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Sports Law in Motion: The Sports Law Clinic @UCC – A unique learning and teaching space for student engagement, dynamism and creativity

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Introduction

UCC Sports Law Clinic is the only undergraduate clinic of its kind in the world (https://sportslawclinic.wordpress.com/). It was initially founded and developed by Dr Aisling Parkes and Dr Seán Ó Conaill (UCC School of Law) in 2015, established on foot of an Irish Research Council New Foundations Award. The Clinic not only provides undergraduate law students with an exceptional research experience, as well as an extraordinary learning experience in terms of skills development and application of law to facts, but it also provides a free legal information service to the wider community both within and outside of UCC. It is a student-led initiative and encourages students to be creative, innovative and to think outside the box. Through student research, overseen by Dr Ó Conaill and Dr Parkes as clinic directors, a much-needed pro bono information service in the field of sport is made accessible to the local community.

Method

Our teaching philosophy has always centred on the need to ensure that students engage in deep learning as a result of teaching, while also enjoying the experience as much as possible. We believe that the key to being successful in achieving these aims is having the ability to empathise with students – adopting a student-centred and, where possible, a student-led approach. Instilling confidence in students is central to our teaching philosophy.

The clinic is student-led (each week, one of the eight clinic students has the opportunity to chair the board meeting; another will act as secretary) and encourages students to be creative and innovative. The creativity of the students is evident from their creation of the clinic's social media pages, the logo, the website, the headed paper, as well as the development of interviews and a video which highlights the work of the clinic. Moreover, on a weekly basis, students are responsible for: the intake of cases, the recording of meetings and the delegation of work amongst the group, the organisation of clinic events, the arrangement and conduct of meetings with clients (together with a Clinic Director (/s)) and for the provision of information in a timely and professional manner.

Findings

From a practical point of view, active student participation in the clinic is critical. Given the nature of the cases received on a regular basis, students must engage with the material and cannot be passive recipients of knowledge. This facilitates a much more rounded understanding of the subject matter - where the students not only learn from their experience in the clinic but also from their interactions with each other. In promoting this kind of active learning, the aim is to facilitate the sharpening of students' problem solving, analytical and

communication skills, proficiencies particularly important for the study of law as well as for the professional environment.

The clinic environment encourages students to be creative and to use their own practical knowledge and understanding of today's online world to highlight the work of the clinic. The digital literacy of today's student cohort means that students of the clinic are encouraged and supported to expand on their current skillset in a safe and controlled space. Key examples of how the clinic environment provides the space for creativity are evident from the Sports Law Clinic social media pages where interviews conducted by the students with high profile athletes have been posted over the past year.

Students learn to collaborate with peers as members of a team. While official clinic meetings occur weekly, the cases that students are working on require them to meet as a group outside of designated class time. The latter requires commitment and dedication and encourages students to work together as a team. Finally, the clinic works on the basis of peer evaluation, so that peers oversee each other's work which is ultimately overseen by the Clinic Directors.

Dr Ó Conaill and Dr Parkes co-facilitate the clinic each year and actively seek ways to improve the delivery of the module for the students. The module is student-led in more ways than one with student feedback being integral to the ongoing enhancement of the module. Indeed, student feedback has directly informed amendments to the Book of Modules (https://www.ucc.ie/admin/registrar/modules/?mod=lw3373).

The Clinic is assessed by way of a reflective Learning Journal (50%) and a research project (50%). The only requirement for entry to the clinic is that the students have undertaken or are undertaking (as co-requisite) Sports Law [LW3373]. As part of the evaluation of the clinic module for the academic year 2018/19, when asked if there was anything they would change about the module, many students referred to the method of assessment and the number of students on the clinic committee at any one time: 'the assessment and the number of people in the clinic and maybe interviews to get into the clinic'; 'Give a higher % mark for weekly work done through the clinic; 'possibly the way it is corrected but nothing other than that'; 'the assessment, the number of members – small would have worked better', 'look to changing the assessment'.

Conclusion

The clinic experience enables students to develop the graduate attributes and connected values envisioned in the *UCC Academic Strategy 2018-2022.* Through partaking in this module, law students learn to engage directly with real life clients. Students are exposed to the importance of research in the context of sports law and learn the importance of teamwork. Students also learn about making mistakes in a professional context and, as a result, how to cope with the consequences. They learn the importance of punctuality, dedication and commitment when working with others towards a common goal.

The Sports Law Clinic also provides a service to the local community by hosting sports events for the wider community. Annually, students take responsibility for hosting such a public information event for the local community (https://sportslawclinic.wordpress.com/increased-regulation-in-sport/).

References

UCC Academic Strategy 2018-2022 (Cork: UCC, 2018)