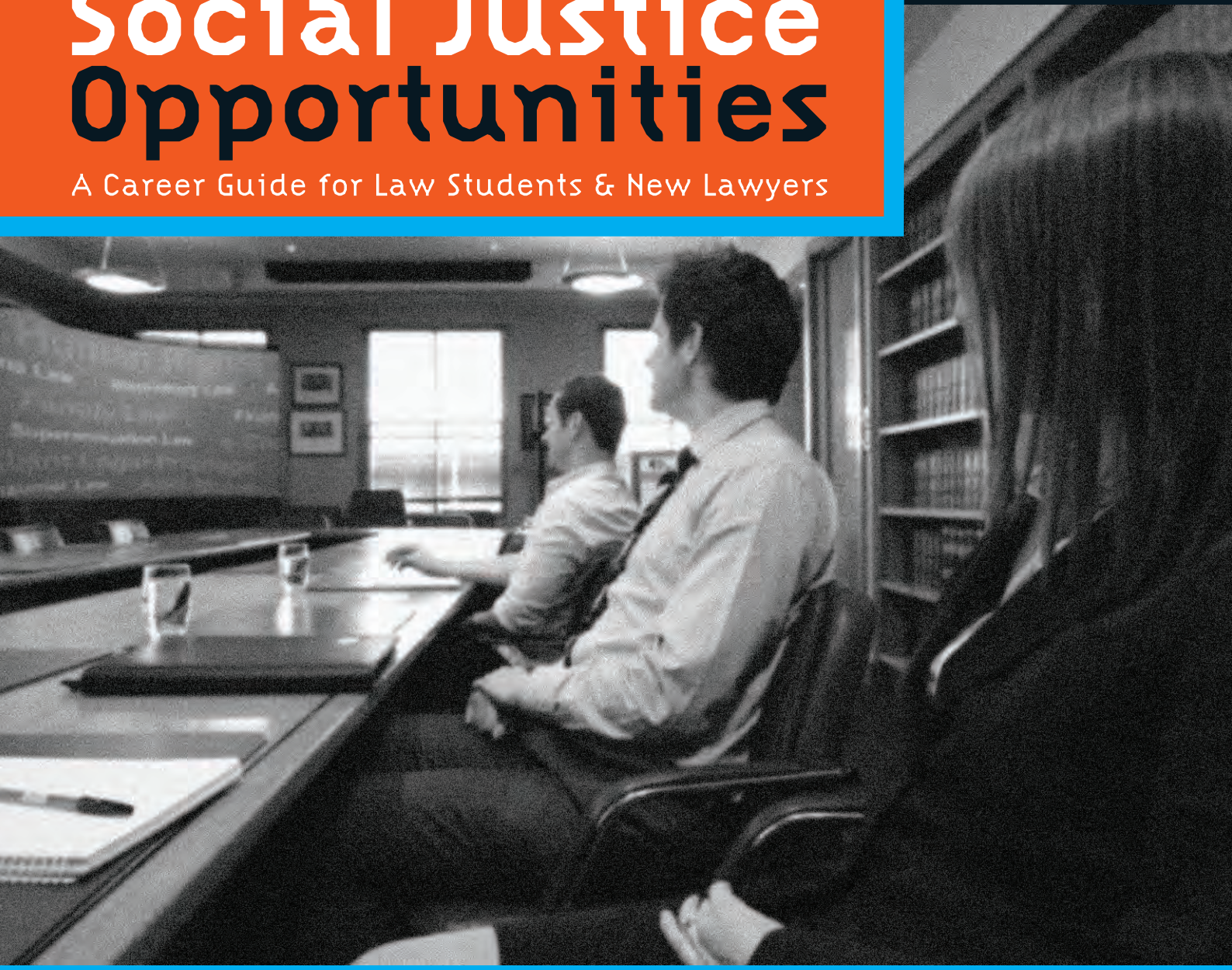
Social Justice Opportunities

A Career Guide for Law Students & New Lawyers



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NATIONAL PRO BONO RESOURCE CENTRE

AUSTRALIAN LAW STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

Social Justice & why you should get involved

Justice usually involves fairness in individual cases, but social justice is about more than this. It is about ensuring that the structures of society are fair and just for the vulnerable and disadvantaged. Lawyers working to improve social justice outcomes often use individual cases to illustrate how an unjust law should be amended, or run test cases to change an unfair law that affects many people.

