

assessors a wide discretion or consist of rigid, mechanical checklists. Despite these difficulties in determining whether the standard has been met, anecdotal evidence is provided that some consensus on the appropriate standard to label competence does exist, resulting in some degree of reliability in skills assessment.

In assessing a student's skills it is hard to know where to draw the line on legal accuracy. Students should be given enough guidance to be confident about the relevant areas of law and procedure, so that the focus can be squarely upon the demonstration of competence in the skill. The main advantage of the clinical program as used in the Exempting Degree is that practical skills are assessed in a practical context with real clients and real problems. Tutors are able to form a far better view of the student's abilities than they would in a snapshot exercise in normal skill assessment regimes. Students in the Exempting Degree course are less concerned with assessment and more focused on the client.

The Board's standards imply that the integration between skills, procedures and substantive law is essential. However, for the student skills competence has become a matter of assessment, rather than part of a holistic approach to being a lawyer. Moreover, in this assessment-dominated culture, where the goal is to ensure that students entering practice have basic professional skills, almost no one will fail the skills assessments.

In the realm of practical training two things would make for further improvements: (1) dropping separate skills assessment and making them pervasive parts of the

whole LPC; and (2) in the longer term, establishing more Exempting Degrees.

Practical legal research the Cardiff way

P Clinch

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Practical legal research (PLR) is one of the five skills included in the Legal Practice Course (LPC) in the United Kingdom, which lays stress on the acquisition of practical and transferable skills as well as the accumulation of legal knowledge. PLR is concerned with students demonstrating competence in the planning and execution of research and the presentation of the results of that research.

Cardiff Law School has been validated by the Law Society's Legal Practice Course Board to teach the LPC. When devising the Cardiff LPC, it was recognised that PLR was one of the foundation skills and thus featured heavily in the three week induction program. The Board requires that skills be interrelated with the compulsory subjects. Therefore outside the induction program PLR is related to business law and practice and litigation.

During the three week induction program students receive a total of 12 hours of PLR instruction: 6 two hour lessons with 3 on the paper aspects of PLR and 3 on the information technology aspects. In parallel with the compulsory courses a further 5 hours of PLR instruction were provided.

The PLR course is composed of three elements: (1) identification and analysis of a problem; (2)

finding information to solve the problem; and (3) presentation of the results of the research. The content of the course includes instruction on how to use Halsbury's and Current Law publications, the Legal Journals Index (in electronic form) and a range of practice publications. Considerable effort is put into the preparation of handouts so as to form a reference to PLR techniques for students in the present and the future. These include a PLR skills guide, containing 35 criteria grouped under 5 broad headings which provides the framework for the teaching objectives and the stated criteria upon which the students are to be formally assessed.

Assessment is through the submission of a word-processed memorandum on a client problem. The subject matter of the assessment is relatively straightforward, although it was apparent from the answers received that more instruction was required on identifying the purpose of the research and the form of response required for the situation.

Acquiring basic legal skills and knowledge: what and where?

J de Groot

[See **Research**]

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