

OLA Annual Report 2014-2015

Oxford Legal Assistance has continued to increase in strength this academic year. It has coordinated three main pro bono projects this year, detailed below, with around 25 undergraduate volunteers. This report will provide an overview of the operation of each of the three schemes, which are the Turpin and Miller legal advice clinic, the Citizens Advice Bureau project and the Turpin and Miller Graduate Bail application scheme. It will also give details of sponsorship, and future development of OLA. It should be noted that student interest in OLA consistently remains high, proving OLA's desirability among students and the need for its continuation and expansion.

Turpin and Miller

The Turpin and Miller scheme has this year been very well received by both student volunteers and the firm. There have been no major problems, although two volunteers dropped out at the very beginning of the scheme so it would be wise to emphasise the level of commitment required when applying for a volunteer role. Also, one future aim may be the expansion of schemes of this nature to satisfy the high demand for legal volunteering opportunities. This year, the main project has been the core immigration, asylum and human rights triage-style clinic. At the start of each session, solicitors from Turpin & Miller provide case summaries of the clients scheduled to attend the clinic, and any relevant points of inquiry. In many instances there is simply no information, and it is incumbent on the student to identify the real cause of attendance at the clinic. Students interview clients, taking their history, and look to uncover any facts that may assist their case. This year after interviewing a client, students have also been permitted to sit in with the solicitor and client, with the client's consent, when the solicitor gives his legal advice. This clinic therefore economises the time of the firm's solicitors, who after learning the relevant facts from student volunteers are in a position to offer legal advice, and offers an exclusive opportunity for students to see law in practice. The clinic consists of roughly 2 hours each week.

The number of clients attending the clinic each session has inevitably varied, and this is beyond the control of both the firm and the students. This year the number of clients has been consistently high with an approximate average of four clients per week. When there are more volunteers than clients however, volunteers who do not see a client, instead assist in legal aid cases prepared by the T&M solicitor. Often this will be writing chronologies or undertaking background research into an evidential claim made by either side in a dispute, and researching points of law. Whilst in the past this has been seen as a fall back activity, this has been received very positively by both the students and the firm this year. The solicitors have been particularly grateful for this assistance, and they have in return made a material effort to offer students either serious or stimulating cases.

This year there have been 14 volunteers, plus one executive committee representative and 3 caseworkers. All the volunteers are law students in their second year of the degree course, having applied the previous Trinity term as first year undergraduates. The volunteers are divided into regular volunteers and reserves, however this year the reserves regularly attended the clinic and assisted with interviews and casework. It is therefore proposed that the distinction between volunteers and reserves should be removed in future years; there is clearly enough work at the clinic for 14 regular volunteers.

All volunteers participated in a training session at the start of Michaelmas 2014. Whilst this was a useful introduction to the paperwork that students would be dealing with over the coming year, and featured an activity component about interviewing clients, the nature of the work means that it sometimes takes volunteers a couple of sessions to get used to the demands of the role. It is accepted however that the nature of the work makes this unavoidable.

Fortunately, attendance was on the whole consistent and at a good level throughout year. This year the T&M Officer introduced a swapping system which meant students could swap time slots amongst themselves with knowledge of the officer. This system has worked very well and it would be wise to continue using this system next year.

Once again the feedback from the student volunteers have been overwhelmingly positive, and the Turpin & Miller scheme has provided a valuable opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the progress of a legal aid claim, and to provide triage support in the immigration, asylum and human rights clinic alongside solicitors at the firm.

Citizens Advice Bureau

The past year has seen the CAB students engaging in a wide variety of projects, predominantly working in the area of improving social policy. As a group of five, they have sometimes been challenged with aspects of the work, however have found it a brilliant platform for the students to learn from one another while engaging with the social policy work carried out at the Bureau.

The small number of volunteers has made the team very dependent on one another, and although this has been extremely beneficial where communication and organisation has been concerned, this has at times proved to be a difficulty. Lack of numbers has made it difficult to implement disciplinary measures where commitment has been concerned. There was one occasion where a student failed to attend any meetings at the CAB and was therefore asked to leave the programme.

A recommendation for OLA in the future would be to produce a constitutional infrastructure so that the Student Liaison Officer may confidently encourage the commitment of volunteers and find replacement students as and when the need may arise. It may also be advisable, subject to a discussion with the executive committee and coordinators at Oxford Citizens Advice Bureau, to recruit a greater number of volunteers, and secure a selection of reserves. Further, a more rigorous interview process would ensure strong commitment levels from the selected candidates.

