

Research Article

Optimizing Experiential Learning in Law through Legal Aid Clinics (LAC): Unleashing the Potential of the LAC Navigator

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Abstract: In legal education, experiential learning has gained significant recognition as an effective pedagogical approach in producing practice-ready graduate and well-rounded legal professionals. There is a gradual increase in law schools adopting experiential learning through clinical legal education organized by legal aid clinics. This abstract presents an innovative idea that centers around leveraging a legal aid clinic to enhance experiential learning in legal education. The LAC Navigator is a project that aims to transform a traditional legal aid clinic into a dynamic and immersive learning environment for law students in the Faculty of Law, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The LAC Navigator is a handbook that is specifically designed to enhance the quality of experiential learning by providing students and educators with the essential resources and tools to engage with legal aid clinics. It consists of the guidebook, a registration form for students, client information form, and contact numbers. The project seeks to empower students with comprehensive skills and knowledge while addressing the legal needs of underserved communities. This project's novelty lies in that it is specifically designed for legal education. The navigator for legal aid clinics will incorporate specialized features tailored to their specific requirements. This comprehensive toolkit has great potential for commercialization within the legal education industry as it addresses a crucial need. It can be marketed to law schools, legal training institutes, and individual legal educators. Furthermore, the toolkit can be customized to suit the specific needs of various legal education institutions. The main objective of this project is to utilize legal aid clinics to enhance experiential learning in law, providing law students with practical skills, critical thinking abilities, and a strong sense of social responsibility. By leveraging this innovative approach, the project aims to nurture a new generation of legal professionals who are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of the legal landscape and create a meaningful impact in their respective communities.

Keywords: experiential learning; legal aid clinic; clinical legal education; one-stop center toolkit



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1. INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning through clinical legal education allows students to practice the substantive laws in a real-world situation while they are being fully monitored by the lecturers (Mahmood et al., 2023). Learning through experience brings together theory and practise by giving students numerous opportunities to learn and practise lawyering skills in the same manner that they

are employed in actual legal work (Thomson, 2015). There are four thrusts of experiential learning which are industry-based, community-based, research-based, and personalised learning (Department of Higher Education, 2021). Experiential learning for legal education incorporates all four thrusts through the establishment of legal aid clinics.

Legal aid clinic has been widely recognised as a leading force for experiential learning in legal education (Buggati, 2023). Exposure through the legal aid clinic is a valuable and essential component of legal education and adopting the legal aid clinic as part of experiential legal learning is imperative. It aims to achieve a balance between theory, doctrine, and practise in the legal profession by encouraging law schools to incorporate clinical methods into the law degree (Thomson, 2015; Kemp et al., 2016). Furthermore, law is a social phenomenon that constantly evolving, and law students should be equipped with the actual societal issues. However, many universities face a problem where the institutions fail to effectively bridge the gap between skills acquired and real-world application. Consequently, this gap poses challenges for law students in grasping the expectations of employers and clients (Turner et al., 2019). In order to close the gap, the Faculty of Law, Universiti Teknologi MARA has established a legal aid clinic known as Klinik Bantuan Guaman.

One of the advantages of the legal aid clinic in promoting experiential learning is its ability to provide practical application of knowledge. However, it is worth noting that some learning environments excel more than others in this aspect. Higher education institutions introduced experiential learning as a process of accumulating knowledge through transforming experience in order to create high-impact and meaningful learning experiences for law students (Ali Mohamed et al., 2021). Students of law are given the opportunity to develop a critical understanding of legal doctrine, rules, and procedure, legal theory, the planning, and execution of legal representation of clients, ethical considerations, and the social, economic, and political implications of legal advocacy through clinical legal education, which serves as a training ground for law students. (McFaul, 2020).

As such, a handbook known as LAC Navigator is created to transform the traditional legal aid clinic into a dynamic and immersive learning environment for law students. The handbook is also designed to enhance the quality of experiential learning by providing students and educators with essential resources and tools to engage with legal aid clinics. The LAC Navigator represents a groundbreaking paradigm in legal education. Its core mission revolves around the profound transformation of conventional legal aid clinics into dynamic and immersive learning environments. This approach stands out as an exceptional and distinctive concept in the realm of legal education. Unlike traditional teaching methods, which often rely heavily on theoretical instruction, the LAC Navigator places a heavy emphasis on practical, hands-on experiential learning. This commitment to experiential learning not only sets it apart from conventional approaches but also revolutionizes the way law students engage with legal concepts and their future roles as legal professionals.

2. METHOD & MATERIAL

LAC Navigator is designed to improve legal education through experiential learning. The development of the LAC Navigator involves several essential steps. First, identify the essential elements that must be included in the LAC Navigator. An effective handbook for legal aid clinics must consist of organisational information, step-by-step guidance on conducting cases, comprehensive guidance on performance monitoring, and quality standards, a list of forms, a checklist, and practical tips (Ling & James, 2022). In order to ensure that the LAC Navigator effectively addresses the requirements and expectations of the stakeholders, extensive research has been carried out into the fields of legal education, experiential learning, and the needs of law students and legal professionals.

Second, review the overall operation and management of the legal aid clinic. The analysis is pivotal in ensuring students and educators receive the right direction on how to effectively manage the legal aid clinic and deliver excellent services to the clients (Thomas & Johnson, 2020). All the relevant forms for clients and staff are arranged according to the right sequence for easy reference. Experimentation was done during the LAC Navigator's development in both its functioning and design. To optimise experience learning, developers experiment with various features and user interfaces. Evidence-based approaches make sure the tool is effective in reaching its educational aims by gathering data and user feedback to support design decisions.

