

Measuring the Impact of Clinical Legal Education on Graduate Career Trajectories

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Project Description:

Clinical legal education (CLE) now forms a significant part of the university experience of many students, with over 150 clinics across 72 UK law schools currently registered with LawWorks. CLE performs various functions, including access to justice, training students in practical lawyering skills and building links between law schools, legal professionals and associated networks. Given the increased marketisation of higher education, there is also growing emphasis on using CLE to enhance student employability, and in turn, graduate career trajectories.

However, despite the hopes placed in CLE to enhance employability, and anecdotally a widespread sense that CLE is doing students good, there is surprisingly little research to back it up. Cantatore (2018), and more recently Tam (2020), both observe the gap in the literature around the effects of CLE on graduate careers, with Tam commenting: 'Despite extensive literature on the aims and theories of CLE, sparse empirical research has been done on the attitudes and experiences of students towards CLE.' There is also a dearth of scholarship of a longitudinal nature which explores the impact of CLE on graduate career outcomes. What we currently know tends to be based on student subjectivities which, while not lacking validity per se, would benefit from triangulation with a broader range of evidence of career success and employer perspectives.

It is proposed that the project will mobilise Bourdieu's work on social and cultural capital as a framework with which to explore CLE's potential to go beyond mere skills development to effect transformations which address some of the structural disadvantages faced by students from less privileged backgrounds when seeking graduate work. The central questions of the project might be along the lines of: To what extent can social and cultural capital be developed through clinical legal education? And how might we do that?

The primary methodology for the proposed project should be a legal one. That said, in line with the OU's mission ('open to methods'), we are open to receiving proposals that draw on other disciplinary methodological approaches which complement the legal methodologies chosen. It is anticipated that the research will involve empirical work.

We welcome PhD proposals which develop the ideas in this call.

About the Supervisors:

Dr Andrew Gilbert is a Senior Lecturer in The Open University's Law School. Andrew's work uses insights from Bourdieu to examine ways in which legal education generally, and clinical legal education in particular, can develop social and cultural capital, promote social justice and enhance student employability.

Kara Johnson is Deputy Teaching Director and Lecturer at the Open University Law School. Her research cuts across the disciplines of education and law focusing on how concepts of liminality and transformative education can provide educator-researchers with a better insight into the experiences of part-time, adult learners.

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