**Enhancing and promoting student skills: Pro Bono and CV development**

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**Summary**

This paper discusses how those involved in the administration of pro bono/career activities might maximise the extent to which students recognise the skills gained via such activities, and make use of those skills for the purposes of their future careers. The paper discusses the results of two surveys conducted with pro bono participants within the School of Law at the University of Leeds, highlighting the difficulty respondents seemingly had in recognising the full range of skills gained from their involvement in pro bono work. The paper then moves on to discuss a new Law careers website which is intended in part to assist in embedding the recognition of key employability skills in students.

***Key words:***

Pro bono; employability; skill sets; careers; technology

The School of Law at the University of Leeds, in common with many other Law Schools, has developed a reasonably extensive range of co-curricular pro bono opportunities for its students to engage in. Such activities include a live legal advice clinic <http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/about/legal-advice-clinic.php>); an innocence project (<http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/prospective-students/undergraduates/extra/innocence-project.php>); *Streetlaw* activities; checking contracts for first years signing their first tenancy agreement with a private landlord (in conjunction with Leeds University Union); an annual corporate social responsibility project; and other, more generic, volunteering activities (such as reading in schools, and fundraising for local, national and international charities). The activities have been developed with several aims in mind, including positive engagement with the local community and businesses, increasing students’ understanding of the law, and enhancing the employability of participating students.

The last aim will be the primary focus of this paper, which is split into two sections. Firstly, the results of two surveys conducted with students engaging in a number of pro bono activities will be discussed. These surveys examined which skills students thought they had gained from their involvement with pro bono, and the extent to which they felt they could ‘sell’ those skills to potential employers. The results indicate that students do not necessarily fully appreciate the range of skills they have developed when they are asked to think about them independently. When given prompts they are able to identify a larger number of relevant skills than when they are asked to think independently about which ones they have developed. These results support anecdotal evidence from personal tutors and careers advisers. Careers advisers have reported for example that some students who have been on the Innocence Project have not referred to this experience on their CV, and have had to be prompted to consider how the skills gained might be of value to potential employers. Personal tutors have also reported that students engaging in a variety of pro bono activities have failed to appreciate the value of that experience to potential employers.

The second part of the paper will address one method of enhancing students’ recognition of such skills. Using template CVs for law-related professional paths, a new School of Law website will allow students interested in those paths to identify which opportunities they could avail themselves of in order to further develop particular key skills. This will assist those students who might not currently be involved with pro bono activities (or indeed other developmental opportunities offered by both the School and wider University), to recognise the value of such activities to their future career development. However, it is anticipated that it will also be of use to those students already engaged in pro bono activities who perhaps need a further ‘push’ to either develop key skills, or to recognise those skills which their pro bono projects have actually allowed them to develop.

**Pro bono activity surveys**

In order to investigate the extent to which students do recognise the skills gained from their involvement with pro bono activities, two remote, electronic surveys were conducted with students taking part in a range of pro bono activities. The first ‘general pro bono survey’ was conducted in Spring 2010 and targeted students taking part in one or more of the following pro bono activities in any academic year during their time at Leeds:

* Streetlaw: students, working in groups, prepare and present about particular legal issues to local schools and community organisations
* *Pathways to Law* Ambassador programme (<http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/prospective-students/pathways-law/>): students assist with a variety of activities on this national widening participation project, including helping with moots, giving participants presentation tips, and providing general support to the participants.
* E-Mentoring (with the Brightside Trust): students mentor young people interested in studying Law through a website
* Mentoring (through Education Leeds): students mentor Law students from local schools in person.
* Corporate Social Responsibility Scheme: students work alongside, and in some cases lead, fellow students and members of the legal/corporate community on a time-limited community task
* Reading in the community: students assist young pupils with their reading
* Bar Pro Bono Unit Fundraising Challenge: as part of this national scheme students were to fundraise as much as possible, in competition with other Law Schools, for the Bar Pro Bono Unit
* Student Union Advice Centre - Contract Checking: students explain what the terms of a tenancy agreement mean to students approaching the Student Union Advice Centre, and check that they understand the commitment they are making in signing it.

