

the teaching and methods of assessment used in their courses. A substantial section of the report is devoted to the researchers' findings about the students' career intentions and the factors which influenced their decision-making, including the availability of careers information. It will be enlightening to compare these results with those from the Centre for Legal Education's recently published "Career intentions of Australian law students", which will be reviewed in the next issue of the Digest.

The last two sections of this first report deal with the students' success in obtaining offers of training places and jobs by the time of the year 2 survey and the lack of funds and level of debt incurred by the students while engaged in their studies. The conclusion is reached that entry to the legal profession is strongly biased against those from less affluent backgrounds. There is also a useful 10-page summary of the findings and conclusions to date, which points the way to subsequent stages of this very elaborate longitudinal study of the cohort group.

It is safe to observe that this project, by the time it reaches finality, will have yielded a wealth of data which will enable policy makers and educational administrators to have a far better appreciation of the patterns of student entry to law courses and their ultimate career paths and thereby to make more informed decisions about legal education and the composition of the profession. Indeed, it amounts to a comprehensive "Seven Up" social research study of law students and their careers. Reports of the subsequent stages of the project will be awaited with considerable interest. Indeed it can be assumed that an account of the year 3 developments will emerge some time this year.

Editor

TEACHERS

Teaching assistants: a study of their use in law school research and writing programs

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One of the most prevalent uses of peer teachers in law schools is the use of upper level law students as teaching assistants (TAs) in first year legal research and writing courses. Yet little has been done to investigate the roles or effectiveness of teaching assistants. A survey of those universities that utilised teaching assistants was performed. Sixty-six law schools were surveyed.

The majority of law schools assigned first year legal research and writing students (LRW) to a TA. Some sessions are voluntary and some are compulsory. The roles, types of meetings and frequency of meetings varied from law school to law school. Over half of the programs used TAs to evaluate student work, grade students and present new substantive information. One of the more difficult issues in the use of TAs is deciding how much responsibility to give them. This issue is particularly important when deciding whether to give TAs grading tasks, as this tends to interject conflict into what would otherwise be a cooperative relationship between TA and student. Questions about whom the TA assists and who is the TA meant to assist then arise. Of those law schools that use TAs to grade, many record complaints concerning bias, incompetence and inconsistency.

In almost all of the schools that used TAs the availability of the positions was openly advertised. The selection process typically involved completing a written application followed by an interview. TAs were largely selected

from second and third year students. Grade point averages were not a major factor in the selection and no schools reported having a minimum standard GPA that potential TAs must have. No particular background qualifications were required and the qualities that were listed as desirable in a TA were strong interpersonal skills, dedication and willingness to work, good writing skills and patience and kindness.

Training of the TAs was mainly on the job, with most programs providing training throughout the semester. Training is not generally undertaken before the program begins. In those programs where TAs are responsible for grading, they tended to receive more training.

TAs are compensated for their efforts in three ways: class credit, hourly pay or tuition credit. TAs were generally evaluated by both their students and their supervisors. The benefit that students get from the use of TAs has not been properly studied, although the respondents to the survey listed as the main benefits emotional support, increased teacher-student contact, increased student satisfaction and the provision of role models. The advantage for faculty is that TAs increase teacher-student contact and lighten the teaching load of the faculty. The TAs also reported that their legal research and writing skills improved and that they derived satisfaction from meeting the first year law students. The major disadvantage of using TAs was the dissemination of misinformation.

The most interesting finding from the survey is the high level of responsibility that the TAs may be shouldering. This alone calls for greater commitment to their training.