Get involved in social justice **right now** and continue that commitment throughout your legal career. You can do this:

- By volunteering at any time (p.4)
- While studying at university (p.8)
- In your PLT placement (p.12)
- In the job that you choose (p.13)
- By doing pro bono legal work (p.16)

Getting involved in social justice means helping your community or a fellow human being who is having a tough time, but it isn't just about the warm fuzzy feeling you get on the inside. **It is also an opportunity to apply your legal knowledge practically.** Learning black-letter law in lectures is different to learning how the law applies in 'real life' situations.

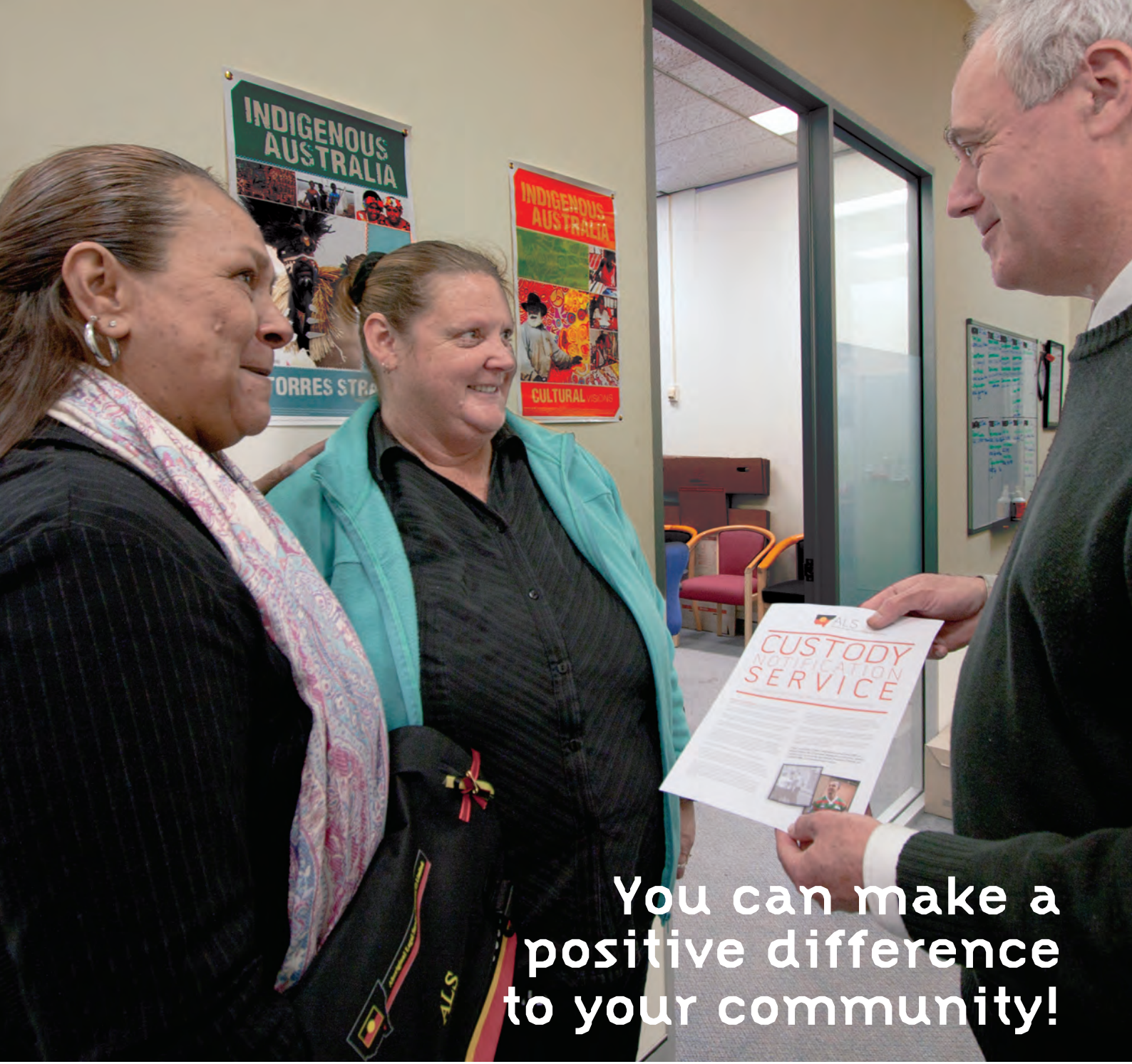
Whether you are hoping to get a clerkship, looking for a graduate position, or aiming to work in a not-for-profit organisation, your practical experience will provide you with the broader legal experience that employers are looking for.

