

profession are that they could contribute to setting uniform standards across the states and territories, thus dealing with the current fragmentation. They could also contribute to the accreditation and licensing process, to education and training and continuing professional development and also enhance public confidence in the profession in that it would deliver uniformity of those entering the profession. In the wake of the mutual recognition legislation, such uniformity may be needed to avoid the lowest common denominator situation where graduates are able to shop for a forum that will admit them with their current qualifications.

## LIBRARIES & INFORMATION

**A library for the modern law school: a statement of standards for university law library provision in England and Wales**  
T Daintith (convenor)

*Leg Stud*, December, 1995

This 162-page special issue of *Legal Studies* contains the new statement of library standards prepared on behalf of the Society of Public Teachers of Law by a consultative group to its Libraries Committee. The standards themselves take up only 11 pages and are divided into five areas: policy, management and staffing; services; space and physical facilities; collections; and franchising and distance learning. Appendix 1 is an indicative list of law library holdings. Appendix 2 is the report of the results of a research project, conducted by Dr Peter Clinch, in which data were collected from institutions teaching law at university level in

the United Kingdom (70% of which responded to a questionnaire) on law libraries and their place in legal education within the institution.

## PRACTICAL TRAINING

### REVIEW ARTICLE

#### *The Legal Practice Course: benefits in practice*

J S Slorach

Nottingham Law School Limited, 1996

Practical legal training courses have been a feature of the legal education landscape in many countries now for up to a quarter of a century. It is therefore strange to realise that, although these courses exist for the specific purpose of preparing law students for the transition to practice, so little effort has been devoted to finding out whether they have succeeded in this objective. In other words, there has been very little attempt to discover how useful PLT instruction has been. This evaluation could be conducted either by asking both the PLT graduates in practice themselves and the lawyers who supervise them or by collecting data about the actual work that new lawyers perform in order to ascertain whether it meshes with the PLT curriculum.

The pioneering evaluation research of this kind was first carried out in the mid-1980s by Nelson<sup>1</sup>, who argued for the development of a more flexible and responsive PLT curriculum based upon research<sup>2</sup>. He contended that the curriculum should be grounded on the collection at regular intervals of

data about the types of legal work being handled by new lawyers and the skills they needed to perform that work, as well as their opinions about the relevance of the instruction they had received to what they were in fact doing.

Slorach's research project falls into that mould. Its purpose is to evaluate the benefits in practice which the Legal Practice Course<sup>3</sup> ('LPC') has provided for trainee lawyers and their supervisors in Great Britain, in the hope that the results will assist in the continuing development of the LPC to meet the needs of the profession. The aims of the LPC are expressed to be the preparation of students for 'general practice' and the provision of 'a general foundation for subsequent practice'.

The research objectives are stated as the evaluation of the following 'practical issues':

- the extent to which trainees utilise knowledge and skills attained in their LPC
- how often trainees refer to LPC materials in practice
- whether trainees are better equipped for practice as a result of the LPC
- any discernible benefits to practices from trainees having completed the LPC
- whether there are any gaps in trainees' knowledge and skills which should be filled by the LPC.

Slorach recognises the importance of obtaining the perspectives of both the trainee lawyers and their supervisors. He uses questionnaires to collect the data from the two populations and indeed many of the questions asked in the one are mirrored in the other, although when reporting



he fails to highlight the significant differences in the data gathered from each group. Had time and resources permitted, it would also have been useful to have conducted some follow-up interviews to seek further elucidation of the unexplained findings.

Of the 1,355 questionnaires distributed to trainees, 599 (44%) were completed and returned, whereas only 250 (20%) of the 1,278 sent to supervisors came back. With these low response rates, particularly from the supervisors, Slorach rightly does not make any claim that the data collected can be construed as representative of the opinions of the two groups.

Several features of the research design and the data analyses require comment. There has been no attempt to build in such demographic variables as size and local of law firm. It would, for example, have been very revealing to see if there was a relationship between these variables, such that the respondents' views differed depending upon whether the trainee was practising, say in a large city or small country law firm.

The data are presented in a rather unsophisticated way, using only frequencies and percentages. Most of the questions call for a response on a 7-point rating scale. Hence it seems strange that means and standard deviations were not reported, which would have presented the results in a far more meaningful way. Similarly, it would have been useful to have used such straightforward tests as analysis of variance to have established, for example, whether

the differences in the helpfulness of the LPC in developing each of the five skills taught in the course, were statistically significant or could have arisen by chance. Those with an interest in the results may not have wanted these more elaborate analyses, but one would have thought that means and standard deviations would have been the minimum reporting level.

Most of the 7-point rating scales have descriptors for only the extreme responses, e.g. 1 ('very dissatisfied') and 7 ('very satisfied'). The author tells us he has chosen to report the 4+ ratings as indicating satisfaction. However, it seems reasonable to conclude that a mid-range response of 4, generally the most frequent because of central tendency, will almost certainly convey that the respondent did not have an opinion either way, being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the proposition.

Despite these reservations about the research design and the way the data are presented, the picture painted in the report is that the LPC, while still in the early years of its implementation, has been a success. There was a high frequency of application in practice of the knowledge gained from the compulsory subjects and the vast majority of trainees felt that their LPC had prepared them to commence supervised practice of the legal skills taught, an opinion shared by the supervisors.

The author concludes that the majority of supervisors and trainees are satisfied with the LPC, both with respect to the acquisition of legal knowledge and skills. It thereby meets the primary

objective of providing a general preparation for the commencement of the two-year training contract, despite the misconception of some that its goal is to impart all the knowledge and skills needed for the whole contract period.

Specific recommendations are also made for further research on key issues revealed in the study. One particularly interesting theme which emerged from the open-ended questions inviting comments was the failure of the LPC to address the specific needs of those going to the large city commercial practices because of the focus on general practice. It was apparent that many trainees would have preferred a course tailored to the type of practice with which they would undertake their training contract. Interestingly, this identical message came through just as clearly in Nelson's study conducted 10 years ago in Australia.

#### Editor

- 1 *New directions for practical legal education in the nineties*, Centre for Publication and Information, 1988
- 2 Defining the role for research in developing the legal practice course curricula, 6 *Journal of Professional Legal Education* 1, pp 47-64
- 3 Slorach and Nathanson describe the Legal Practice Course developed by one provider, the University of Nottingham Law School, in an article digested in 4 *Legal Education Digest* 2, p 11