

Following a law student through a practical pro bono module (Part 1)

Moving into the final year of my law degree at the Open University Law School, I was given the option to choose my final module. W360 Justice in Action is a new, practical module offered by the Open University which started in October 2018. I jumped at the opportunity to put the legal skills that I have obtained to practical use, through supervised pro bono work. The Open Justice Project began its development in 2016 and is managed by the Open Justice Team. It provides access to legal support through an online law clinic and provides Public Legal Education sessions. It also innovatively provides students with a more engaging method of learning, by allowing them to both consolidate and utilize their legal knowledge and provide an avenue to obtain useful practical skills. Which will arguably shape better graduates with more practical legal skills right from graduation.

Flash forward to today and the second presentation of W360 is well underway. Being overly keen, I signed up for as many projects as I could while ensuring I could manage the load and not burn out. The module is fantastically well designed, it takes you on a journey of development and self-discovery, which you must document and reflect on. Starting with an introduction to pro bono work and why it is important. Followed by an exploration of three key themes social justice, professional identity and legal values and ethics. I have thoroughly enjoyed exploring these topics and was surprised to find that a commitment to pro bono work throughout your career provides countless benefits. Benefits not just for yourself, but towards improving access to justice and changing the face of the legal profession.

After completing the first written assignment of the module, you begin to learn and develop the key practical skills you will need for undertaking the pro bono activities. Particularly, practical legal research, interviewing and advising clients, legal writing, presentation and public speaking skills. The module has provided me with multiple opportunities to test out these key skills in a safe environment, allowing me to be ready to utilize them in the upcoming activities. You are encouraged to engage with your tutor group and interact as much as possible. I have found this to be immensely worthwhile, giving and receiving feedback from peers has not only helped me learn, but has increased my confidence tenfold.

Meanwhile, you are given information about the activities you'll be taking part in and who you will be working with on these projects. This is when I began to get really excited about the weeks ahead. As I mentioned, I opted to take part in as many activities as I could fit into my schedule. As such, I was allocated the Open Justice online law clinic as my 'core' project and will also take part in a school based Streetlaw session, as well as the Open Justice Prison Project. I was provided with detailed and easy to follow guides for each project. The guides set out exactly what the project entails and what is expected of me. I learned the importance of client confidentiality, professionalism, safe guarding, ensuring my wellbeing and understanding relevant policies and procedures.

Giving me, what I can only describe as, the best possible tools to undertake the pro bono activities.

The next step involved meeting my teammates. A key part of the module is working and collaborating with a small team of fellow peers. We were introduced fairly early on and given tools and resources to allow effective communication. Communication is what I class as the most important element of team work! It has been fantastic to begin building relationships with my teammates and I am looking forward to seeing these development over the coming months. I have thoroughly enjoyed meeting so many students as enthusiastic as me. I have found the support of the Open Justice Team and the module tutors in nurturing these relationships invaluable. The level of attention to detail and support is above reproach.

I have one assignment left to do before I begin the activities and I feel that I could not have been put in a better position to undertake them. Having now met with all my teammates and started the ball rolling with preparation for the projects, I am feeling excited, confident and ready to take part. I hope to share my experiences along the way in the hope that others will consider taking part and to show just how wonderful teaching and learning in this way can be for students, teachers and the public at large. Until next time, wish me luck!