You will learn how to communicate with clients and colleagues, work well in a team and will develop skills in negotiation, dispute resolution, drafting, legal research and analysis.

If you are interested in working in the not-for-profit or public sector after you graduate, volunteering will give you a head-start by providing networking opportunities and improving your knowledge of the sector. Many law firms and corporate employers have Corporate Social Responsibility and Pro Bono policies, and volunteer experience indicates that your values resonate with theirs. Volunteer experience also reflects a well-rounded and mature individual.

Becoming involved in social justice is a fantastic opportunity to meet like-minded people and make new friends, but the greatest benefit is having the personal satisfaction of knowing that you are able to help people, contribute to society and make a difference.

Right: Tracey Roberts, Rose Morrisey and Peter Lemesurier at the Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT) office in Canberra.



You can make a positive difference to your community!

Volunteering at any time

AT A COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRE (CLC) OR OTHER COMMUNITY LEGAL ORGANISATION

You can find current volunteering opportunities at CLCs across Australia on the **CLC Volunteers website**. Here you will also find opportunities at some other community legal organisations including **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services** (ATSILS) and **Family Violence Prevention Legal Services** (FVPLS), or you can try their own websites.

CLCs provide legal assistance and advice to the public. They can also work more broadly, e.g. by providing community legal education, lobbying for reform, or making submissions to government. As a volunteer, you could help with tasks such as answering calls for assistance from clients, summarising their legal issues for a solicitor and then interviewing them face-to-face. You could even be researching policies affecting the clients of the organisation or assisting in the development of submissions to government about law reform.

Build real-world skills in dealing directly with clients by volunteering at a CLC or other community legal organisation as a student. Stand out from the crowd when you're looking for employment in the future, whether it's in a social justice organisation, a corporate law firm or anywhere else.

Even early in your degree you may be able to assist in the provision of legal services. This may include administrative work such as booking clients into advice sessions or helping to prepare paperwork for the organisation. Court support work is another avenue; accompanying clients to court not for the provision of legal advice, but as a friendly face providing support and basic information about how the court system works.

Generalist CLCs provide general legal assistance to those living in a defined geographic area. Specialist CLCs provide assistance in relation to particular areas of law, social groups or interests.

CLCs focus on broad areas of legal need:

- Aged-Care
- Arts
- Animal Welfare
- Asylum Seekers and Refugees
- Consumer Credit
- Children's Rights
- Child Support
- Disability Discrimination
- Employment Law
- Environment
- Family Law
- Human Rights
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
- Mental Health
- People living with HIV/AIDS
- People with Intellectual Disabilities
- Prisoners
- Public Interest Matters
- Seniors
- Tenancy
- Youth
- Welfare Rights
- Women's Rights

Generalist CLCs often have specialist clinics or units as well. For details of the areas covered by CLCs refer to the online version of this guide – **www.sjopps.net.au**.

You can volunteer at any time, even when you are employed – most CLCs, for example, have night clinics or other ways for solicitors to assist outside of business hours.

There are well over 200 independent, not-for-profit CLCs across the country, and there are often more positions available in the outer suburbs and in remote, rural and regional areas than in the inner city.

You can find more information on CLCs in your area on the **National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) website** or via your state or territory's peak body (listed on the **NACLC website**). You can get a snapshot of the issues by attending a national or state conference of CLCs, which have discounted rates for students.

Before volunteering at the Welfare Rights Centre I had no practical experience working in the area of law. It has enabled me to build my confidence and communication skills when talking to clients. Katrina, student and CLC Volunteer at Welfare Rights Centre, Sydney

I never expected to be given so much responsibility, but the staff there entrusted me with some important and incredibly interesting roles. I got to learn first hand about the struggles of small business owners from developing countries and came away from the experience feeling like I had made a real difference. I loved the work so much that I stayed on after my internship as a volunteer. Charlotte, intern, non-legal community organisation

Volunteering at any time

AT A NON-LEGAL COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Start by thinking about issues that are important to you, such as homelessness, migrant's rights or youth. Identify the community organisations that work in those fields by, for example, having at look at websites such as **Fido Skilled Volunteering** or **Pathways Australia**, then go to the organisations' individual websites or contact them directly about volunteer opportunities. Some organisations are always looking for volunteers while others have regular intakes at set times of the year.

