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COMMENT: Pro bono is great education for law students, but they shouldn't fill gap left by legal aid cuts

[Elaine Campbell](#), Solicitor Tutor in the School of Law, discusses issues surrounding pro bono law education

Law students are doing more pro bono work than ever before. In 2014, 70% of all UK law schools now provide free legal services to individuals, groups and organisations. According to the latest LawWorks Law School Pro Bono and Clinic report, this was up from [46% of law schools](#) in 2006 and [61% in 2010](#).

Clinical legal education – where law students provide free advice to the public – began in the United States. The [first wave](#) was in the early 20th century as law schools started to look beyond traditional chalk-and-talk teaching methods. In the 1960s, the civil rights movement led to a rise in law school staff and students looking to assist those who could not obtain legal support elsewhere.

Slowly, UK law schools began to see the advantages of including clinical work in their programmes. Here was an opportunity to allow students to experience lawyering in context and to develop a range of practical skills including communication, strategic planning and commercial awareness.

But it took us some time to get into the swing of things. Our first wave wasn't [until the 1970s](#) – and even in 1995 there were only eight law schools which ran a legal advice clinic.

Flourishing of legal clinics

Today, we're in good shape. We have [law offices](#), public legal education projects such as [Streetlaw](#), [Innocence Projects](#) and partnerships with law centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux and law firms, to name but a few.

New projects are materialising with increasing frequency. Take for example the launch of the [Liverpool John Moores University Legal Advice Centre](#) which opened its doors in early November, following a successful pilot.

The LawWorks Report found that 85% of the law schools which responded to its survey were looking to increase their current pro bono provision. Extending legal subject areas, extra client appointments, establishing more local partnerships, and obtaining bigger premises are all on the cards.

It is estimated that there are 10,000 students currently involved in pro bono work. Imagine what this figure will be when these new projects are fully functional. And let's not forget the significant number of supervisors who ultimately take responsibility for the legal advice being provided.

Crucial service

The work that law students and their supervisors undertake for the community is more than admirable. They provide a crucial service to those who are often left with no means of support elsewhere. I know from my own

experience as a clinical supervisor how helpless clients can feel.

Lawyers protest against legal aid cuts in March 2014. Sean Dempsey/PA Archive

In a world where [legal aid has been all-but eradicated](#) and [650,000 people have been deprived of support](#), there is a sense that there is no-one to turn to for help.


Perhaps this is why we have seen an increase in schemes such as the [Personal Support Unit](#), where volunteers guide those who cannot afford representation in court through procedures that can seem so alien. Those schemes have not been without criticism. Last year, journalist and editor of [The Justice Gap](#) website, Jon Robins, said that the idea of well-meaning but unqualified amateurs helping with legal queries made his [heart sink](#).

Students no replacement

When I think of the clinic I work in, my heart doesn't sink. It bursts with pride. Every day I see well-supervised students who put their all (and then some more) into providing a quality service to members of the public. But what we mustn't do is look upon law schools as a replacement for legal aid, or a sticking plaster for a somewhat bruised legal system.

We cannot forget that this is clinical legal *education*, designed to give law students the opportunity to hone their practical legal skills, to experience what it is like to sit opposite a real person with a real issue and help them solve a problem. They need to understand how the cases and legislation they learn about in the classroom truly affect individuals and organisations – and to reflect meaningfully on their personal strengths and weaknesses.

We need to give our students time to learn. If we start to use them solely to fill the justice gap then we may lose the educational benefits which make clinic such a formative experience.



Elaine Campbell does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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