York Law School (YLS) has a unique approach to legal education where students take part in an intensive problem-based learning programme. They also have the opportunity to work on real cases under the close supervision of professionally qualified staff. This is part of what we call our ‘clinical’ steam.

Although students can take the Law Clinic as a credit-bearing part of their degree they are also offered the opportunity, in vacation periods, to go abroad to extend their experience, helping other organisations doing legal work, on a free (pro bono) basis.

Here we give an insight into this international dimension. YLS Students, past and present, have travelled all over the world, from Australia to America and from India to Indonesia. With no two placements being quite the same, the experience to be gained is unique as well as challenging and exciting. It also seems to be of great interest to future employers – something regularly mentioned.

This report is based on responses to a questionnaire that was sent to students who have undertaken overseas placements.

Data were collected from a range of students – some have since graduated from the Law School others are still with us. It sets out details of where some of the students went, what they did and what they now think about the experience. We hope that we have presented their views accurately and in an unbiased way so that if you are considering taking part in this work you might know what to expect and be able to prepare to get the most out of it.

Let’s see what they have to say!

“I was offered a job on the back of this!”

International pro bono report 2015
Marissa, 22

Worked with COFTONE: Community Transformation Foundation Network, Uganda for 3 weeks

“Whilst the work I did in Uganda was not working in a law school (it was with a NGO) it was in a legal context and I had to grapple with a very different set of norms. One of the biggest challenges was the almost total lack of legal awareness. In Uganda, most people are simply just not aware of their rights. There also seems to be little enforcement of entitlements and what appears, to my Western eyes at least, to be wide-spread corruption.

Much of my work over the three weeks was helping to set up an advice centre. This included meeting with local Human Rights Commissioners. We also visited the University of Kampala’s legal clinic in order to understand that clinic’s structure and to compare it with how York’s Law Clinic operates.

Whilst I wouldn’t change any part of my experience in Uganda as even the challenges taught me something, there were one or two particularly worrying issues, most of which revolved around how children were treated – in some cases it seemed quite harsh in a disciplinary sense. I am not criticising but it was different to what I am used to.

Looking back I think one of the best ways to help organisations working in difficult circumstances like this is by giving your time and volunteering and may be offering help after you get back.

One of the lighter moments during my trip was my experience of travelling in a taxi. At the start of the journey four of us were seated quite comfortably in the small car. After 10 minutes, two men joined us in the back of the car. Another five minutes down the road a further three men got into the car, another in the back seat, one sat on the lap of my host in the front seat, and the third (to my complete shock) sharing the driver’s seat! It was one of those moments where it was so unbelievable there was nothing I could do but laugh. Thankfully the other passengers saw the funny side too!”

“Embrace the culture and enjoy the experience. It may be the only time in your life you will be able to immerse yourself in a such a completely different world.”

“One of the best ways to help...is by giving your time and volunteering.”
Dominic, 20

Worked for Springvale Monash Legal Service (SMLS), Melbourne, Australia for 3 weeks

Jobs included shadowing in the clinic, meeting people at ‘sister’ clinics and doing his own case work.

Also completed the 10 week clinic module at York

“In terms of similarities, both SMLS and York clinics have much the same structure – students conducting casework, overseen by supervisors.

However, there are quite a few differences. SMLS is a much larger operation. It has more supervisors, and sees many more clients and more quickly, too. SMLS provides drop-in sessions and ‘on-the-day’ face-to-face advice within an hour or two.

One experience that’s stuck with me since I got back was one of the last cases I worked on before I left. A woman had come to SMLS seeking advice... She could only speak very limited English. We spent at least 3 hours, trying to provide legal advice. At the end, she was very tired, quite tear-stricken, but clearly very grateful.

“The trip was ultimately quite expensive, but it’s the best thing I’ve ever done in my life, to date. I can’t think of anything I didn’t enjoy. I would really recommend this type of experience to others. It was amazing!”

11 out of the 13 students who responded to the survey chose the clinic module at York: it provides a useful point of comparison

From what she had told us she clearly owned very little and had debts. None the less she delved into her bags and pulled out some sweets to give us and told us that our parents “must be very proud of us”. It was very touching.

I also had to face difficult clients, too. One woman asked for help and had a long list of questions she wanted answering. After we checked the position with our supervisor we provided the answers but the client was unimpressed and gave us a whole lot more! Our supervisor suspected that she did not like the advice we gave her (even though it was right legally). It was quite difficult maintaining a professional attitude but I think we managed to do that. As someone once said “you can’t please all the people all of the time!”

SMLS is a very effective service. The speed and quality of the advice is fantastic, and the students I met seemed very confident in the skills they’d learnt. They also offer a wider range of legal services, from drop-in advice all the way to representation in court. It was a privilege being able to take part.”
James, 20

Worked for iThought in Delhi, India for 4 weeks

“I did not work directly on client matters; instead I had a research role looking into the legal age of sexual consent from an international perspective. I met with a range of people and organisations in the field of child protection. Although the legal system in India is very similar to ours in the UK the context is so very different from cultural, economic, political, religious and normative points of view. Although child marriage is now unlawful in India it is still commonly practiced especially in rural areas.