You could be volunteering at a homeless shelter, visiting refugee detention centres with outreach programs, volunteering to provide homework support to recently arrived migrants or volunteering with groups which run activities for people with disabilities.

You will gain a wide range of skills including interpersonal and administrative skills as well as the ability to demonstrate sensitivity when working with vulnerable and disadvantaged clients.

By volunteering at a community organisation in a non-legal role you can demonstrate your genuine enthusiasm for altruistic work and improve your chances of getting a law-related position – especially if you're a first or second-year law student who doesn't have much legal training.

Left: Aurora interns placed at Cape York Institute, courtesy The Aurora Project

Right: Volunteer lawyer with local artist. Photo by Iain Morton courtesy Ananguku Arts (and Arts Law Centre of Australia).

At University

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES EXIST AT YOUR LAW SCHOOL?

You can find opportunities at your law school to get involved in social justice work. Many law schools sponsor and support clinical legal education programs, social justice internships/outreach programs, stand alone public interest electives and student pro bono programs.

Ask your law school what social justice opportunities they offer through clinics, internships or other programs. Talk to your Dean, your lecturers and fellow students about the curriculum and creating more opportunities for students.

I have come to the realisation that there is more to law than the corporate sector, but that as a law student I can also make an impact by putting my hand up to volunteer, promote the work of and even pursue a future career in the community legal field. Jamie, student, clinical legal education

Clinical Legal Education

Many Australian law schools offer their students the opportunity to work and study in a legal clinic environment (real and/or simulated). Legal clinics typically provide free legal services to clients in a community legal centre environment.

You get hands-on legal experience by providing assistance to solicitors with research, drafting legal arguments, providing advice, meeting with clients and perhaps accompanying clients to court.

Participating in clinical legal education will give you a deeper understanding of how a legal clinic operates and its role within the legal system, as well as the ethical aspects and impact of the law and legal processes. You learn a lot from interactions with clients, your fellow students and colleagues and your supervisor – more than you could ever learn from textbooks and lectures.

Kingsford Legal Centre publishes a **Clinical Legal Education Guide to courses offered in Australian Universities** online.

I finally realized after 5 long years why I had studied law, and just how effective it can be to effect long term, systemic social reform. I went away feeling incredibly inspired. Alessandra, student, clinical legal education

Internships/Outreach programs

Internships give you the opportunity to be placed in a centre or organisation with a social justice focus and to see how they do their work. In addition to legal work, you will also be exposed to how the office functions and learn to operate in a real-work environment.

You can find out about internship opportunities by contacting your law school. Internship placements are sometimes on campus, but often external to your university, and can include an overseas placement. There are sessional internships (e.g. 1 day a week for 13 weeks), and block placements (e.g. every day for a month or longer). You can even obtain academic credit for undertaking an internship at law schools which have active internship programs.

Internship opportunities can be quite diverse, whether it is a placement with a state-based Public Defenders Office, an NGO such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace, or a court such as the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Student Pro Bono Programs

If you get involved in pro bono legal work as a student, you provide your services without fee, reward or academic credit (For more information on pro bono see page 16). While the primary drivers of student pro bono programs are community service and a concern for justice, you can also gain valuable communication, teamwork and leadership skills. As there is no academic credit for such activity, this option offers you greater flexibility in organising the program to suit your timetable.

Get involved with your Student Law Society to organise a student pro bono program.

Some law student societies have successfully established student pro bono programs at their universities. The **National Pro Bono Resource Centre** can provide you with a template to set up a program using the **Pro Bono Students Australia** model.

Former Vice-President of UNSW Law Student's Association and former Vice-President of ALSA at National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference

At University

Awards

In addition to the satisfaction of contributing to your community, you can also gain recognition and awards.

Check with your law school about what, if any, awards exist to recognise student involvement in social justice work. For example in Victoria, there is the **Chief Justice's Medal for Excellence and Community Service** which is awarded each year to one graduating Victorian law student who has demonstrated academic excellence in their legal studies and a commitment to community service. At the University of Technology, Sydney, the **Brennan Justice and Leadership Program** provides an award for students who, over the course of their degree, complete both 'Reflections on Justice' and 'Leadership through Service' elements and accrue points from a combination of lectures, discussions groups and voluntary activity.

