

Maximizing Access to Justice and Legal Education through University Law Clinics and Pro Bono Initiatives

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Cite as: Capps, D., Dunn, R., Wardle, J., & Slee, P. (2026). Maximizing Access to Justice and Legal Education through University Law Clinics and Pro Bono Initiatives. *Metropolitan Universities*, 37(2), 91-111. DOI: 10.18060/29537

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Abstract

There have been many changes to the legal aid system in England and Wales over the last 50 years, causing a significant and deleterious impact on the legal system and on individuals' ability to access justice. Many people cannot afford to fund their own legal representation or simply do not know whether they have a case and/or if they have one, how to proceed. Leeds Beckett University's pro bono law clinic operates at the intersection of legal education and social justice, striving to bridge the gap between the increasing demand for free legal assistance and the limited resources available to provide it. This paper explores how Leeds Law School amplifies its local impact: by providing the community with free legal advice through its law clinic; by developing a strategic partnership with the national charity Support Through Court; by lobbying government for political change; and all whilst simultaneously training and equipping law students with practical legal skills and confidence.

This article will first provide a short history of Leeds Beckett University and Leeds Law School, before explaining how the law clinic, Support Through Court, and other pro bono opportunities operate in the significantly constrained publicly funded sector of Higher Education to achieve significant and cost-effective outcomes for both students and the community. This article will also discuss the challenges faced, including the unmet legal services need and balancing service provision with primary educational goals.

Keywords: clinical legal education, access to justice, university law clinics, pro bono legal services, third sector partnerships, litigants in person, Support Through Court, anchor institutions, Leeds Beckett University, law student employability

Introduction

A Background to Leeds Beckett University and Leeds Law School

Leeds Beckett University has a heritage dating back to 1824, when the Leeds Mechanics Institute, the first of Leeds Beckett's founding colleges, opened its doors. In the years that followed, a host of new colleges, such as Leeds Institute of Science Art and Literature, the School of Commerce, and Carnegie College of Physical Training, offered educational opportunities to the region, and these, and more, joined together to form Leeds Polytechnic in 1970. Leeds Polytechnic then became Leeds Metropolitan University in 1992, and following an application to the UK's Privy Council, changed its name to Leeds Beckett University in 2014.

Leeds Law School itself has roots dating back to 1924, when the law, as a subject, was first taught at the School of Commerce. It is a full-service law school with a student body of just under 2,000 students studying undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional courses on a full-time, part-time, and distance-learning basis. The student cohort is varied and data reported to the Higher Education Statistics Agency for 2024/25, shows that: 39% of our students come from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background; 67% are female and 33% are male; and 53% of our students come from socially and economically deprived backgrounds that measure in the first and second quintile of the indices of multiple deprivation. (HESA, n.d.) The law school is situated in the center of Leeds, a major city in the United Kingdom. With a population of 812,000 people (CENSUS DATA 2021), it is economically significant and often regarded as the main legal, financial and professional service center outside of London. However, this prosperity is not evenly distributed, and alongside affluent suburbs, Leeds contains areas of marked deprivation, where around 29% of residents live in neighborhoods in the most deprived fifth of England. (Brabin 2025).

Leeds Law School is not considered wealthy and, like any other civic organization, must ensure every ounce of value is extracted from its activities and financial expenditure. As such, and at a time of financial adversity within Higher Education across the globe, Leeds Law School must look for opportunities to do more, or the same with less resource.

Leeds Beckett University forms part of the Leeds City Anchor Network, which was founded in 2018. It has 14 members, largely made up of "Eds, Meds and Feds" who operate at scale and have deep roots within the city. The network has four aims. First, to act as exemplary employers, who support a diverse local workforce that more closely resembles the population we all serve, and who create good jobs with fair pay, good prospects and a healthy and constructive working environment. Second, to fully commit to Leeds' carbon-reduction ambitions. Third, to increase the proportion of our discretionary spending we allocate to local organizations, particularly small and medium enterprises. And fourth, to increase the positive benefits of our service delivery for local people. For our four educational members, this means developing and redefining our

concept of “service learning”. A more detailed analysis of the development of the Leeds Anchor Network can be found at Denison *et al* (2024).

Leeds Beckett incorporated the core Anchor network principles into the 2021-2025 institutional strategic plan and has made anchor impact even more dominant in the strategic plan for 2026-2031. These principles influence the development of our core operating strategies, from student recruitment, teaching and learning and research to workforce development, estates planning and decarbonization.

