

Recruiting rural and remote law students: Creating aspiration and providing support in transition at Newcastle Law School

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Abstract

In 2009, Newcastle Law School piloted an innovative program, “Lawyers of the Future”, designed to address the dearth of law students from rural and remote NSW backgrounds. After conducting focus groups with our existing law students from rural backgrounds, the School conducted a successful Schools’ visit program, involving a team of first year law teachers and hand-picked student mentors, to Orange, Dubbo and Mudgee in NSW. The Schools’ Visit program was complemented by networking sessions with local legal practitioners and Law Societies. At the commencement of the 2010 academic year, our commencing law students from rural and ATSI backgrounds were involved in an inaugural three-day Pre-law program, which focussed on social networking and academic skills enhancement to ease the transition to law school. The Pre-Law program was supported by first year law teachers, senior peer mentors and the University of Newcastle Law Students’ Association. This session considers the efficacy of the Newcastle program and its context within broader higher education priorities.

Session Outline

Introduction: Thinking and talking about dreams and their creation – **5 minutes** for brainstorming by participants and **5 minutes** for feedback to the whole group.

Body of presentation (10 minutes): Lawyers of the future and how it inspires dreaming

Wrap-up (5 minutes) What are our macro influences in Australian higher education which will influence rural and remote recruitment for the immediate future?

Final input and discussion by participants (**5 minutes**).

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

W B Yeats

Introduction

The Newcastle Law School has an established national reputation for the provision of high quality support in the transition of secondary school students to the first year of Law School (Lindsay, 2009). The School has now extended that commitment to achieving the targets expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, the Honourable Julia Gillard (2009) in embracing Recommendations 2 and 4 in the Bradley Report (Bradley et al, 2008). This program, which we call “Lawyers of the Future”, addresses the need to recruit, retain and support remote and rural law students for the “Professional Law School” at Newcastle, as recommended in an external review (Roper, 2007).

Institutional data at the University of Newcastle has revealed that the proportion of rural students enrolled in law programs has remained static at about 14% of intake for the last 5 years. More significantly, the number of law students from remote locations, as defined by ASES, is negligible and much under 1% of intake for the same period (see **Appendix 1**). The Minister for Education emphasised in a March 2009 speech the importance of the university sector in reaching back to students in secondary education to provide support in order to increase participation and success to achieve these national priorities (Gillard, 2009). This project takes on this challenge, directly using strategies which have been successful in other contexts and for other equity groups.

The Newcastle Law School has made a commitment to fostering diversity and equity, and the Schools’ visit program is a crucial component of our equity initiative. We are seeking to build aspiration for professional careers amongst rural and remote students who have not previously had the encouragement, information, support or initiative to consider attending law school or to pursue a vast range of careers which are open to law graduates. The Schools’ visit program addresses the critical conundrum of inspiring dreams in students in junior high schools, and resourcing their families to assist them in making decisions. The involvement of hand-picked, inspirational law students for the Schools’ visit program is the cornerstone of its success.

“Lawyers of the Future”

The Lawyers of the Future program has two related dimensions. **Stage 1** had a dual purpose. The Schools’ Visit program sought to build aspiration for professional careers amongst rural and remote students who have not previously had the encouragement, information, support or initiative to consider attending law school and/ or pursue the vast range of careers which are open to graduates of the LLB. The need to create such aspiration in concrete ways was experienced first-hand during Katherine Lindsay’s ALTC-funded visit to Georgetown Law School’s Street Law program in Washington DC in January 2009. Through participation in the Street Law program taught by Georgetown Law students in the roughest and most unlikely schools in the DC school district, African American and Hispanic American Street Law students in junior high school could confidently claim: “You come here to teach us because we are the next generation of lawyers.” The necessity of creating aspiration was reinforced by Lindsay’s visit to Thurgood Marshall Academy (www.thurgoodmarshallacademy.org), a shining light in one of DC’s most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where 100% of the graduating class go to college. Stage 1 also sought to

develop similar tangible links between rural and remote students and student mentors from The Newcastle Law School.

Stage 2 of the project is the Pre-Law program. This part of the strategy focused on support in transition for rural and remote law students. In stage 2, we have consciously aimed to further build the social capital of students from rural and remote locations who have received an offer to attend law school. In February, and prior to existing orientation week, first year law teachers and our Law School student mentors ran a three day “Pre-Law” program. It focused on general transition support, social networking and legal and academic skills in the week before the academic year began. Once again, the human dimension was at the fore. Pre-Law participants were supported by the law teachers they would be meeting in their first week of classes, they made social links with other first year students and more senior law students. The program sought to balance academic (research, writing, case reading, court visit, client observation exercise, tour of University of Newcastle Legal Centre) and general transition support (getting to know Newcastle, checking on transport, accommodation and other personal needs), with social interaction (family morning tea, breakfast, gelato, lunches in the park, curry feast and final BBQ)

What these initiatives have demonstrated is the power of human interaction amongst peers and between teachers and students in the creation of aspiration, and in the provision of high quality academic and transition support.