Third, choose the appropriate writing format. According to Guerin and DelPo (2017), writing a handbook must be consistent and concise to avoid ambiguity in applying the stipulated procedures. Based on a report by Forbes (2017), 91% of people prefer visual content to text-based. Hence, instead of lengthy text, the LAC Navigator incorporates pictures and illustrations to help illustrate the procedure for easy reference and more readable.

Fourth, evaluation and research can verify The LAC Navigator's efficacy and influence on legal education. This could entail carrying out research or assessments to gauge its influence on legal students' abilities and knowledge, the standard of experiential education, and its capacity to meet the requirements of marginalised populations and legal professionals.

Finally, the LAC Navigator is amenable to continuous improvements based on data and research in order to preserve its functionality. This iterative procedure guarantees that the tool will always be up to date and will continue to satisfy the ever-changing requirements of the legal education.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Definition and Concept of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a form of learning that emphasizes active engagement, reflection, integration, and feedback (Thomson, 2015). Thomson further explain each element as follows:

- i. Active engagement: Experiential learning involves active engagement by the student in the learning process. This can include hands-on activities, simulations, and other forms of active learning.
- ii. Reflection: Experiential learning also involves reflection on the learning experience. This can include debriefing sessions, journaling, and other forms of reflection.
- iii. Integration: Experiential learning involves the integration of theory and practice. This means that students can apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in the classroom to real-world situations.
- iv. Feedback: Experiential learning involves feedback from instructors, peers, and other stakeholders. This feedback helps students to improve their performance and deepen their learning (Thomson, 2015).

3.2 Importance and Benefits in Legal Education

Experiential learning is an important aspect of legal education that helps students develop the knowledge, skills, and values they need to succeed in the legal profession (Thomson, 2015). Specifically, it provides students with practical skills including client interviewing, legal research, drafting legal documents, and advocacy as well as enhances their professional identity, fosters ethical and social

responsibility by working with clients from various socioeconomic, and provides networking opportunities as students can build relationships with lawyers and other legal professionals. (Chavkin, 2009).

3.3 Legal Aid Clinics in Legal Education

Clinical legal education bridges the gap in developing legal professionals by offering students hands-on experience working with real clients, supervised by experienced lawyers. It hones practical skills, fosters a professional identity, and instills ethical and social responsibilities. Real-world exposure deepens their understanding of law's societal impact and builds valuable networks, enhancing their readiness for the legal profession (Giddings & Weinberg, 2020).

3.4 Tools in Running a Legal Aid Clinic

A handbook of legal clinic is an important resource that provides guidance, practical advice, acts as a teaching resource, and addresses the gap in resources available for clinical legal education (Thomas & Johnson, 2020). Nonetheless, the addition of a legal aid technology will help students to develop technology skills that are essential for success in the legal profession and can improve the efficiency of legal services by automating routine tasks and streamlining workflows (Smith, 2022).

3.5 Summary

In summation, this literature review has shed light on the critical elements of experiential learning, highlighting its active engagement, reflection, integration of theory and practice, and the value of feedback. Experiential learning is instrumental in legal education, equipping students with practical skills, fostering their professional identity, and instilling ethical and social responsibility. Legal aid clinics play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between legal theory and practice, offering students the opportunity to work with real clients under expert guidance, enriching their understanding of the legal profession's societal impact, and facilitating valuable networking. To further enhance the effectiveness of legal clinics, a comprehensive handbook is essential, providing practical guidance and acting as a teaching resource. Additionally, integrating legal aid technology can equip students with essential technological skills, improving the efficiency of legal services and preparing them for success in the legal profession. This synthesis underscores the importance of experiential learning, legal aid clinics, and supportive tools in the holistic development of legal professionals.

4. DISCUSSION

Legal aid clinic in law school is an increasing phenomenon that has revolutionised the traditional pedagogy in legal education into an innovative and interactive legal teaching method. It that exposes students' real cases and a form of learning by doing model. The implementation of experiential learning through legal aid clinic is challenging. The main challenge is the clinic needs to provide clinical experience to a large student cohort as many students are interested to participate in the clinical program. It is also difficult for the lectures to monitor big group of students (Atkinson & Livings, 2023). Therefore, the handbook is an effective mechanism as the information in the handbook allow students to work under minimal supervision while engaging with the management works.

It is also pertinent to note that the focus of legal aid clinic is not only students but the community, i.e., to provide solution to the real problems. Clients must receive services in stable and sustainable way. Hence, students must be able to effectively carry out their "role" as legal practitioner in assisting the client. Making appropriate use tools and kits such as handbook for legal aid clinic such as LAC Navigator is important to diversifying and deepening the student learning experience and

assisting client effectively. Furthermore, students are not dealing with ‘problem simulation’, but a ‘real problem’ solution. The student may need to promote some diligences, contacts and procedures with public institutions or services. Hence, the comprehensive handbook that consists of complete guideline and procedure a great assistance for the students and lecturers.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, clinical legal education is recognized for its vital role in shaping law students into competent legal professionals. However, there is notable gap which is the absence of comprehensive guidance for managing legal aid clinics with technological qualities. The LAC Navigator, offers a groundbreaking solution tailored for legal education. Its mission is to transform traditional legal aid clinics into vibrant learning environments. It equips students and educators with the tools needed for effective engagement. By harnessing technology, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and personalizing learning, the LAC Navigator holds the promise of empowering the next generation of legal professionals.

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