INTERNATIONAL

If you are interested in social justice in an international context, you can apply for unpaid internships and volunteer opportunities with international organisations. To find out more about organisations you are interested in contact them directly.

Formal internship programs are usually limited to graduate law students, so check before applying, although opportunities for undergraduates do exist through some clinical programs at some universities. However, volunteering overseas in a social justice environment is usually open to undergraduate students. Selection criteria differ between organisations, but generally, you will need to demonstrate a genuine interest in the relevant subject area and a strong academic record. For some positions, you will have an advantage if you have a working knowledge of the working languages of the organisation or the country where the internship is based.

There are internship opportunities for final year students available at the **United Nations** in its New York headquarters and related UN offices, funds and programmes. You can also check out websites such as **reliefweb.int/jobs** or **devnetjobs.org** to find opportunities to intern or volunteer with other international organisations. For example, internships for undergraduate students are offered by the **International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia**, which prosecutes war crimes that occurred during the Balkan conflicts.

Through my CLE placement I found out about another social justice program at uni and as a result next month I will travel to Borneo to conduct research and advocate for local indigenous legal rights. Sarah, student, clinical legal education

There is a diverse range of causes you can get involved in overseas, from development & health to diplomacy & human rights.

AGS lawyer providing training in Papua New Guinea, courtesy Australian Government Solicitor

Practical Legal Training

You will need to undertake a practical legal training (PLT) course, or articles of clerkship, to be admitted to practice in Australia. You will need to organise your 15 weeks of supervised work experience in an approved work placement, paid or voluntary. For the specific work experience requirements of a particular PLT provider either contact the provider or check their website.

You can undertake a PLT-approved work placement at a community legal centre or other NGO. This can even be overseas if that experience is undertaken in a common law jurisdiction.

You can approach an NGO or community legal centre (CLC) to see if they will allow you to undertake the work experience component of your PLT there – some CLCs even have their own programs. It is up to you, however, to check that they can fulfill the requirements. A full list of CLCs can be found at **naclc.org.au/directory** or **clcvolunteers.net.au**.

The **Victorian Federations of CLCs** offers a graduate program that includes the payment of all PLT fees, for example, and NACLC has a project to encourage law graduates to work in remote, rural and regional CLCs for their PLT work experience and placements; see **lawgraduatesrrrclc.org**

Regional, rural and remote (RRR)

There are specific incentive schemes and internship programs for graduates who are willing to work in RRR areas. For example see NACLC's **Law Graduates for CLCs**, **ATSILS and Family Prevention Legal Services in Regional Australia** and the **WA Country Lawyers Graduate Program**.

You can find videos, jobs and other information about what it's really like to work in RRR Australia by checking out **rrrlaw.com.au**.

Lawyers from the WA Country Lawyer Graduate Program, courtesy Legal Aid Western Australia

Employment

You can use your legal skills to further social justice throughout your working life. There are opportunities to contribute on a full-time, part-time or volunteer basis. When looking for your first job, you should be aware that some organisations offer **paid internships** for new graduates, e.g. Legal Aid Commissions **(see below).**

LEGAL AID COMMISSIONS

Legal Aid Commissions in each state and territory assist economically and socially disadvantaged people to understand, protect and enforce their legal rights.

There are a small number of highly sought-after positions with Legal Aid, so experience volunteering in a community legal centre or other similar role is one of the best ways to boost your chances.

Given the shortage of lawyers in many RRR parts of Australia, you are likely to find that there are more job opportunities in RRR areas than in the city.

Legal Aid NSW offers a Career Development Program for new solicitors with less than 12 months post-admission legal work experience and **Victoria Legal Aid** employs first and second year lawyers through the New Lawyers' Program. **Legal Aid Western Australia** has opportunities through its Graduate Program and Country Lawyer's Graduate Program for graduates and **Legal Aid Queensland** offers a formal Graduate Recruitment Program for final year law students, individuals enrolled in a PLT course and newly admitted practitioners.