The primary focus of the group has been in social research this term. Centred around injustice, the volunteers will be drafting the first ever 'Outrage bulletin' which will draw on stories of those who have used the Bureau who have left feeling 'outraged'. The volunteers will use these case studies to draw attention to the issues that affect the community in Oxford the most. Second, the volunteers will conduct interviews with employers and employees regarding the rise and injustice surrounding zero-hour contracts, and the Bureau believed that this is an area very close to home for students and, therefore, the volunteers would do a fantastic job on reporting on this issue. Finally, the volunteers will launch and operate the Bureau's presence on social media. It was acknowledged that the work of individual CABs often lacked a nexus within which to operate, so the volunteers recommended starting up and operating a Facebook and Twitter account about the Oxford CAB, which people could access for information. This will also work alongside the current CAB blog that is in current operation – but the volunteers noted that such an idea was quite outdated and the CAB could keep up with the times if the volunteers got involved.

Something important to note is the general nature of the work carried out by the volunteers. Although much of the work performed by the CAB is legal in subject matter, to say it is a role orientated towards the law would be a limited reflection of the services provided by CAB. CAB equips volunteers with skills transferable and essential to working in a legal capacity, as opposed to giving raw insight into the practice of the law itself. This is no way should undermine the invaluable work that students do for the bureau. Nonetheless it is something that students should be made aware of before applying for any position within the CAB scheme.

Over the year there have been some issues regarding communication between the CAB and the volunteers and coordinator. These include a failure to give the volunteers the code to enter the CAB building, and some supervisors at CAB failing to show up to prearranged sessions, without alerting our volunteers. These issues have been addressed by the OLA committee, including the faculty members, and we hope that these can be resolved before the end of this academic year, ahead of the scheme restarting next year.

The CAB scheme remains a thoroughly enjoyable and valuable experience for the volunteers, and for this reason it is the hope that it can continue. There are issues which need to be ironed out, however it is anticipated that CAB can continue in the future.

Graduate Scheme:

After the unfortunate demise of the Bail for Immigration Detainees scheme that has been run previously, it was decided by the executive committee to look into other graduate scheme options. Meghan Campbell, our graduate liaison officer, was able to arrange a new graduate scheme with Turpin and Miller, with around 8 graduate volunteers assisting with the preparation of bail applications for those detained at Campsfield Immigration Detention Centre. Successful applications give detainees more freedom in the run-up to the hearing.

This new graduate scheme has thus far been a success, and it is proposed that it be continued next year.

Funding and Sponsorship

As in previous years, Baker & McKenzie has been kind enough to provide OLA with a donation of £1000 this academic year, and this money has contributed to the training costs to the Law Faculty of OLA's work. We hope that this relationship with Baker & McKenzie will continue into the future, and we are very grateful for the support of the firm.

In light of the upcoming renewal of OLA's funding, we have sought to find other external methods of funding. Maureen O'Neill, the Law Faculty Development Director has been invaluable in her assistance with a funding proposal. Whilst no sponsorship deal has yet been confirmed, we are hopeful that in the future more of OLA's running costs will be absorbed by external sources of funding.

We are, of course, indebted to the Law Faculty for its willingness to fund the work of OLA.

The OLA Website

This year's executive committee have endeavoured to update the OLA pages, which are part of the OxHRH website. The website can be easily updated by our committee, and are an attractive way to demonstrate the work of OLA.

The OLA Moot

The OLA Moot took place again this year to great success. The moot was opened to undergraduate and postgraduate students, and the committee received over 20 applications for 12 places. The moot problem again focussed on an issue within immigration and asylum law. The overall standards of the mooters was very high, and the Grand Final of this year's competition was judged by the Hon Sir Bernard McCloskey. The Moot Committee are indebted to James Goudkamp, for his advice and assistance in the organising of the moot.

Future Development of OLA

This year has seen a new graduate scheme rise from the ashes of the old Bail for Immigration Detainees scheme, however demand for places on OLA volunteering schemes consistently outstrips the supply of opportunities. Whilst the focus of this year's committee has been on securing external funding, and a new graduate scheme, it is recommended that next year's committee will look to further expansion of undergraduate schemes to meet this demand for pro bono opportunities.

