

Pro bono and social justice, finding a different perspective.

When the news broke that Russia had invaded Ukraine, like many others worldwide, I was in shock. Watching the 24-hour news footage was surreal and heartbreaking. The devastating impact this conflict would have on innocent civilians felt almost too awful to think about.

Extract 1 – *Client brief revealed, Report relating to Ukraine/Russia conflict. Excited to work on such an interesting topic, but international law will be tricky. The group seems up for the challenge.*

When it was revealed that the project I would be working on with the Open Justice Clinic would be writing a report about the transfer and deportation of civilians during the conflict, I looked forward to working on the project. This was something I cared about. It felt relevant and important, its applications evolving daily with each news report. Understanding customary International law, however, I was less excited to tackle. It had always appeared to me as complex, challenging, and only to be written about by scholars. My worry was uncalled for. After online sessions, research, and some excellent analogies from supervisors, although not an expert, I felt happy that my knowledge was good enough to produce a strong report.

Extract 2 - *The group worked well together. Still, I was a bit demotivated, struggling with the link between the project and social justice.*

However, in the weeks that passed, I began questioning how this project would contribute to social justice. I signed up for the Open Justice module, hoping to do work that went beyond textbooks, journals, and academic writing. My understanding of pro bono work and social justice was that it provided access to justice to those who couldn't afford it, empowering them to enforce their societal rights. I had worked previously with the Criminal Justice Clinic, advising a client on the possibility of appealing their conviction or sentence. That project was aligned more with my view of pro bono work and how it could positively affect individuals. How could work on a report advance individual and social positive change?

Extract 3 – *After discussing with A, J & B, spoke with PT about general concerns about report. Think everyone feeling happier and more positive about the work.*

My supervisor assured me that the client, a solicitors firm, had previously undertaken important humanitarian law cases pro bono. Although there may not initially be a direct relationship between our work and an individual client, our research would not be wasted. This was encouraging. However, on reflection after completing the Report, it is apparent that the importance of engaging in pro bono work and its relationship with social justice goes far beyond providing procedural access to justice and upholding the rule of law. Taking part in pro bono activities that are simulated or research-based can inspire students to become agents for change and to engage professionally or voluntarily in areas of law they hadn't considered. Areas of law that have the power to address social inequalities and injustices. As a direct result of my open justice activities, I have discovered a new passion for humanitarian law and human rights. I have acquired knowledge and skills that have ultimately empowered me to pursue a research fellowship that aims to influence the government's policies concerning inequality and Human Rights in the UK.

Providing access to justice is essential to pro bono work, social justice, and upholding the rule of law. But the relationship between pro bono work and social justice is much broader in scope. When engaging in Open justice activities, you might not always change a client's life. Yet, you may positively transform yours.

Extracts

Der Gregorian, K. (2023) 'Extract 1', originally written 20 October 2022.

Der Gregorian, K. (2023) 'Extract 2', originally written 15 February 2023.

Der Gregorian, K. (2023) 'Extract 3', originally written 20 March 2023.