The **Legal Services Commission of South Australia, Legal Aid Tasmania**, **Legal Aid ACT** and **Northern Territory Legal Aid** do not have graduate employment programs. Vacancies are advertised as they arise on the **South Australia Public Sector Notice of Vacancies**, **Tasmanian Government Careers website** and the Employment Opportunities page of **Legal Aid ACT** and **NT Legal Aid**.

Employment

NON GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS (NGOs)

There are thousands of non government organisations in Australia working in a wide variety of fields whose mission is to further social justice .

Only a few of the larger NGOs in Australia employ in-house lawyers, including the **Salvation Army**, **Red Cross** and **Mission Australia**. These organisations do not run formal graduate programs and don't very often have vacant positions, so you will need to be proactive in your job search and perhaps be willing to do non-legal work to get a start in the organisation.

If you are interested in working for a particular NGO, enquire directly about legal positions. Most organisations have contact numbers listed on their websites.

There are various lists of Australian NGOs and Interest Groups, for example **Ausaid** has a register of key accredited NGOs and the **Australasian Political Studies Association** provides a more extensive list.

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS, AGENCIES AND AUTHORITIES

One of the roles of government is to improve social justice for its citizens. Government Departments and Agencies are tasked with implementing relevant policies.

Your view as to the extent to which a particular government agency or department furthers social justice may inform your decision to apply for a job there.

State and Federal Governments have developed strategies intended to promote a more socially inclusive society, in particular for those vulnerable groups most likely to be marginalised, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, children, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with disabilities, older people, women and young people.

You can find a diverse range of graduate employment opportunities within the public service at both the State and Federal levels. Each Department or Agency's website has details of any graduate program offered. The **Australian Public Service Commission** has a **Find Jobs** tool which enables employment seekers to locate vacancies in the public service, and similar websites exist for each State and Territory.

There are even job opportunities available while you are still a student. **LawAccess NSW**, for example, provides legal information to the public on a wide range of areas and has job opportunities each year for Customer Service Officers in its call centres.

COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRES AND OTHER COMMUNITY LEGAL ORGANISATIONS

Working in a CLC or other community legal organisation is working on the front line of social justice and can be incredibly rewarding. It gives you the opportunity to get involved in an area that you are passionate about.

You can get in touch with CLCs, ATSILS and FVPLS directly to find out about paid positions. The **NACLC website** contains links to job advertisements with CLCs and also lists all the CLCs in Australia. More information can often be found on the site of the peak body for CLCs in your state (also listed on the **NACLC website**).

Boost your chances of getting a paid position by volunteering or interning first.

Remember that while positions at inner city CLCs can be hotly contested, there are often many opportunities available in outer suburbs and remote, rural and regional (RRR) areas. To find out about working in RRR areas see **rrrlaw.com.au**, or for PLT opportunities check out **lawgraduatesrrrclc.org**. Information on CLCs and other community legal organisations and what they do can be found on p. 4 and online – **sjopps.net.au**.

Ella Kucharova and Iris Elgueta at the Women's Legal Centre (ACT & Region)

Employment

PRO BONO AS PART OF YOUR WORK LIFE

You will always have opportunities to undertake pro bono work throughout your career – it's just part of being a lawyer.

You can help someone in need and expose yourself to new areas of law and types of work by doing pro bono work. It can be one of the most rewarding parts of your law career.

Pro bono comes from the Latin phrase **pro bono publico**, meaning 'for the public good.' In the legal context it generally refers to the provision of legal services on a free or significantly reduced fee basis.

You can provide pro bono assistance to individual clients who can't afford legal representation and do not qualify for Legal Aid, to non-profit organisations and for matters that are in the public interest. You can do it on your own time or, where your employer has a pro bono scheme, on your employer's time.

Throughout your career as a lawyer, there are many different ways to get involved, whether it be as a law student, through your law firm or as a barrister, even after retirement. You may already be involved with a non-profit organisation that could use your assistance.

At a law firm

Many law firms have organised pro bono programs and provide opportunities for their lawyers to undertake a range of interesting pro bono legal work.

See the Australian Pro Bono Practices Guide for details of the pro bono programs of many of the large and mid-tier law firms throughout the country.

You might be seconded to a CLC, providing advice to a homeless person in an evening clinic, preparing papers for a case in the Federal Court, becoming part of a litigation team pursuing public interest litigation or undertaking research on the effect of an international treaty. A diverse range of work is undertaken through law firm pro bono programs.