Comments from Volunteers

Ashley, CAB Liaison Officer:

My name is Ashley and I am a second year Law with French Law student at Christ Church, Oxford University. I have worked as part of the Oxford Legal Assistance programme since the beginning of the academic year and I am head of the team working in the Citizen's Advice Bureau. I enjoy being part of the wider CAB team as their pro-bono work is renowned nationally and it is a pleasure to be a part of their team. I have enjoyed watching my own volunteers working side-by-side with those at the CAB in order to tackle issues of social policy, and it is refreshing to my own legal studies to bring a new dimension to how the law affects citizens. The more I have worked with the CAB I have realised how important their work really is and I am proud to be a part of such a programme that helps those that need it the most.

Ruth:

I am Ruth and I come from Singapore. I wanted to get involved with the OLA CAB programme to get to know and better understand the town side of Oxford that, as students in the university, we do not normally notice or have the opportunity to come into contact with. I am interested in social policy, and coming from another country I also wanted to get first-hand experience of what the social and welfare system is like, and how it affects people. I hope to better understand what kind of problems people face and what kinds of things they find most helpful. I hope to be of help to the people who come to CAB for advice, and also be of service to the other CAB volunteers, and learn from them. It would be great to contribute to development of social policy in certain areas as well.

Jehanara:

My name is Jehanara and I am a second year Law student at the University of Oxford. I applied to be a Citizens Advice volunteer mainly because I wanted to understand the range of social problems that people from all walks of life face. In effect, I hoped to explore how the law interacts with people outside of the academic context that I study law in. I've already taken part in the "outcomes" project (which involved me calling up a number of the Bureau's clients and surveying them on their experience with the Bureau). This was an interesting project as it showed me the variety of short and long term problems that people face. I am really looking forward to doing some social policy work for the Bureau later in the year in order to help the Bureau to tackle problems from the source.

Megan:

Hi! I'm Megan, a second year law undergraduate at Oxford University and I've just started working with Oxford CAB. I am really grateful for the opportunity to learn about the impact of CAB's work, through the outcomes survey, and to be a part of the social policy side of the bureau. I wanted to volunteer to better understand areas of social policy which directly affect our community and to be an active part of improving that policy. I also find that it brings a fresh dimension to my legal studies as it reminds me that there are very real and practical applications of what I am studying, which can really help people- something it is easy to forget when staring blankly at textbooks! I hope to be able to be of some assistance to the bureau through collecting outcomes data and raising awareness of social policy changes and demands, but also to learn as much as I can, during my time at Oxford CAB.

Damola:

I am a second year Law with French Law student at Mansfield College, Oxford University. I first heard about the opportunity for students to volunteer at the CAB through the Oxford Legal Assistance scheme. I had already begun training with a CAB near where I live and so I already knew of its hands-on, communitarian work. It sounded like an excellent opportunity to develop practical skills needed in life and in legal workplaces that my very academic degree does not provide. This has already proved true, and the more I learn about the CAB's work, the more worthwhile and necessary a cause it seems to be. I enjoy contributing to the CAB's work in the small ways I can and the staff there have all been very friendly and very willing to help.

Caroline, Turpin and Miller Liaison Officer:

I got involved with OLA to make a real difference to the community and see how my studies could be applied in practice. Working with T&M and the volunteers to provide free legal clinics for those affected by human rights, immigration and asylum issues has been incredibly rewarding. Seeing how the law affects real people in such a personal way motivates me to study harder and constantly reminds me why I chose to study law. Being the only organisation in Oxford to provide undergraduate law students with opportunities to undertake pro bono work, I strongly believe in OLA's value and I would recommend the T&M scheme to every law student in Oxford.

Xanthia:

I joined T&M for two reasons: I wanted to see what working in legal aid was like, and I wanted to see the kind of environment that a small local firm provides. I have loved being able to learn more about immigration and asylum law and get involved in real cases and real stories rather than spending time just learning about them in theory. Seeing solicitors and their work in practice has been an incredibly valuable experience, and the sessions have given me the chance to try interacting with clients and see a bit of the administrative side of legal work.

Orin:

I got involved in the Oxford Legal Assistance Programme, and the Turpin & Miller scheme specifically, because I believe that justice should be accessible to all. This has been one of the most fundamental principles of our society, and with the recent cuts to legal aid, this principle is slowly crumbling. As an OLA volunteer, I work with Turpin & Miller during their legal aid clinics where I interview potential legal aid clients and draft chronologies of the facts of their case, which the solicitors can then use to determine whether or not they'll be eligible for legal aid. It's a really good way to develop confidence as well, because it's client facing, and you have to be able to maintain professionalism at all times. I've learned so much about the world of legal aid through this programme, and I'm really proud to be part of something like this.