

# CAMPUS REVIEW

## Networking supports legal education

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**The new Law Associate Deans Network is moving to adapt the curriculum and teaching to meet modern needs. By Kate Galloway.**

In the nearly 10 years since Johnstone and Vignaendra (2003) published their report on learning outcomes and curriculum development in law, there is certainly evidence of change in the Australian law curriculum.

It is arguable, however, that overall there still remains a disciplinary focus on content and more traditional assessment, bounded by the so-called “Priestley 11” – the core subjects mandated as part of an accredited law degree. In the context of development of the Discipline Standards for Law (Kift, Israel and Field, 2010) it transpired that there is in fact a much broader view than the Priestleys of what is the essence of a law degree, and one that is shared by the profession, academics and the student body.

While there has been much focus on these Threshold Learning Outcomes for law (TLOs) as part of the new standards regime in higher education, importantly, the TLOs also provide an impetus for some quite fundamental change in the landscape of the law curriculum. The question for many law schools has been how to implement that change and what might it look like.

The time has come for the sharing of knowledge and experience to generate ideas around a more dynamic, contextual and skills-based law degree. This is the goal of the newly formed Law Associate Deans Network (Law ADs). In 2010 at the invitation of Sally Kift, Mark Israel and Rachael Field, associate deans (teaching and learning) in law from round Australia gathered as part of the consultations over the TLOs. This was the first time the Law ADs had met nationally.

This provided the impetus for considering further meetings and the group elected to continue to meet to advance thinking around the law curriculum and to share curriculum practice that works in the contemporary environment – of higher education, legal education, legal practice and scholarship.

The benefit of such a network was apparent through our inclusion in the TLO consultation process. The diversity of contexts of law schools nationally meant that it was important to have a voice in the design of the TLOs, which are likely to form the basis for regulatory oversight of the law degree. The outcome, I think, is that the TLOs ended up as outcomes with which each law school felt comfortable as a reflection of what was possible within our diverse contexts, but true also to what it means to be a law graduate.

Importantly also, through the discussions during the consultation process, it was clear that ADs from these diverse contexts were grappling with similar issues that would benefit from a collegiate environment within which to explore responses to the TLOs.

Since 2010 the network has continued to meet six-monthly, focusing on a “hot topic” – a contemporary issue in legal education of interest to members. So far, as we continue to learn how to translate the TLOs into curriculum, topics have tended to centre upon curriculum design incorporating aspects of different TLOs. For example in the November 2011 meeting, Dr Rachael Field (QUT) facilitated a discussion on student wellness, while Judith Marychurch (Wollongong) presented an interactive session on curriculum strategies to support student wellness.

These reflect the TLO of student self-management. In July our meeting will be facilitated by Kris Greaves – formerly senior lecturer at the College of Law Victoria and now a PhD candidate in education researching the scholarship of teaching in practical legal training. The focus for the meeting is assessment of legal skills.

These sessions promote discussion of why and how to change the law curriculum, leaving participants with practical ideas for doing so. The way in which law schools interpret this will give form to the TLOs and reflect each school’s particular institutional character. To assist this process, the network has commissioned 10 good practice guides on various aspects of TLOs, funded by law discipline scholar Professor Sally Kift. The network has identified areas within the TLOs recognised as challenging in terms of good curriculum design in legal education, and these are the targets of the good practice guides. Six were published in 2011 with the remaining guides presently being written.

These guides represent a foundation resource not just for TLO implementation strategies, but also in terms of essential features of comprehensive legal education that continue to represent a challenge in curriculum design – such as critical thinking and communication skills. The guides also identify where more work needs to be done, opening the way for the network to support further targeted scholarship in legal education.

The network’s activities are presently supported through a grant from the former Australian Learning and Teaching Council, now the Office of Learning and Teaching. In particular, the funding has enabled us to publish the 2011 good practice guides in hard copy, and will seed a permanent web presence. Assistance in the network’s early phase is designed to develop a secure foundation, sustaining our work.

What has become clear through these past two years is the benefit to the discipline in meeting regularly and maintaining communication. In developing and nurturing this discipline-based community, the Law AD Network provides a forum within which to discuss matters of importance to the discipline as a whole.

Importantly, this forum fosters the capacity to develop solutions to problems, supporting Australian law schools to chart their own way through the challenges facing not just legal education, but also our students and the profession.

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