The second survey was targeted at students taking part in the University of Leeds Innocence Project (UoLIP) and was conducted at the mid-way point of the project in December 2010. The UoLIP has been in operation since 2005. Students working within teams of up to six investigate possible miscarriages of justice, with the ultimate aim of making a referral to the Criminal Cases Review Commission on behalf of a client.[[1]](#footnote-1) Whilst the pedagogical value of such projects has arguably been explored to a lesser extent that other clinical pro bono work, such projects are recognised as having value to participants. Findley for example argued that:

“…innocence projects, even more so than many other clinical programs, involve students in extensive fact investigation. They offer a learning model that is quite different than the traditional law school focus on appellate opinions, in which the facts are presented as a given or even insignificant. At the same time, innocence projects provide a valuable opportunity to examine the criminal justice system from the back end, by deconstructing cases that have already been tried and appealed, and in which the system failed.” (2006:1105).

He suggests that innocence projects offer a unique opportunity within a legal educational context for students to develop an appreciation of, for example, the importance of facts and investigation; the need to be thorough, whilst retaining some scepticism; and the ethics involved with a lawyer’s role (2006: 1111-1135). In the UK context, Naughton and Price (2006) have argued that innocence projects

“exist not only as a resource for student education about the ills of the criminal justice system but also provide opportunities for researching the various aspects of the problem and the obstacles that innocent victims of wrongful conviction or imprisonment, their families and friends, and even wider society, continue to experience. The lessons learned in undertaking innocence project cases not only educate our students but can also be fed back into the criminal justice system to effect legal reforms that will hopefully reduce the possibility of wrongful convictions in the future.”

The question is: to what extent do participants themselves recognise these opportunities, and the extent to which they themselves have developed such skills?

***First survey: General pro bono survey***

Students engaged in one or more of the activities listed earlier were asked first asked an ‘open’ question: “Which skills do you think you have gained from being involved with pro bono activities? Please list as many as you think are applicable.” Once this question had been answered the respondents clicked on a link to another page displaying a ‘closed’ question, which presented them with a list of possible skills they might have gained from their involvement in those pro bono activities (including, for example, team work skills, time management skills, research skills, a sense of how to conduct oneself professionally, and verbal and written communication skills). Respondents were asked to tick all of those which were developed during their time working on pro bono activities. This list of skills was partly based on McCartney’s (2006) suggested learning outcomes of Innocence Projects, and also reflect the apparent value of learning ‘in context’, as espoused by, for example, Grimes (2008) and Terenzini (1999:37):

“Learning occurs best when it is ‘situated’, when the challenge encountered has real meaning in a real context. Learning is more likely when students encounter problems they want to solve, problems that are not mere exercises in a classroom or for a homework assignment, devoid of any meaningful context.”

In answering the first ‘open’ question the twenty one respondents reported gaining a range of skills, including group working skills, oral communication skills, the ability to lead others, time management skills, and presentation skills. The skills respondents reported developing are in line with those often highlighted as of particular importance to employers (see e.g. the CBI 2009). Crucially, these activities also appear to be assisting in the development of skills which research has shown students perceive themselves as lacking, including time management, task juggling, and verbal communication (Leon, 2002)

However, respondents listed between one and seven skills in response to the first ‘open’ question, and between four and twelve in response to the ‘closed’ list of skills. Every single respondent underestimated the number of skills gained from their involvement in pro bono activities: respondents typically listed an extra six skills in response to the ‘closed’ question, with some listing up to nine more.

Almost all of the respondents (nineteen of the twenty one polled), reported that they could sell the skills gained in an effective manner to employers – yet the results would indicate that, when doing so, they are not necessarily aware of the full range of skills they have developed.

***Second survey: Innocence Project survey***

As a result of the first, general pro bono survey, the training for the UoLIP was amended to include an enhanced segment on skills development. Students were told about the skills participants had reported gaining the previous year, and a skills chart was distributed. This listed key skills the students might be expected to develop on the project, and the students were encouraged to refer back to the chart throughout their time on the project. Specific reference was made to the potential use for the chart during telephone interviews: if the students had noted down examples of when they had adapted to a difficult situation for example, then they could have the chart in front of them during such interviews and have a ‘readymade’ answer for an interviewer requesting an example of when they had utilised such a skill. Furthermore, ad hoc reference was made during the weekly group meetings to how students could develop skills from their experiences on the project. For example, if complaints were raised about group members not ‘pulling their weight’, students were asked to consider how they might resolve the problem, and whether such problem-solving skills might be of value to employers.

