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Research skills boot camp: preparing law students for internships

By Charlotte Gill, Priyanka Sharma and Yuyun Wirawati Ishak

Legal Internship is an integral part of legal education and is the first brush that a law student has with the legal profession outside the comfortable environs of law school. Since the inception of the law school at Singapore Management University (SMU) in 2007, law students are required to complete a 10 week compulsory internship as an essential part of their legal training pedagogy. The internship is intended to acquaint students with the practical workings of the legal system and the realities of law practice in the private and public sectors. The consistent message that we have received from practitioners over years has been that it is of utmost importance that law students are equipped with strong research skills. To address this need, the Li Ka Shing Library at SMU designed and conducted a series of legal internship prep sessions for law students. While participation in the sessions is voluntary, the sign up and attendance rates that we have seen have been very high- 100 percent registration (all available spots taken up) and 86 percent attendance. The primary aim of the sessions is to refresh the legal research skills of law students at the point of need – just before they begin their internship.

The course is conducted offsite – in the Singapore Supreme Court Library. The Li Ka Shing Library is extremely grateful for the support extended by the Supreme Court Library in permitting SMU to use their premises. The rationale of having this training programme off campus is to ‘immerse’ the students in an unfamiliar and formal setting which has different and sometimes limited resources and services available compared to the academic research library that the students are accustomed to. Concurrently with the setting, the content and style of the training programme is significantly different from the regular activities and format used in library training onsite. The focus is on ‘real life’ research questions, and the learning outcomes that are actively promoted emphasize the research methodology.

While designing the programme, the team tapped on the Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach to select and measure the learning outcomes. We used a multi dimensional teaching model that focused on assurance of learning through a pedagogically sound course design methodology, and a systematic teaching evaluation process that is enhanced by the affordance and use of appropriate technology. The rubric for project presentation included elements of organization of the presentation, engagement with audience, explanation of the selection, evaluation and use of multiple information sources as well as the challenges faced (in terms of sources that did not yield results). The learning outcomes are measured through ‘tell the step’ and the evaluation focuses on the explanation of the research process and the use of appropriate resources.

A case study approach is used to deliver both the skills and a taste of the 'real world' experience of work in a law firm. Students are divided into 4 groups and each group has a 'case' – a real life question that they might encounter in a practice situation. The cases are gleaned from four distinct – and from the students' perspective – obscure areas of law, and are focused on:

- 1) The research methodology, resources and background work towards a drafting exercise
- 2) Foreign law research
- 3) A comparison of laws across jurisdictions
- 4) Preliminary research on an area of law not familiar to law students

The other major aspect of the training is the use of technology. In 2012, we piloted the use of iPads in this course by providing each group with an iPad with Wi-Fi connection. The iPads were equipped with applications such as LawNet, iSSRN, AustLii, and HeinOnline. The iPad browser also contained bookmarks to databases such as EbscoHost, Singapore Statutes Online and JSTOR Mobile. Students were informed about the availability of the apps and bookmarks. From our observation, we found that while the students did not use the apps much, they did use the internet browser frequently. This also underscored one of our learning outcomes – a real life situation where in addition to technology, the use of print resources is sometimes essential.

The training programme also seeks to expose students to a real world situation of limited resources, limited support, limited time, and logistical challenges such as limited connectivity, as well as the etiquette of working in the Supreme Court library. These aspects are built into the session as essential elements of delivering a well rounded training experience.

One of the main advantages of allowing the students to attempt the research tasks unguided and encounter road blocks in their research is that this experience helps the students realise the gaps in their knowledge. For many students, the workshop enables them to see and acknowledge that they can sometimes be over confident in their research skills. This also increases their appreciation for the importance of research skills in their chosen profession.

We have had two rounds of this programme so far, and the feedback has been very positive and encouraging. One hundred percent of the students who attended the session have said that they would recommend the course to their friends. In 2012, 100 percent of the participants rated the session as Good and Excellent. Ninety-seven percent students said that they found the session highly beneficial. This is indicative of the fact that the workshop is meeting a real and practical need by becoming the bridge that the law students need to transition from law school to the legal profession.

Based on the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the School of Law and the students, the team plans to continue and improve this programme. We plan to gather feedback from practitioners on the areas to focus on in terms of research skill development. We also plan to conduct a pre and post workshop survey to help identify areas of weakness and also to better assess the impact of the workshop on students' research skills.

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