Ask the firm you seek to join about their pro bono program.

Barristers on District Court Circuit, courtesy Legal Aid Western Australia

The willingness of lawyers to undertake pro bono work is a key fact that distinguishes the profession of law from it being a mere business.
Chief Justice of the High Court, the Hon. Murray Gleeson

I was surprised to find that all lawyers at the firm are encouraged to complete a certain number of hours of pro bono work each year. It is a refreshing change to deal with smaller scale legal problems (as compared to commercial legal issues) for individuals that really have nowhere else to turn to.
Anon, lawyer, large corporate law firm

As a barrister

Many of Australia's great public interest cases have been run by barristers acting pro bono, e.g. *Mabo*, *Vadarlis* (the MV Tampa case), *Roach* (prisoner's right to vote) and *Mallard* (wrongful imprisonment for murder).

You can contact your Bar Association to see if it runs its own pro bono referral scheme (in Victoria and Queensland the state's **Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH)** manages the Scheme on the Bar Association's behalf). In all these cases your Bar Association or pro bono clearing house will assess applications from clients, community legal organisations and NGOs for means and/or public interest and merit and then provide a brief. You will only be offered matters that match your experience and interests and you will not be under any obligation to accept.

Many states and territories also have a Duty Barrister Scheme running in one or more local courts. These schemes operate on a roster system and allow you to gain experience representing clients in Court. Your Bar Association will have the details.

You can also build a relationship with a community legal centre (CLC) in your area or whose specialisation matches your interests. For more information on CLCs see p. 4.

Employment

INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Working to improve social justice in an international context can be extremely challenging and rewarding as the inequalities can be vast and the social structures extremely undeveloped.

You could get involved in monitoring human rights compliance and abuses, evaluating developing legal systems, reviewing legislation, mentoring lawyers in basic legal skills, setting up legal system infrastructure, like case management systems for courts, or even finding furniture for courts.

You can look on websites such as **reliefweb.int** or **devnetjobs.org** to find opportunities to volunteer and work with international organisations. Some positions which are called 'volunteer positions' actually pay a substantial living allowance or stipend.

Lawyers Beyond Borders works with overseas partners to identify assignments for Australian lawyers to work with communities on locally-identified projects. There is, however, a large demand for these assignments.

United Nations Volunteers (UNV) is a United Nations organisation that promotes volunteerism to support peace and development worldwide and specifically recruits volunteers with legal qualifications and experience. Many of the opportunities with UNV may be in the field in developing or post-conflict countries, so you will need to be able to adjust to difficult and sometimes dangerous living conditions. You need to possess a university degree or higher technical diploma, have two years of relevant work experience and be at least 25 years of age.

This work will give you valuable field experience but note that it may automatically disqualify you from being considered for any paid professional positions within the United Nations for 12 months, so you shouldn't see it as an easy path to a career with the United Nations itself.

Lawyer providing diplomacy training in Malaysia, courtesy Diplomacy Training Program

I wasn't really sure about law until I started volunteering at a community legal centre. This gave me a new enthusiasm for law and a practical perspective on what I was studying which meant that my marks improved too. Working at a CLC was the best training I could have had for my job at the United Nations.
Leanne, lawyer, United Nations

UN
UNMIL 716

For current information on the opportunities available to you check online at www.sjopps.net.au.

Was this guide useful to you?
How could it be improved?
Please send your comments to **info@nationalprobono.org.au** or **administration@alsa.asn.au**.
We want to hear from you!

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LAW AND JUSTICE FOUNDATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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- **Young Lawyers Committee of Tasmania**
- **Young Lawyers' Committee of Western Australia**
- **Young Lawyers' Section of the Law Institute of Victoria**
- **National Association of Community Legal Centres Inc**
- **Macquarie University Students for Community Legal Engagement (MUSCLE)**
- **University of NSW Social Justice Internship Program**
- **University of Technology, Sydney Brennan Justice and Leadership Program**

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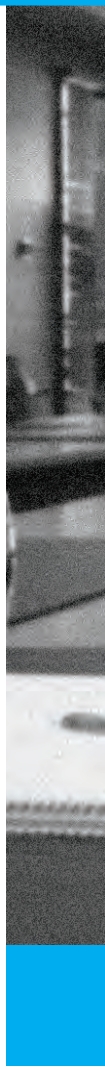

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