Legal Aid, Justice, and the Unmet Need

In 2024, 1.99 million new cases started in the civil and family courts (Ministry of Justice, 2025), exceeding the total number of internal journeys taken by airplane in the UK in the previous year (Office for National Statistics, 2024). Access to justice is now a buzzword, and whilst there are lots of free legal advice services available, demand often outstrips supply, meaning many are forced to navigate these complex issues alone. Without the help of a lawyer, vulnerable individuals face rigid procedures with complicated terminology, leaving them desperate for someone to turn to.

A healthy justice system should be considered an essential public service and the bedrock of a fair and just society. It allows us to make our voices heard, to exercise our rights, challenge poor treatment, and to hold decision-makers accountable. But the health of the UK justice system is rapidly deteriorating. Public funding for justice in England and Wales has been systematically reduced for many years, with each person now receiving 22% less in public money for legal issues when compared with 2010 (Bar Council, 2025). In 2023, the number of family cases where neither party was represented was 39%, which is treble the 13% in 2013 when the most recent major cuts to legal aid were introduced. Between 2000 and 2022, the number of legal aid cases commenced decreased by 85%, from 803,828 to 115,912. By 2019, at least 1 in 3 people were living in a legal advice desert, with no legal aid providers available to help with housing law issues (Law Society, 2026a). This has significant repercussions, including individuals not being properly represented before and during legal matters, unnecessary adjournments and court delays, some not pursuing legal action where necessary, and impacts on litigants’ mental and physical health because they are not able to resolve their legal issues (Organ & Sigafos, 2018). Law schools now play a vital role in helping to achieve and advance justice for individuals and communities. Through pro bono initiatives, law schools can become places of social change and help communities address unmet legal needs, further embedding themselves as anchor institutions. This has a dual benefit, as these initiatives offer help and support to those who need legal advice and provide opportunities for students to gain practical experience, reflect on their legal skills, and develop their ever-increasing important employability skills for life after graduation.

The purpose of this practice piece is to highlight how an anchor institution can work more closely with community partners to benefit the local community by involving students in the delivery of vital services. This practice piece will outline the changes and resulting challenges to access to justice in England and Wales, and the impact these have had on individuals navigating the legal system. It will then look at the methods and purposes of clinical legal education in carefully balancing the education and professional development of students, which is the priority of any educational establishment, with the desire to provide meaningful legal assistance to members of the community. The piece then provides three useful case studies on our pro bono activities, including a novel outline comparing the costs and benefits of our pro bono law clinic with our flagship collaborative partnership with Support Through Court (STC). It is hoped that readers may find inspiration and adopt some of the clinical methods currently utilized at Leeds Law School.

Challenges to Access to Justice in England and Wales

For many years, the legal system in England and Wales was held out to be one of the best in the world. Access to justice was underpinned by a very strong system of legal aid that provided funding for legal advice, representation, and procedural costs for individuals pursuing or defending legal action. Legal aid in the UK stemmed from the Legal Aid and Advice Act 1949 and was part of Prime Minister Atlee's welfare state reforms following World War II. Legal advice and representation, however, are not cheap, and towards the latter end of the 20th Century and early part of the 21st Century, rapidly rising legal aid bills came under scrutiny and legal aid was slowly, but steadily, curtailed. Figures reported by the Bach Commission, a study organized by the Fabian Society to develop realistic proposals to increase access to justice, identified that in the 1980s 80% of households were eligible for legal aid. However, by 2008, that figure had fallen to 29% (Fabian Society, 2017). Despite this significant reduction in the availability of legal aid, the cost was still deemed too high, and in 2012, as part of the UK government's fiscal policy known as austerity, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) was passed, which sought to cut a further £350 million a year from the £2.1 billion legal aid budget. Newman identified that the *"cuts were partly achieved by removing public funding for large parts of social welfare law such as welfare benefits, debt and housing. The legal aid scheme in these areas has been cut to the bone. All that remains is what could not be removed because of the residual protections afforded by the European Convention on Human Rights."* (Newman, 2022). As will be demonstrated below, this has had a detrimental impact on access to justice.

In the UK, qualification for civil legal aid is complex. It is means-tested, assessing financial eligibility, which includes income and value of savings, investments and property. At the time of writing, an individual (and partner if applicable) will need to have a joint monthly income of £2,657 or less, get a qualifying public assistance benefit (such as universal credit or JobSeekers

Allowance), have savings of less than £8,000 and not have more than £100,000 of equity in their home. An individual who exceeds the above may still be eligible if their case concerns domestic abuse or forced marriage, or if it is an exceptional case where human rights are at risk. The thresholds remain an issue, with the Law Society highlighting that the means test has not been updated to reflect inflation since 2009, while prices have risen by 40%. Research they commissioned in 2008 found that people on incomes 10-30% below the minimum income standard were excluded from legal aid (Law Society, 2026b). If the means test is satisfied, an individual must then satisfy the merit test, where the matter is evaluated to determine whether it has more than a 50% chance of success and is a proportionate use of public funds. Cost-cutting continued outside the legal aid budget, and established charities that had previously relied on Government grants had their funding removed. This means there is an increasing number of people who need both legal advice and representation but cannot afford it themselves. This unmet need is often met by university law schools and clinical legal education.