The Schools’ Visit program

In Stage 1, the project team contacted relevant staff in rural and remote schools, prepared support materials and planned a program of visits to Dubbo, Orange and Mudgee in rural New South Wales. The stage 1 schools’ visit program involved the project team, Kevin Williams (Lecturer, Newcastle Law School) and selected senior Law School mentors (Newcastle Law School has 65 trained student mentors in 2010) in presenting a showcase about the Australian legal system and the importance of legally-trained professionals from diverse backgrounds for students’ communities and the nation as a whole. In choosing student mentors for the program, attention was given to the background and experience of these students. Having already conducted focus groups with our existing students from rural and remote backgrounds, we had an available and enthusiastic talent pool. Each mentor was asked to keep a reflective journal of their Schools’ visit experience, which has provided important and contemporary feedback on this aspect of the program.

eBuddy Mentors

The Schools’ visit program was conceived as an extension of our existing transition pedagogy at Newcastle Law School. The Law Student mentors involved in the Schools’ visit program have also committed themselves to involvement in the next phase of the project, the eBuddy (electronic) program. This electronic buddying system will link interested rural and remote high school students with a law student supporter at Newcastle in the period before entry to Law School. School students will be encouraged to contact their law mentor e-buddy questions about the university experience, and the buddies will form a link with law school staff, who can provide information and assistance with applying for university entry and other practical matters. The consequence of these links will be a proto-learning community (Tinto, (1997) , (n.d.)) established even before the students arrive at university.

Our Indigenous academic colleague was able to engage Aboriginal school students who encouraged by his example. This is a critical area for future development. The numbers of Indigenous lawyers in Australia is very small. Many of the Indigenous law students amongst existing enrolments are from urban and regional backgrounds. There is significant work to be done in terms of contacting and engaging with Indigenous school students, their families and communities. The University of Newcastle is fortunate to have the significant presence of Wollotuka, the Indigenous learning centre, in providing support for Indigenous students. There is a special entry program for ATSI students to the law school, which also offers a combined degree in Aboriginal Studies and Law. Hence, there is a strong and supportive pathway for Indigenous students who seek legal qualifications. That information needs to be communicated by Lawyers of the Future amongst the communities of western NSW.

Building Community in other ways: the Support and Involvement of Local Practitioners and Career Advisors

The Lawyers of the Future program also needs the support and involvement of legal professionals in rural and remote regions, who also serve as role models for aspiring practitioners of the future. As Newcastle Law School offers the Professional Program (which integrates traditional LLB study with practical legal training and supervised legal placement during the degree), the support of regional and rural practitioners for our rural students is particularly significant.

In a recent submission to the Commonwealth Attorney-General, the Law Council of Australia highlighted the importance of recruitment of rural and remote students to law school, their development at university, and also in placement in their own communities, especially in terms of the future of the legal profession in regional and rural Australia. At Newcastle Law School we have sought to address this challenge head on by commencing conversations with members of the legal profession in locations where schools have begun to engage with the Lawyers of the Future program.

This important community building began over dinner in Dubbo and Mudgee in November 2009. The conversation included not only the local practitioners but also the career advisors from the local high schools. The involvement of non-lawyers in the local communities allowed for greater networking and provided a broader perspective of what is needed to motivate and inspire future lawyers from regional Australia. Journal entries from our student mentors concluded that:

‘it is clear that the Careers Advisor was the most vital link in the process...interaction between the local legal profession and the careers advisor on a social basis encouraged the career advisor to throw their support behind us at their school.’

Lawyers in Dubbo and Mudgee, The Orana Law Society (which covers an area from Dubbo to Broken Hill) and the Dubbo Aboriginal Legal Service have subsequently contacted the School offering ‘any assistance that they can’ and expressing warm wishes for the future success of the program. The next phase of harnessing this good will involves providing

The Pre-Law Program

The 2009 pilot Pre-law program focused on support in transition for rural and remote law students. The objective was to nurture further the social capital of students from rural and remote locations who have received an offer to attend law school. In February 2010, staff and student mentors ran a three day “Pre-Law” programme. The Pre-Law program focused on general transition support, social networking and legal and academic skills in the week before the academic year began. Once again, the human dimension was at the fore. The overwhelming response from the students who participated and their mentors has been positive, and indicates that the social, transition and academic objectives of the program have been achieved. The numerical results of our evaluation will be available at the conference presentation. Here is some unsolicited feedback from one participant:

Good Morning Katherine and Sher,

A short email to thank you both for organising a wonderful three days this week. It was highly beneficial to me as new student and as a result I am feeling far less nervous (read: terrified) regarding study and meeting others undertaking the same degree

Cheers

A B

Our influences and the future

The transition and foundation team at Newcastle Law School have been influenced fundamentally by the work of Vincent Tinto on learning communities (Tinto, (1997)+), and in our own experience can attest that they work. In particular, Newcastle Law School has sought to promote a three-way understanding of learning communities: peer learning communities amongst our students, both within and across cohorts, student and teacher learning communities, and staff learning communities, particularly amongst our foundation team. This is also complemented by the inspirational work of Ken Robinson ((2009), (2010)), who constantly challenges us to “tread softly” on the dreams of our students. Our challenge is to facilitate dreaming where none has been, and then to tread softly and respectfully in that space.