On a lighter note one real positive of the trip was getting to eat my favourite food (curry) three times a day! I went out with 3 YLS friends and as well as working together we were able to travel to places every weekend and immerse ourselves in the amazing culture over there. One particular challenge was communicating my life threatening nut allergy to people preparing my food. They assumed initially that I was just an overcautious traveller!

Vikram the leader of iThought is very passionate about child welfare and is a highly influential figure in the region... his attitude to the law is creative and he certainly stretches legal doctrine as far as he can to serve the important aims of the organisation! He is a real problem-solver.

Although I am joining a corporate law firm with little direct human rights implications my experience has reinforced for me the importance of doing pro bono work throughout my career. Interestingly my trip to India caused a great deal of interest in the interviews I have had with law firms. I strongly believe that having such experience is not only rewarding and helpful for all concerned but it shows a future employer the extent of your commitment and initiative.”

“I was awarded a travel bursary from the University for around £400, which covered the cost of my flights.”
Richard, 25

Spent one week each at Brooklyn Law School, New York and South Carolina Law School, University of South Carolina.

Observed the set up of each clinic, how students were taught and shadowed students.

"Clinical work in the US is very different from my experiences at York. Law school in the US is a post-graduate course of study. The students are generally older and more mature... often with considerable life experiences [they] bring a whole different set of knowledge and skills to their work in the clinic. For this reason perhaps, clinic students in the US are allowed to do more than clinic students in the UK, including court representation.

This is a major difference to England, where rights of audience in the courts are limited to qualified lawyers. (English law students do have the right to represent clients in some tribunals and the ‘small-claims’ court.)

The main similarity to England is of course the law itself, which in the US is fundamentally the same, except for the state and federal structure. It was relatively easy for me to observe and participate in student discussions on legal matters (both substantive law as well as procedural elements).

A strength of the US set-up is that the students get a really deep understanding of law and practice in their particular clinic – many of which specialise in one aspects of the law such as juvenile crime or environmental concerns. The main negative... is that the students do not appear to receive what I term enough ‘skills’ training – interviewing techniques, drafting documentation and advocacy skills. My placement has given me an insight into legal practice in different jurisdictions, which is important as eventually I want to work in the international law field."

“You do learn from different experiences, from different perspectives, and from meeting some very interesting people”

Left: outside the Supreme Court In Washington DC
You might find this information useful:

- Average placement length: **3.2 weeks** (range **2–4 weeks**)
- Average placement cost: **£1,700** (range **£1,000–£2,500**)
- Most students finance the visits independently via part-time work, savings, grants and help from parents and friends.
- The cost of the placement is not necessarily related to where in the world you go. Nor is cost always linked to how long you go for. Getting there (flights especially) will most likely be the biggest part of the expense.
- Some students in answering the survey included other, personal, costs in the data returns – for example additional travelling. The actual cost of the placement may be less than suggested above.
- The University’s Centre for Global Programmes provides funding to help with international travel. For further information on funds available and application deadlines visit the Travel Awards webpage at [www.york.ac.uk/study/study-abroad/travel-awards](http://www.york.ac.uk/study/study-abroad/travel-awards)
- The University also offers training and induction sessions before you go on a placement.

Advice

Some tips and tricks to help you with your trip and the pro bono work

“Do it – you won’t regret it! Just don’t expect the work to come to you, you have to go after it.”

“Plan ahead – early flights are cheaper and take advantage of ‘round the world’ tickets.”

“Consider where you want to go and make time for travelling.”

“Set out your expectations with your host.”

“Be sure why you want to do it. When you know why, then it will be easier to organise. Further, make contact with those in your destination early; this will save stress just before arriving.”

“Be ambitious but realistic- I went with ridiculously high expectations of changing the world, but left realising I could perhaps make a small difference in my own way.”

“Don’t be afraid to visit somewhere unknown.”

“Tell everyone – your friends, your contacts and most of all anyone who might give you a job!”

“Put it on your CV!”
So there you have it, from those who have been there and done that!

Pro bono work is hugely beneficial for so many people at home and abroad, including the client who gets a free service and the student who learns from the experience. There is as much if not more to be gained at the University of Life as well as at the University of York!

Finally can we thank all of the host organisations who have, year on year, been willing to take our students? We hope we have been as useful to you as you have certainly been to us. Thanks also must go to the University for funding some of the trips, to the Mums, Dads and others who have done likewise and to the students themselves who always represent the Law School with such enthusiasm and commitment.

If you are interested in this important work and want to know more please contact: Richard Grimes, Director of Clinical Programmes, York Law School, University of York: richard.grimes@york.ac.uk

For more information on international law clinic work also see the Global Alliance for Justice Education’s website: www.gaje.org

Good luck and happy travelling!

This report was researched and prepared by Sarah Gamble. It was edited by Richard Grimes
Our Law School

www.york.ac.uk/law

Beautiful and historic York

International pro bono report 2015