Clinical Legal Education: Purpose and Methods

Clinical legal education is a method of teaching that aims to put legal theory into practice through real and simulated experiences (Evans, 2017). Unlike more traditional methods of teaching, such as lectures, workshops, and seminars, clinical legal education allows students to apply the law they have learned to real-life legal scenarios, using their practical skills. It also allows students to explore their values and reflect on their experiences with the wider justice system. Some also highlight the public-interest and employability benefits of clinical legal education (Vaughan et al., 2021).

Several models of clinical legal education exist, including live law clinics, simulated law clinics, policy/law reform clinics, externships and Street Law. All models have been discussed extensively and rehearsed in the literature elsewhere (see Dunn, 2016; Nicolson, 2016; Evans, 2017; Barry, 2007), and, as such, not all of these will be discussed in this article. Instead, it will focus on those used by Leeds Law School: live client clinics, our partnership with STC, and policy/law reform clinics.

From a practical perspective, clinical legal education can be viewed as having two main purposes: first, to provide students with a practical experience of the law, and second, to increase access to justice. In some countries, there is a clear need for law clinics to fill gaps in legal services and advance social justice (Nicolson, 2016; Kosuri, 2012). In England and Wales, the focus was traditionally linked to educational benefits due to the strong legal aid system (Grimes et al., 2024).

Further to educational and community needs, several major reviews of legal education in England and Wales have shaped our current legal education goals, with clinical legal education

becoming more established and recognized as a separate educational method (Grimes et al, 2024). For example, the most recent review of legal education, the Legal Education and Training Review (2013), recognized clinical legal education as a valuable method to develop the key competencies graduates need when entering the legal profession. This is particularly acknowledged in law clinics, where students represent real clients under the supervision of a qualified lawyer. The skills developed in law clinic are explained extensively elsewhere (Dunn, 2017; Alexander, 2023; Marson et al, 2005), but to summarise, they can help students to develop a whole of host of essential legal skills including: their research skills, oral and written communication skills, teamwork, empathy and listening skills, organisational and time management skills, advocacy, drafting and letter writing. Though law clinics may not always produce ‘practice-ready’ students or prepare them for every task they may encounter in practice (Cantrell, 2014), they do provide a foundation to start in practice and to be confident in developing their skills in the future (Mack, 1993).

As stated above, the two main goals of law clinics are education and social justice. There has long been tension in the global clinical legal education literature over which is, or should be, the primary goal (Nicolson, 2006; Campbell & Murray, 2015). It is likely this tension cannot be resolved, and the aim of a law clinic can be driven by jurisdiction, including state input into legal services, the employability needs of law students and the marketization of higher education (McFaul, 2020). Further, they can operate alongside each other, with law clinics working on cases that provide an educational benefit to students while also addressing community needs. The primary goal of clinical legal education as an educational tool in England and Wales has begun to change since LASPO was introduced and drastic cuts to legal aid were implemented. Law clinics now see themselves as filling a gap in the availability of legal aid and helping those who would not otherwise be able to access legal advice. LawWorks, a charity that provides support for law clinics across the UK, publishes annual reports on pro bono services in England and Wales. Their report reviews all law clinics and legal assistance charities across England and Wales, with 181 of the 313 law clinics in a university setting, accounting for over 50% of their network (LawWorks, 2025). Their latest report, presenting data collected from law clinics in 2024, found that of the 266 law clinics that submitted data, 90,551 enquires were received and 61,956 individuals were provided with legal advice. This represents a slight increase over 2023, when 60,798 individuals received legal advice. Most law clinics in England and Wales provide advice in family law (37%), followed by employment law (20.1%), and civil litigation (12.1%). Fewer law clinics offer services in areas such as housing law, asylum and immigration, welfare benefits and crime. Furthermore, LawWorks found that the clients who access law clinics are increasingly reporting a disability or long-term health issue: 33.6% in 2024, increased from 27% in 2023. The impacts of cuts to legal aid are clear.

In addition to gaining vital graduate skills, law clinics can expose students to social inequalities and help them understand community needs. The ability for law students to develop a social

justice ethos and understand the complexities of access to justice in law clinics is clearly explained by Wizner (2002:1935):

What do students learn from representing clients in the law school clinic that they would not learn from their regular academic courses? First, they learn that many social problems, like poverty, can be seen and acted upon as legal problems. Second, they learn that legal representation is as necessary to resolving complex legal problems for the poor as it is for the affluent. Third, they learn to develop and apply legal theory through the actual representation of clients. Fourth, they learn to use the legal system to seek social change. And finally, they learn the limits of law in solving individual and social problems... These are all important intellectual and ethical lessons for law students to learn.