There were thirteen respondents to the UoLIP survey. Respondents listed between two and ten skills in response to the ‘open’ question (‘Which skills do you think you have gained from being involved with the UoLIP this year? Please be as detailed as possible’), including leadership skills, teamwork skills, creative thinking skills, and self-motivation and legal research skills. However, once again every single respondent underestimated the number of skills gained from their involvement, with respondents listing between ten and twenty skills in response to the ‘closed’ question (‘Which of these skills/characteristics do you think you have developed on the UoLIP thus far this year?’). On average, respondents listed an extra eleven skills which had been developed to a ‘great extent’ or to ‘some extent’ on the UoLIP.

Interestingly, the respondent who demonstrated the smallest disparity in answering the two questions (with only three extra skills listed in response to the ‘closed’ question), copied and pasted part of his/her CV into the ‘open’ question box. This demonstrated that this particular student had already given thought to their involvement with UoLIP for careers purposes, and had already begun making use of it for those purposes. This is not to say that the other students have not done so – without asking, there is no way of knowing whether they have all developed CVs – but it is worth noting that such directed thought might be linked to a greater appreciation of the skills developed.

**Moving forward**

It would be appear then that, in the case of both UoLIP and 'general' pro bono students, participants are not recognising the skills gained in full. This is the case even where training which outlines those skills has been provided, and where students have been asked to continually reflect upon the skills gained. It should be noted that those responding to the second survey in particular often gave very detailed answers to some of the questions, and were able to identify very clearly what they liked most/least about the project. For example:

“The academic course, by way of design, does not allow you to get to know what is actually required ‘on the shop floor’…The Innocence Project allows us to get a practical feel for life as a practising lawyer”

“I am enjoying putting my legal knowledge to practical use and actually interacting with people in the real world, and being able to make decisions.”

“I have been filling in forms for law firms recently, and have found that the majority of key skills needed by any lawyer can be demonstrated through working on the Innocence Project. – time management, attention to detail, teamwork, explaining the law in layman’s terms etc”

“Actually being involved in law instead of just studying it is really interesting. It’s good to know we’re helping people; even if they’re not innocent at least we can help explain to them why they have been convicted and given them some peace of mind.”

Such statements suggest the students are putting thought into how the project is assisting them in developing experiences/skills which might be of use to employers (and indeed, that they do value the opportunity to put their more abstract learning to practical use, as suggested by Terenzini (1999) and Grimes(2008)), but the concern is that they do not appear to be fully appreciating the range of skills they have had the opportunity to develop. Whilst the results might be indicative of students needing more time to think about the skills gained when answering the survey, this does not bode well if, for example, they were asked to explain how their pro bono work has benefited them in an interview question (when they would be under pressure to think on their feet). It could also be a reflection of the fact that students are being asked to detail skills without reference to a job description, or a request to detail a time when they have to display certain skills.

We would therefore advocate combining project-specific training (and reminders!) concerning the recognition and development of such skills with more general support systems. ‘Book ending’ pro bono opportunities with training is clearly of some value, but the wider School (and University) have a role to play in ensuring that once that training is undertaken the lessons are not lost in a mass of paperwork.

One way of doing is through the development of a specific law-related careers website, to which attention will now turn.

**Law careers website**

***Aims and Background***

The project to create a law-related careers website began in early 2009. Its realisation was made possible by a successful application to a University fund whose object is to facilitate the embedding of employability skills within the curriculum. Genesis for the project was provided by critical comments about personal development captured by NSS 2009. Close scrutiny revealed three themes within the commentary. First, students commented that they felt ‘pressurised’ into pursuing traditional legal careers such as commercial law solicitor or barrister (the source of this pressure was fairly oblique) and, secondly, students felt that they was a dearth of information about alternative career paths. Finally, students expressed a feeling of ‘information overload’ about personal development.

Thus the project intends to address these concerns. However, the nature of these concerns provides an obvious dilemma in how best to resolve these issues. Clearly, the most immediate solution to the first and second concerns would be for the careers service to disseminate information about a broader range of careers and personal development opportunities. Of course, that approach would inevitably require an increase in information distribution and so conflict with the third concern expressed.

It is also relevant to note the context in which these concerns were raised. Both the University and the School of Law has a well-established and extensive range of personal development advisers and opportunities. This fact points away from a shortfall in service provision as the root of student dissatisfaction. Instead, the solution proposed by the project lies in information management and therefore, in responding to the NSS 2009 comments the purpose of the website is a fairly simple one: to provide the means of more effectively managing personal development information. At the same time the website aims to improve student recognition of how employability skills are developed by both curricular and extra-curricular activity.

