

# My internship with the Australian Human Rights Commission

By Jenna Donsky

**For a law student with a strong interest in human rights law, interning at the Australian Human Rights Commission was an experience of a lifetime. I was lucky enough to have this experience through the Aurora Native Title Internship Program.**

I had applied to the Aurora Program hoping to gain an insight into native title and Indigenous issues because I thought it was a fantastic way to obtain exposure to an area of central concern to Australian human rights law. I had fantasised about working in outback Australia never imagining I would be placed in my dream internship. When I was told I was interning in the legal unit of the Australian Human Rights Commission I was thrilled.

The Commission is a national independent statutory body imbued with the mission of promoting and protecting human rights in Australia. It resolves complaints of discrimination or breaches of human rights under federal laws, holds public inquiries into human rights issues of national importance, develops human rights education programs and resources and coordinates research into human rights and discrimination issues. The Commission also provides independent legal advice to courts and advice and submissions to parliaments and governments.

Given the pre-eminence of the Commission and the incredible work it does I was understandably nervous on my first day. I had no idea what was expected of me or how I would fit in but my fears were quickly allayed. I was warmly welcomed into the legal unit of the Commission and given a whirlwind tour. The Commission was nothing like the law environments I had previously experienced. The halls and offices were covered in posters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Indigenous art and school children's drawings depicting various human rights. Rows and rows of books on human rights lined the halls and doors were always open so that you often heard people chatting about national security laws, Indigenous health and the National Human Rights Consultation.

The legal unit itself was incredibly inclusive and I was immediately invited to meetings, conferences, lunches and drinks. I was asked about my interests and every effort was made to include me in work being undertaken on those and other interesting topics. Before I arrived at the Commission, I didn't realize the breadth of the legal unit's work. The legal unit acts as the in-house counsel to the Commission by providing legal advice and representing the other units of the Commission. It also advises on speeches and submissions to government and law reform bodies, prepares reports on individual complaints, and advises on applications for exemptions from federal discrimination law. Working in the legal unit was fascinating and an invaluable experience because it gave me exposure to all facets of the Commission's work and allowed me to work with people throughout the organisation.

During the six weeks of my internship, I was trusted with carrying out real legal work, invited to attend confidential meetings and forums and given more responsibility than I had ever experienced in a legal environment. I researched judicial review for offshore entry persons and ministerial discretions in the Migration Act, attended forums on national security laws and drafted submissions to parliamentary inquiries on homelessness and equal opportunity for women in the workplace. The work was challenging but highly

rewarding, and it fostered my love for this area. I saw the positive effects of human rights and realised that they are not just abstract concepts but instead tools with the power to change the Australian legal and policy landscape.

Not only did the work exceed my expectations but so too did the people. The legal unit is comprised of seven impressive individuals with huge workloads and limited resources. Although they were constantly juggling complex tasks, they were never too busy to offer me direction, advice and encouragement. Each had taken a unique journey in pursuing a career in human rights law. Their paths were as diverse as the area, but they all shared a drive and commitment that made me realise that a career in this area was possible even if it meant taking some detours down roads of your own making.

My experience was truly invaluable and I would highly recommend the Aurora Project to any law student interested in experiencing, growing and contributing to something meaningful. I feel very privileged to have been part of an institution that contributes so greatly to improving the lives of ordinary Australians and am very grateful for the opportunities the Commission and the Aurora Project have given me.

**For information about Aurora internships and application materials, please see [www.auroraproject.com.au/Internships](http://www.auroraproject.com.au/Internships).**

## Some interesting facts about the Aurora Native Title Internship Program...

- Since it started in 2003, 408 law students have been placed in Aurora internships.
- Of these, 31 students have been from Monash University
- Students from 28 Australian and 3 overseas universities have participated in the program.
- In the past year students from 21 universities have been placed.
- 27 law graduates have taken up full-time positions as a result of Aurora internships.