Law clinics, and clinical legal education more generally, can be an excellent tool to explore socio-legal issues with students and help them understand that the complexities associated with any given case may not necessarily be legal. Further, clinical legal education allows students to experience the legal system and all its shortcomings, helping them to identify where it might be improved.

The next section of this article outlines Leeds Law School's law clinic and explores three case studies from Leeds Law School, highlighting the impact they have had on communities and students.

Law Clinic and Outreach Projects

Leeds Law School's chosen method of clinical legal education is a live client clinic, which enables students to support members of the public with real legal problems. We offer a completely free, advice only, service in matters relating to family law, civil law and employment law. Students work in allocated "firms" over a semester, interviewing clients, conducting research on the legal issues and providing clients with a bespoke letter of advice. Student firms will have ideally six students to ensure there is greater time for supervisors to review student performance, discuss key legal issues and values, and help with a student's professional development, something not always possible in a traditional classroom setting. Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread adoption of video conferencing platforms, clients can now have online interviews in addition to in-person ones. This has increased the law clinic's reach, meaning clients outside of the Leeds area can now access our services. Anecdotally, online interviews also appear to have reduced client non-attendance.

When compared with many other university law clinic offerings, Leeds Law School's law clinic is small. We do not have the funds to resource a large-scale, full-service clinic with a full-time manager and a team of paralegals. Our three solicitor supervisors are full-time academics, who each work about one day a week in the clinic during the teaching year. Between September 2022

and May 2025, our clinic provided legal advice to 175 clients. The majority needed advice in family law (104), employment law (36), and 35 clients requiring help with civil disputes. These three areas of law are representative of where legal aid cuts have hit the hardest and where the people of Leeds have the greatest unmet legal need. As demonstrated by the LawWorks statistics above, this is also in line with clinics in other parts of the country. Our clinic therefore provides significant help within our local community. We do not intentionally collect data on our clients' protected characteristics in the clinic, as it is unnecessary and would contravene data protection laws. Anecdotally, our clients come from a wide range of backgrounds and communities, often traveling from across the local area and beyond to seek advice and support. They are from different age groups, circumstances, and levels of need, including both able-bodied and disabled people. Our client diversity reflects the clinic's important role in providing accessible and inclusive legal assistance to anyone who might otherwise struggle to obtain help.

Feedback from clients is almost wholly excellent. For example, one family law client stated:

I was happy with the advice and the way my case was handled. I would recommend the service to others without hesitation. I am very grateful for the service as I think this is a really good way to help students and people needing legal advice that may not be in a position to pay the costs.

A civil dispute client said:

It was excellent advice, carefully considered, and clearly communicated. It was clear that a lot of work had gone into analyzing the details of the dispute.

Negative feedback is minimal, with only two non-positive comments. One client criticized the faulty buzzer that allowed access to the building, and one person was disappointed that the law did not support their claim. Otherwise, clients are understandably grateful to receive any help and advice, which often includes whether they have a case to pursue and, if so, how to start those proceedings.

The law clinic is not limited to the above; during the academic year, students can also engage in outreach projects, usually in collaboration with local law firms and law clinic supervisors. For example, students have attended the local Hunslet Club. This not-for-profit, award-winning youth organization provides a safe place for young people across Leeds to engage with sporting and vocational activities and gain valuable life skills (Hunslet Club, n.d.). Parents of the young people, who come from some of the most socially and economically deprived areas in the Leeds City region, have been able to attend a legal advice drop-in service to get initial advice on family law matters such as child contact and divorce. Students have also started attending the Sue Ryder Hospice in Headingley (Sue Ryder, n.d.) to support hospice residents with end-of-life planning. Our students have supported local solicitors in providing advice on creating wills and trusts, planning for children when their single parent passes, and other matters to help individuals feel that all practical and legal provisions are in place for when they have gone. Most recently, our

new clinic service means inmates in local prisons can now access our remote service to get legal advice on child contact matters. The value to local communities of these free services is immeasurable, with even a single legal advice session allowing someone to gain the confidence to pursue a legal claim or be satisfied that further legal action is not needed (Bengtsson & Speed, 2019). A single outreach session each month, where our students go to the clients, can make a great difference to a local community and further establish Leeds Law School as an Anchor Institution.