***Operation***

In order to achieve these aims the website is intended to have an instructional and promotional function.

There are two aspects to its instructional or informational feature. First, the user is presented with a list of divergent career paths on the introductory screen. This screen is, of itself, useful as a means of responding to the NSS 2009 comments. Early feedback suggests that students find the list itself not only informative but also reassuring that a law degree is applicable to a broader range of careers than simply traditional routes and thus reinforces the versatility of a degree in law or criminal justice.

Secondly, the user is provided with best practice information about their selected career. By choosing one of the listed careers, the student is taken to a different screen which contains a sample CV and covering letter (“CL”) relevant to that career. This information is intended to represent ‘best practice’ however it contains a ‘health warning’ which reminds the student that this is not the only way to construct the information. We are particularly keen that the user does not conclude individualism, diversity and innovation have no place in the construction of a job application. Instead, the ambition is to provide an example of persuasive writing which evidences the skills and experiences that are particularly desirable to that profession.

The CVs and CLs were constructed by a specially appointed administrative assistant who worked in conjunction with the University careers centre to design the layout of the information. Thus the CVs and CLs contain comment boxes which explain the significance of particular items within the information. These instructional comments are displayed at the right hand side of the screen and are intended to aid the user in tailoring the information to their own circumstances.

The purpose of the promotional function of the website is to provide those members of University staff who have an interest in personal development with ‘direct’ access to their target audience. In particular, these ‘stakeholders’ can advertise events, opportunities or courses which relate to a specific career or specific employability skills. This advertisement appears as a ‘pop-up’ on the screen when the user ‘hovers’ the mouse over whichever term the stakeholder has attached the advertisement to. For example, the term ‘commercial awareness’ could be used as the keyword so that every iteration of the term within the website is displayed in a highlighted colour.

This feature is intended to address the ‘information overload’ concern raised in the 2009 NSS results. The task of filtering traditional sources of advertising (*e.g.*, notice-boards or, more typically, e-mails) in order to identify opportunities that are relevant to the user’s intended career path is removed by this process. The information relevant to the specific career is presented to the student with minimal or no filtering required.

***Embedding employability skills into the curriculum***

The University has a strong commitment to embedding employability skills into the curriculum. This is evidenced by a broad range of policies and programmes relating to employability skills including another website called ‘Leeds 4 Life’ which is part of a strong personal tutoring system that encourages the recognition, discussion and continuous development of personal development from an early stage in the academic career.

The law careers website works in conjunction with the University’s commitment to employability skills in general terms and specifically in relation to Leeds 4 Life. In particular, the website assists the user not only in deciding upon a specific career choice but also in strategising their personal development in order to maximise their opportunity of successful application in a competitive marketplace. The sample CVs and CLs on the website provide a focal point for personal tutor meetings in which personal development is discussed. Furthermore, the CVs and CLs will remind or inform the student that employability skills are utilised and developed through curricular *and* extra-curricular activity. In particular, seminars, dissertations and group coursework provide useful evidence of communication and organisational skills as well as leadership, teamwork and (potentially) initiative.

***Measuring success***

At the time of writing, the law careers website is not fully operational and so has not been released to the entire student population in the School of Law. Consequently, it is unknown whether the aims for the project have been realised. It is intended that a full evaluation of the website will be conducted after it has been ‘live’ for an academic year. Substantive comments from this process will be analysed with a view to enhancing the functionality of the website if at all possible. From the beginning, the website was conceived as a starting point toward addressing student comments on personal development. Going forward, it is hoped that the student population can contribute to future modifications of the website and, therefore, that students embrace the website and take ownership of it so that their requirements for personal development are fully realised in this context.

**Conclusion**

Our experiences suggest poor student recognition and/or expression of the employability skills gained from engagement in *pro-bono* opportunities. In order to address this issue, assuming it is widespread, we suggest that project-specific training concerning the recognition and development of such skills with more general support systems. It is our hope that the law careers website discussed above is one such method of achieving this result. In particular, we hope that the inclusion of specific references to pro bono opportunities within sample CVs and covering letters on the website will clarify, reinforce and contextualise the manner by which employability skills may be both evidenced and developed.

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1. For a history of such Projects and their role in relation to the CCRC, please see Roberts and Weathered (2009). For an account of the first year of the UoLIP’s operation, including advice on establishing such a Project, see McCartney and Burnett (2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)