hearings cannot be substituted by reading about it in a textbook. (Student)

The OU's 50th birthday celebrations have provided opportunities to reflect on how open access education can transform lives, and looking back at the first three years of the Open Justice Centre shows what can be achieved when the talents and hard-won legal knowledge of OU students are put to work in support of social justice projects. We hope to be able to include more of our talented students in a greater variety of Open Justice projects in the coming years, so if you would like to join the conversation of how we can improve and expand, email us at open-justice@open.ac.uk