There are also benefits for our students resulting from their engagement with the law clinic. These opportunities provide students with the ability to work with professionals in both the legal and third sectors to help develop their networks and provide valuable legal advice to those who arguably need it the most. Over the last three academic years, 134 students have taken part in the law clinic module and gained valuable work experience, which in law is increasingly difficult to obtain. Recent statistics show that in 2022, 29,905 UK students were accepted onto law courses in England and Wales (Law Society, 2025). Yet, there were only 4,952 solicitor traineeships registered (Law Society, 2025), and 638 pupillages advertised through the gateway for barristers (The Bar Council, 2024) in that same year. There are clearly many more students attending law school than there are traditional law jobs available.

Law clinics allow students to engage with the law in a practical manner over an extended period, taking responsibility for their own caseload and thereby gaining valuable experience to help secure graduate employment. One student in our clinic commented positively about the mentoring they had received whilst working in the clinic, *‘My supervisor has been incredibly supportive throughout this module and has given us advice on career paths throughout the clinic.’* Supervisors can easily identify a student’s strengths and weaknesses, provide instant feedback, and guide them towards a suitable career choice.

Overall, our clinic and outreach experiences help to achieve both goals of clinical legal education. They provide students with the opportunity to develop vital legal skills and gain experience which contributes to their employability. At the same time, they can provide much-needed legal advice to community members who would otherwise lack access to justice, solidifying our position as an anchor institution.

Support Through Court (STC)

Established in 2001, though known as the Personal Support Unit until October 2019, STC provides free, practical and procedural support in the civil and family courts to help litigants in person access justice (Support Through Court, n.d.). In 2024, they supported people in over 45,000 cases in England and Wales through dedicated volunteers, primarily made up of university students. The work they do involves helping clients manage their emotions when

facing the fear of losing a child, the pain of divorce, the uncertainty faced by those applying for a non-molestation order for domestic abuse protection, or those who are at risk of being evicted and losing their home. Many STC clients face multiple disadvantages, often experiencing unemployment, having English as a second language, or dealing with serious health issues or a disability. STC-trained volunteers can help people at any point in their case, assisting with legal forms, helping clients understand what is required of them, and accompanying clients to hearings, both in court and online. Volunteers often provide emotional support, helping people to remain calm and understand their options, so they have the best chance of receiving a fair hearing.

In 2022, STC was one of the charitable organizations that suffered a significant drop in Government funding, discussed earlier in this piece. In addition, STC experienced a significant fall in volunteer numbers because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, STC's Leeds service was at risk of closure. In order to continue the vital services across the country, STC changed their operation and partnered with a university in several regions. Leeds Beckett University answered STC's call for a partnership in Leeds, pledging financial stability, state-of-the-art facilities and a suite of new computers, ensuring that frontline services would stay open in Leeds while continuing to innovate and expand. Leeds Beckett's financial support represented a strategic investment in the regional community, in justice, and in the next generation of legal professionals. Following the signing of a contract and dealing with the intricacies of sharing data and some IT systems, this collaborative journey launched in September 2022, with STC's Leeds service moving to university premises within Leeds Law School and opening up volunteering opportunities across the law school's student body. With the University's support and technologically advanced teaching spaces, STC has been able to expand their Leeds service beyond in-person appointments and keep up to date with legal support in the digital age. STC can now reach people across the Leeds city region and the Ridings of Yorkshire who previously could not access our services due to travel costs.

The work students do with STC can be described as a kind of live client clinic. Whilst no actual formal legal advice is given, students work with real clients, conducting aspects of legal work, such as completing court forms and drafting witness statements. STC and Leeds Law School's law clinic work closely together and have created an informal triage service. As the law clinic is advice-only, clients do not receive any support with next steps or the actual court process. When applications to the court are required, law clinic clients are referred to STC for assistance. Conversely, clients sometimes phone or attend STC, and are told, or realize themselves, that they should seek legal advice before completing any court forms, so STC will then refer them to the law clinic. This means that across all our services, Leeds Law School can help clients with each stage of the legal process.

From a student's perspective, there are two main ways to work with STC. First, the law school offer placements in the final year of the degree, which run on a day-release basis each semester and over a 6-8-week period during the summer. Placement students are trained and then work in the STC office. Second, students can become volunteers at any stage of their degree, dedicating as much time as they choose, as long as it is at least once a month. At first, their work may simply be shadowing and meeting clients alongside a more experienced volunteer. As their confidence grows, however, dedicated students can go on to become key volunteers, who help run the STC office, train other students, and manage the team if the service manager is absent. Students, therefore, develop professional skills, such as organization, time management and leadership, as well as their legal skills.

The relationship with Leeds Law School has been a huge success, and there has been a significant increase in client numbers accessing the STC service.

