

Getting a Job in Human Rights

A practical approach to careers in Human Rights

By Andrew White

The Castan Centre Human Rights Career Series is entering its fifth year and so far it has provided students with an excellent opportunity to learn firsthand what a career in human rights can involve and how to go about attaining one for themselves. Perhaps most encouraging for a student who may be seeking an alternative to the well-trodden commercial law route is that the series has offered a glimpse of the wide variety of jobs that exist in the world of human rights, and the equally varied paths each individual took to get where they are now.

From Shanta Martin, the mining ombudsman and extractive industries advocacy coordinator for Oxfam Australia, who arrived there via articles and four years of commercial litigation at Mallesons, to Reena Ghelani, the deputy head of office at the UN office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, who completed a Bachelor of Arts at Monash and later sought work at a UN office in Nairobi while travelling through Africa, students have taken from these lectures that there is no 'right path' when it comes to a career in human rights.

In spite of the diversity of the speakers, some helpful tips have emerged that are common to them all:

Volunteer Overseas

There is no better way to gain cross-cultural experience than to live and volunteer in a foreign country. Teaching English at places like orphanages is always a popular option as it is usually fairly informal, can often be arranged from within the host country, and may be undertaken for a shorter period than may be required of more formal positions. Many organisations charge a fee to place students in positions overseas working on grass-roots projects such as teaching, construction or conservation, however with a bit of initiative, positions on these types of projects are possible to arrange independently.



The UN's Palais des Nations, Geneva

Students who are more advanced in their studies and perhaps have some legal experience under their belt may prefer to volunteer with an IGO or NGO and have an opportunity to get some human rights law experience. In contrast to English teaching, these positions should be confirmed prior to leaving Australia – in fact many have an application process that begins months prior to starting work. Additionally, it is likely that these organisations will require you to work a minimum of three months. Many of the United Nations acronyms have long-established internship programs that cater to students and have 'student-friendly' vacation timeframes. The Castan Centre offers pre-arranged and partially-funded internships over summer vacation to selected IGOs and NGOs through its Global Internship program. Applications usually open around August, but it is recommended that students keep an eye on the website and Castan Centre email alerts.

Volunteer and Get Active in Melbourne

It is not necessary to travel abroad to show a commitment to human rights as plenty of opportunities exist to volunteer in Melbourne. As with volunteering overseas, positions need not be directly related to human rights law. In fact, due to the limited resources of non-profit organisations and local competition for legal positions, in most cases legal organisations prefer that volunteers have a proven history of volunteering, so it may be necessary to begin in a non-legal position. These positions are just as rewarding to the volunteer, maybe even more so as volunteers will be working directly with the people they are helping. Popular options are teaching English to Sudanese refugees with Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (home.vicnet.net.au/~sail/) and working with the homeless at the St Vincent de Paul soup van (www.vinnies.org.au).

For legal work, volunteer opportunities exist with local organisations such as Legal Aid and community legal centres, the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre (www.rilc.org.au) and the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre (www.asrc.org.au) as well as better known NGOs such as Amnesty International and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In addition, there are numerous opportunities to learn about human rights and to meet interesting people at events around Melbourne. The Castan Centre, Melbourne University's Asia Institute, Amnesty International and the Law Institute of Victoria are just some of the organizations which host regular human rights events.

Get Some Commercial Experience

Many of the speakers honed their legal skills in commercial law before moving into human rights, and these jobs provided them with skills and knowledge that have been very useful to them in their careers in human rights.

Through practicing in commercial law, they found that they picked up skills such as negotiation and tactical reasoning that are not specific to any area of practice and have proved invaluable to them in their human rights work. They also developed the commercial instincts that sometimes elude others who work in the area.

Perhaps the most important aspect of commercial practice that Careers Series guests have pointed to is the opportunity to get involved in pro bono work. Pro bono is becoming increasingly significant to larger commercial practices and for interested young lawyers it is possible to get involved right from the outset.

Undertake Further Study

Particularly if the goal is to work internationally, it is likely that a masters in law will be on the agenda at some point for aspiring human rights lawyers. A quick browse through the jobs, and even some internships on offer, will show that international organisations require a masters as their base degree. Many people choose to do this at least a couple of years after finishing their undergraduate studies. This provides an opportunity to get some 'real world' experience, save some money to both pay for the degree and support yourself while back at uni, and of course to have a break from study.

Alternatively, many people complete a masters part-time, while working. This allows them to maintain their lifestyle and not have to revert to shared-houses and two-minute noodles, but on the other hand restricts them to studying in the city where they work. Due to the proximity to many IGOs, many recommend doing further study at a European institution, though paying international student tuition fees as well as the higher price of living, and often work-restricted student visas, makes this an unrealistic option for many. For high-achievers it may be possible to obtain government or privately funded scholarships to study abroad which can cover both tuition fees and provide a living allowance.

The Castan Centre's careers seminar series will continue in 2008. For details, see the Castan Centre website, which also has presentations by many of our previous speakers.



A United Nations forum, Geneva

Careers Speakers' Hints on How to Get Your Career Going

On Getting to Your Perfect Job

"While at University I decided that I wanted to work as a human rights lawyer with the UN...The strategy I have employed from the beginning has been not to expect to find the perfect job from the get go. Rather, to accumulate experience and with each job change to inch my way towards the ideal job."

Richard Clarke, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

"Be willing to take opportunities as they come up. There are lots of paths you can go down. As long as you use your common sense, there's probably no "wrong" way to go, just different paths. Don't close yourself off to something because you think you won't like it, or because you are afraid, or because your friends or family think it's a bit strange. Be brave and step out of your comfort zone."

Fiona McLeay, General Counsel at World Vision Australia.

On Volunteering

"Volunteer and be involved in human rights/humanitarian action. This demonstrates commitment and you will gain valuable experience. I would never hire someone without voluntary experience in an organisation that works with volunteers. It's like buying your car from a bloke who does not have his license!!!"

Jim Backwell, Manager Community Campaigns, Amnesty International Australia

On Making Contacts

"Get contacts, people who work in areas that you are interested in, so that you can pick their brain. Attend talks and lectures on subjects that interest you and if possible chat to the speaker later."

Phoebe Knowles Legal Assistant to a Defense Counsel at the Special Court for Sierra Leone

On the Value of Commercial Law Experience

"Skills and expertise developed in commercial practice are very valuable and relevant to human rights lawyering."

Phil Lynch, Director, Human Rights Law Resource Centre.

"Get your hands dirty in the 'real' world [first]. The world of human rights and NGOs is pretty surreal to be honest."

Jim Backwell, Manager Community Campaigns, Amnesty International Australia

On Postgraduate Study

"Check out the huge number of options in postgraduate international law studies - organisations will be interested in people who have studied in their particular area of work. Monash is well regarded and known at least to people working in the UN tribunals."

Claire Harris, Barrister and former Legal Officer at the ICTY