



Digital Excellence Impact Case Studies

2021/2022

How on earth do you run a F2F
legal clinic during an
international lockdown?

by Christopher Noon

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Module



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Module





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The Student Law Clinic module has been running since 2012. It provides free legal advice to members of the community many of whom simply have no one else to turn to. The Students are afforded an opportunity to develop three key skills which are needed to become a successful lawyer: communication, research and drafting. The students must provide a portfolio of work which they have conducted throughout the year and two self-reflection essays, the first in January identifying and highlighting which skills need to be improved and in May confirming whether the targets set in January have been met.

One of the best aspects of working in the clinic is the face to face time with clients. It is the first opportunity for many of the students to experience a situation where they are in charge and they are responsible for obtaining information from clients and then providing them with advice. Many lawyers would say that communication is the most important skill to have and if the traditional way in which you do this is taken from you how are you then supposed to develop it? The challenge which the students faced was how to do this when members of the public were no longer allowed on to the University Campus and in semester 2 when no one was allowed on to the University Campus.

The second challenge was to enable the students to complete their work without breaching GDPR and the SRA rules and regulations. From Semester 2 when it was not possible for the students to come on to the campus, I had to adapt the way in which the files were created, worked on, and then stored. Initially it was thought that the students would send encrypted emails to me and I would then organise their work into the relevant files, but this was cumbersome and was impractical. Most law firms are either already paperless or going that way.

In my own consultancy I no longer have any physical files and most letters are sent via email only.

I decided that the clinic would move from a hybrid of paper and digital files to digital files only. I had to obtain undertakings (promises with consequences if breached) from the students regarding confidentiality and then enabled the students to access the case management software from home. They were all provided training prior to moving to this system and they were again reminded of their responsibilities to their clients and to the university. In practise they will have these responsibilities and therefore I was of the opinion that I was not asking them to do anything that they would not be expected to do in approximately 6 months' time if they began working in law firms.

In respect to interviewing clients, students would arrange an appointment with a client, and they would attend the clinic in person. This appointment would be recorded on to DVD and observed by the clinic supervisor via CCTV. The necessity for face to face appointments are to ensure client confidentiality and to ensure that the students comply with the rules and regulations of the Solicitors Regulation Authority. Regarding the work the students did this consisted of three parts; a university server which can only be accessed by members of the clinic; case management software called CLIO and a physical paper file. These elements could only be accessed whilst the students were physically in the clinic which helped to mitigate against any breaches of GDPR and confidentiality rules.

From the start of the academic year it was made very clear that members of the public would not be allowed to come on to campus and therefore it was essential that as the clinic supervisor I built a rapport with the students and that they trusted me. This began in the induction days which are a combination of team building exercises, delivering of information, and most importantly highlighting the very serious responsibilities that the students have. This last part is extremely important because if the students do not abide by the SRA rules and regulations their career could end before it has even started. Much of the feedback received from the students is that this stage really scares them and many lack confidence in their own abilities. I believe that it is my job to build this confidence so that they are then able to fulfil their responsibilities and progress into the profession either as solicitors or barristers.



Two SLC case workers interviewing local criminal solicitor Warren Ridley and barrister Cathy McCulloch regarding a case they later provided advice on Via Teams.”

By laying very strong foundations the students then have the confidence to begin their first steps working in the legal profession. This begins by splitting the module cohort into 6 firms of 6 students and then working with each firm individually. The first task given to the students is the very simple task of telephoning the client to arrange an appointment and this is where we had to move from face to face appointments to online appointments via Teams. The students had to plan and prepare this telephone call thinking about how they would explain what Teams is to members of the public who maybe had no experience of it or indeed video conferencing.

Due to the students being familiar with Teams, having access to their own iPads and appointments can be recorded via Teams I decided that Teams would be used. The other benefit of Teams is that the user interface is very easy to use and it is very easy to download. The hope was that members of the public would feel confident using a Microsoft product and that even the most technologically challenged would be able to use it.

The move to digital files was overall a success. There were some teething problems but by moving to the Case Management Software it reduced my own and the student's workload. They now only had to upload their documents to one place. It also meant that when it came to completing their portfolios all their work was saved in one place and they had access to it all. I therefore conclude that when the clinic reopens in September with the new cohort paper files are not necessary.

There have been no breaches of GDPR, or client confidentiality and I believe due to the foundations being laid at the beginning of the year all of the students took their roles and responsibilities very seriously which will assist them greatly when working in the profession.

“This module is extremely beneficial to our degree as it is totally unique and gives us essential skills and experiences similar to a practicing solicitor...Chris and Sarah (admin support) have been able to adapt the module extremely well to enable us to continue learning and without drastically changing what we do”

Student Survey March 2021

The Teams interviews worked but were not as successful as face to face meetings. The students found building a relationship with the clients at the beginning of interviews extremely difficult. We discussed in the firm meetings small talk and the types of questions they could ask at the beginning of the interview. When conducting face to face meetings it is these small interactions which may seem inconsequential at the time but when they are removed you then realise just how important they are.

The main findings were that the clinic could indeed operate during an international lockdown. Most clients were very happy to conduct interviews via Teams. They too found it more convenient and meant that they did not have to travel to the university. Recording all work digitally was very successful and this enabled the students to curate their own work in their own time and in their own location.

With regard to reflecting on digital excellence I do believe that the students will be able to walk into any law firm and have an excellent understanding of the way a case management system works, how to ensure record and time keeping are done and how to work remotely. These skills are essential to be able to be a productive member of any law firm or indeed working as a self-employed barrister.

Whilst I sincerely hope lockdown ends soon, I do not think firms will necessarily return to solely office based working conditions. I also believe that the students have gained invaluable experience of speaking to clients remotely via Teams. They will have a head start over those who have not had this opportunity which means when they are in practice these types of interactions will come as second nature to them. By facilitating these opportunities for the Teesside Law Students, we have prepared them for “the new normal”.