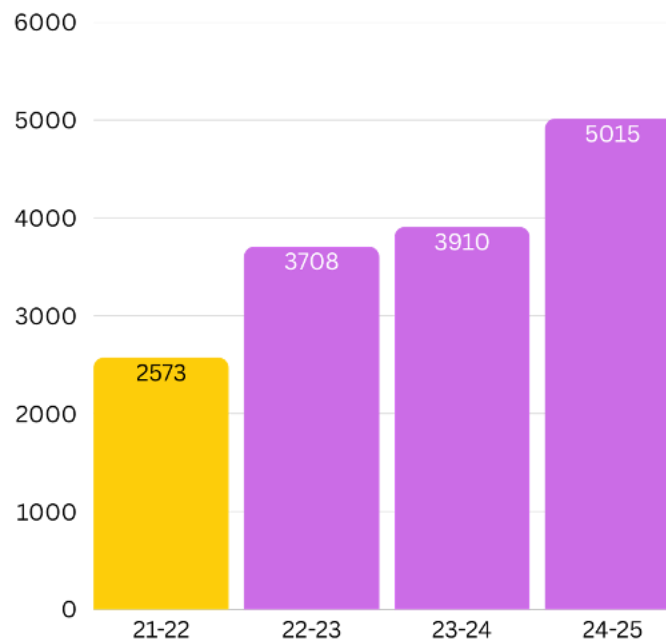


FIGURE 1. Client support sessions September-August.

Figure 1 shows that in the first three years, client support sessions have risen and, over the three-year period, almost doubled. In the first year, they increased by 44% and have continued to rise, with client support sessions rising by 95% since 2021-22. The service's growth and consistency in student availability have led STC to emulate Leeds Beckett's processes across all regions in their network, as well as encouraging the creation of credit-bearing summer placements with their other university partners.

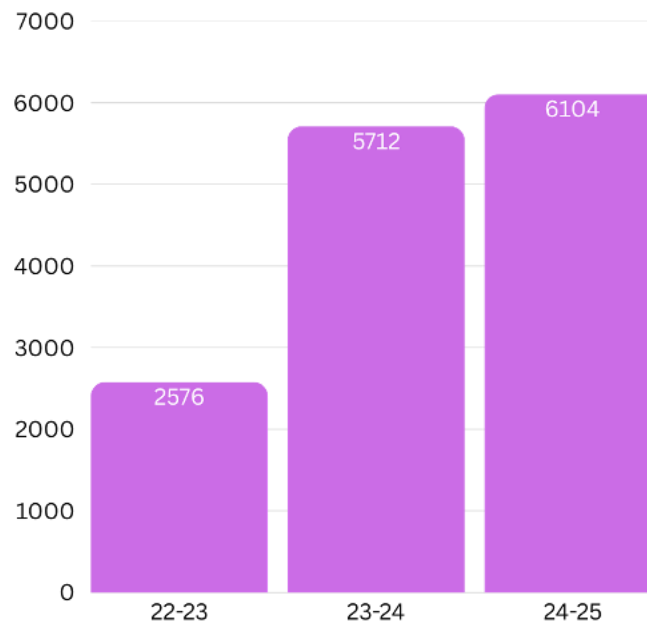


FIGURE 2. Student volunteering hours September – August.

In the first three years of the collaboration, Leeds Law School students have stood alongside people navigating the justice system on 12,633 occasions. This equates to 14,392 hours of reassurance, guidance, and restored dignity to litigants in person (Figure 2). This is an immense amount of support for people who do not qualify for legal aid and would otherwise have received no legal assistance.

The collaboration significantly benefits the students, and their feedback on their time with STC has been largely positive, from the skills they have gained to the impact volunteering has had on their personal and professional development. One student said about their experience at STC,

My experience has been amazing so far and has helped me develop and adapt employability skills. I have gained a lot of confidence due to volunteering here.’ Another stated, ‘Volunteering has widened my view of the legal world, especially having my first contact hours with clients and seeing what a career in law might be like.

Some students noted disappointment with clients canceling appointments at the last minute or with cases being adjourned, leaving them unable to attend the new court date and miss that experience. Others found it difficult where they could not provide legal advice, stating there were situations where I was unable to aid a client. In some cases, signposting a client who had been passed from pillar to post felt harsh. Their feelings of frustration were sometimes quite impactful as it felt that you were powerless to help them in certain situations.

Though these are certainly negative comments, these still presented learning opportunities for the students. Legal practice is unpredictable and all who work within the justice system must adapt to whatever each day presents, whether this is a rescheduled hearing or someone not showing up

for an appointment. Students also need to appreciate the limits of the help they can provide, whether that is legal advice or another form of support to a client. Whilst at the time these experiences may have felt negative, they will form a solid learning experience on the realities of legal practice. From an institutional perspective, Leeds Beckett's partnership with STC has been vital in furthering our students' education and in helping the law school and the university have a deeper impact as an anchor institution by advancing the social justice mission.

This practice piece has outlined how practical lawyering experiences can help local communities access justice and provide students with vital skills. This next section outlines how practical academic work can also further our position as an anchor institution and provide students with alternative experiences to legal practice.

Policy/Law Reform Projects

Law reform and policy clinics are not a new concept in clinical legal education (Curran, 2007; Carpenter, 2013), but their number has increased significantly in the UK (McConnell et al, 2026). The purpose of these clinics is to conduct legal research with the specific aim of influencing law or policy reform. Clients come from a broad spectrum and can often be charities, NGOs, academics with research projects, or external clients trying to effect reform. Law reform and policy clinics are less about justice and more about educational benefit, i.e., going beyond the classroom to appreciate issues and gaps in the legal system, thinking about the law in practical terms, and considering how it can be reimaged (McConnell et al., 2024). During these projects, students identify research aims either based on their own processes or on the client's brief, conduct a literature review, and design a suitable methodology to collect data that address the research issues. This opens students to new aspects of learning and development.

First, it provides students with the opportunity to conduct research, often empirical, in ways that are not possible during their formal law degree. Students are not usually permitted to collect and analyze primary data, but in policy clinics students can do this under the supervision of an experienced researcher. It therefore introduces students to the world of academic research and allows non-practicing academics to engage with this teaching methodology and mentor students (Dunn et al., 2020). They learn how to analyze and discuss data in a meaningful way, without making assumptions about the legal issues or exaggerated claims. This helps them to understand how to construct legal arguments based on evidence and make valuable, realistic recommendations for reform. This is also a skill that can help them in legal practice, through an appreciation of doctrinal and empirical research to understand the law and the implications of changing it (Lady Hale, 2019).

Second, it can develop skills that may be harder to do within a traditional law clinic setting. In policy clinics, students can take on more leadership roles, taking responsibility for certain parts

of the projects and advancing them to completion. Other skills identified in the policy clinic literature include research, advocacy, project management, teamwork, and communication with stakeholders, as well as the exploration of their own values (Gledhill & Palmer, 2024; Hardie, 2024). Students are often encouraged to look to other jurisdictions, seeking inspiration for how a law or set of laws can operate more efficiently, and determine whether it could transfer to our legal system. Through this educational method, students can become ‘citizens of the world’, which teaches them to think deeply about the law and its sociological impacts (Ross, 2017, p. 362) and provides them with a better understanding of legal systems and the law (Coper, 2007).

Finally, it opens students up to careers away from traditional legal practice. Students realize there are different ways to work within the law, and that careers such as research and policy positions in think tanks, charities, NGOs, and government are available as alternatives to practice. There are several ways to influence the law, and impactful research to drive change is one, with the ability to instill a social justice ethos in students that can extend into their profession (Carpenter, 2013; Coper, 2007). Students who have undertaken policy projects have considered or pursued PhD study, entering the academic profession to continue impactful research (McConnell et al., 2024).

Leeds Law School has recently begun engaging students in policy and law reform projects. The first project was undertaken for Grandchildren First (formerly Grandparents United for Children). This organization works to reinstate relationships between grandchildren and their grandparents following familial alienation (Grandchildren First, n.d.). They had several aims for law reform, including amending the Children Act 1989 to include a legal presumption of contact between grandchildren and their grandparents, and educating practitioners, mediators, and those working with children, such as social workers, about the importance and benefits of this relationship. Leeds Law School hosted a Grandchildren First event (Essex Law Research Blog, 2023) and, in collaboration with the organization, decided to work on a small pilot project exploring legal practitioners' experiences of grandparent involvement in contact cases.

In 2022, market research company Savanta found that over 2 million grandparents had at some point been prevented from seeing their grandchild(ren), with over one-third having had a relationship with them for at least 4 years prior to alienation (Lloyd Platt & Co., n.d.). Further, 2,000 applications were made in 2016 by grandparents seeking a Child Arrangement Order (Hansard: Huddleston MP, 2018). Unlike parents, grandparents are not entitled applicants to family court proceedings under s.10(4) Children Act 1989, meaning they need to obtain the court's leave to make an application, thereby raising legal costs and the time spent on their case. Further, grandparents have no equal presumption under s.1(2) of the Children Act 1989 that parental involvement in a child's life will further the child's welfare unless the contrary is proved. Grandchildren First wanted the project to explore the common issues grandparents face when seeking access to their children through a Child Arrangement Order and to explore any

potential reforms that would make it easier for grandparents to be involved parties in legal proceedings.

Two supervisors and five students were involved in this project. One supervisor is an experienced researcher and the other an experienced family law practitioner who teaches in the law clinic. The students started by conducting a literature review of the current legal status of grandparents and their position in the family court system, as well as the psychological impacts of contact between grandparents and their grandchildren, including benefits and alienation. Next, students worked with the supervisors to design an interview plan. The supervisors submitted the ethics application and contacted practitioners in the region with experience working with grandparents, as outlined on their professional webpage. As there is little work in this area, we did not expect a large number of participants, with some having only experienced a few cases involving grandparents. There were five participants in total (three barristers and two solicitors), with all interviews taking place via Microsoft Teams. A student was involved in four of the five interviews, leading a section of each interview and asking probing/follow-up questions as needed. Once all interviews were completed, the entire team analyzed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Then each took a part of the findings and discussion to write for the final report. Recommendations were made to Grandchildren First, and they are using this research to help with their lobbying and discussions with policymakers.

The students involved thoroughly enjoyed this project and felt they had gained skills from it. They felt it was something slightly different to put on their CV and would enhance their employability. One student was so excellent during the project, she was selected to be a research assistant on a separate project and has since written a journal article with that research team. Policy projects allow for further career development in ways traditional or other models of clinical legal education may not and provide students with more opportunities during their legal education and beyond. They can also achieve access to justice in a different way, contributing to meaningful law reform. Universities can provide the evidence needed when lobbying for change, and as Anchor Institutions, we have a responsibility to contribute to the work of charities and NGOs.

Is a Pro Bono Partnership Better Than a Singular Approach?

As mentioned above, one of the aims of all our pro bono activities, given we are not an institution with infinite resources, is to obtain as much value as possible for every pound we spend. Our numerous outreach programs are easy to cost: travel costs and time costs are calculable, but quantifiable differences in their delivery can make comparison difficult. As such, we have chosen our law clinic, along with our strategic partner STC, to illustrate the benefits of working in partnership with an external organization. The table below outlines appropriate costs.

TABLE 1. Comparison of annual costs: Traditional law clinic and Support Through Court

Cost category	Traditional Law Clinic	Support Through Court
Academic staff / supervisor	£74,000	£34,000
Administration	£10,000	£0
Management	£5,000	£0
Building / office space	£20,000	£5,000
Total cost	£109,000	£39,000
Number of students per year	48	100
Cost per student	£2,270	£390

Note. Costs are presented in pounds sterling. Cost per student was calculated by dividing total annual cost by the number of students per year.

All costs referred to have been calculated with assistance from Leeds Beckett's finance department, using student numbers drawn from the university's records for the 2024-5 academic year.

Focussing on per capita student costs, it can clearly be shown that the partnership with STC provides incredible value for money when compared with the costs of running our own law clinic service. Whilst the service offer is different, the student experience is comparable, clearly demonstrating that partnership can be more cost-effective than a law clinic advice service.

Further, our law clinic is limited in the number of students it can accommodate, whereas STC has a much greater capacity for placements and student volunteers. As stated above, our cohort comprises students from diverse backgrounds, including over 53% from socially deprived backgrounds. The ability to present them with more opportunities to engage in clinical legal education, building their CVs and confidence, benefits not only these students but also the law school. As an Anchor Institution, we must provide our students with the ability to engage with community projects, ensuring they can develop skills and attributes, whilst also addressing inequalities in society (Sladek, 2017).

Conclusion

The case studies in clinical legal education in this article show how community initiatives can achieve two aims: providing students with a practical education whilst providing the community with vital legal assistance. Leeds Law School has provided the community with access to justice in a variety of ways, including legal advice, assistance in court, and advocacy for law reform. As an Anchor Institution, we have embedded Leeds Law School within the local community, helping to provide vital legal services whilst also equipping, mostly low socio-economic status, students with essential skills and increasing their employability prospects. The social justice

ethos of the law school has allowed us to collaborate with local communities and to be situated in mutually beneficial relationships with our clients, helping those who would otherwise not have access to legal services.

STC student volunteers and law clinic students will enter the legal profession with a greater understanding of the everyday issues people face and a realistic outlook on the courts and legal procedures. It is our goal that students not only understand what the law is and how it works, but also where it is failing and how it can be improved. Only then can our graduates enter legal employment and work to make the system better for all. Leeds Law School is an example of how the two goals of clinical legal education (social justice and education) can be achieved symbiotically, and that it does not have to be either one or the other. With opportunities to engage in real-world practice and law reform projects, students can explore socio-legal concepts in a supportive and reflective environment. Further, our support for charities like STC is a novel model and one that has proved beneficial. It is unlikely that STC is the only one facing financial challenges, and other third-sector legal advice organizations would no doubt be interested in a similar symbiotic model. This practice piece outlined how law schools can go one step further to more effectively anchor themselves in their local communities and beyond.

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