The future of “Lawyers of the Future” looks bright. We have the support of our School and Faculty and the commitment of core academics and our student mentors. The Schools’ visit program will be expanded in 2010 to more locations, and with the development of further documentation and information resources for students and parents. The e-buddy program will be trialled with our 2009 schools. A new workshop for interested lawyers in rural and remote locations will seek to train lawyers as supervisors with a view to providing our rural students with additional placement sites for their legal practice placements. We are also delighted to see the response of the Commonwealth government to the submission by the Law Council of Australia in the provision of over one million dollars for the rural and regional legal recruitment and retention programs.

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Appendix 1: Figures on Rural and Remote students in Law 2005-2009

Domestic Law Program Enrolments by Rural Status (Urban, Rural and Remote) and Year							
Enrolments			Year				
Rural Status*	Program Code	Program	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Urban	10806	B Laws	52	43	59	37	44
	11504	B Aboriginal Studies / B Laws	1	4	3	1	1
	10779	B Arts / B Laws	91	95	99	114	117
	11182	B Business / B Laws	36	32	45	56	47
	10780	B Commerce / B Laws	32	34	30	52	49
	11503	B Communication / B Laws	42	47	65	77	69
	11385	B Finance / B Laws	16	13	15	13	8
	10781	B Economics / B Laws	16	18	19	14	7
	10778	B Science / B Laws	8	10	17	25	20
	11168	B Science (Forensic) / B Laws	50	35	23	7	6
	11387	B Social Science / B Laws	9	8	6	10	19
10810	B Social Sc / B Social Work	6	3	1	1		
Urban Total			359	342	382	407	387
Rural	10806	B Laws	6	4	2	5	6
	10779	B Arts / B Laws	13	11	15	17	25
	11182	B Business / B Laws	9	6	11	12	9
	10780	B Commerce / B Laws	5	6	3	4	6
	11503	B Communication / B Laws	5	4	4	8	10
	11385	B Finance / B Laws	1	1	1	1	
	10781	B Economics / B Laws	3	3	1		
	10778	B Science / B Laws	2	3	3	3	4
	11168	B Science (Forensic) / B Laws	9	6	4	2	1
	11387	B Social Science / B Laws				3	5
Rural Total			53	44	44	55	66
Remote	11503	B Communication / B Laws			1	1	
	10778	B Science / B Laws			1		
	11168	B Science (Forensic) / B Laws	1	1	1		
Remote Total			1	1	3	1	
No information [#]	10806	B Laws	2	1		1	1
	10779	B Arts / B Laws	5	3	3	5	3
	11182	B Business / B Laws	1		1		1
	10780	B Commerce / B Laws	2	1			
	11385	B Finance / B Laws			1	1	1
	10781	B Economics / B Laws			1	1	1
	11168	B Science (Forensic) / B Laws	2	2	1		1
	11387	B Social Science / B Laws	2	2	1	1	1
No information Total			14	9	8	9	9
Total			427	396	437	472	462
Data source: MIS as at 27 March 2009							
Students are classified as urban, rural or remote on the basis of the location of permanent home residence using the ASES (Australian Socio Economic Status by Postcodes, 2001) reference file.							
[#] No postcode information provided.							

Appendix 2: Lawyers of the future student booklet

Lawyers of the Future!



An initiative of the Newcastle Law School



Who is a lawyer of the future?



YOU ARE!

The basics

A lawyer is a professional who is skilled in assisting other people to resolve their legal problems in court and in other ways.

Lawyers help individuals, groups, corporations and governments to negotiate the complex network of laws which regulate our communities and individual behaviour.

Being a lawyer is a big responsibility. Lawyers must be competent, diligent and ethical in their dealings with their clients and the courts. They have to keep up with laws which are changing every day.

Being a lawyer is challenging, and very, very rewarding.



Is this your next challenge?

How can I become a lawyer of the future?

Becoming a lawyer requires a lot of study and practical training. You need to train your mind to think and analyse legally. You also need to gain skills in writing, speaking, arguing, legal

transactions and courtroom technique. The best place to gain the education and skills you need is at **Law School**.

At Newcastle Law School, we have the programs which support you to gain all the knowledge, training and skills you need to become a legally-trained professional. Our students come from all over NSW, from interstate and overseas. Our staff are approachable and highly skilled.

What about before I finish the HSC?

You and your family can seek information and support about Law School by registering for our e-buddy program. If you register, a law student mentor from Newcastle Law School will be assigned to assist with any questions you may have about university generally and Law school, in particular.

Forms are available at your school.

What about my family and moving away from home?

It is always a difficult decision to travel far from home to attend university or get a job. At Newcastle Law School, we know that when you first leave home to come to university, you might need some extra support. That is why we offer the following programs and supports:

- **Pre-Law week** to help you adjust to a new town and a new learning environment.
- Friendly and helpful **mentors** from amongst our more senior students.
- **Law School orientation** so you can get to know other students
- Skills support sessions for a little extra academic support.
- Peer-assisted study support in difficult courses.
- Small group teaching in first year courses.
- Accessible, caring staff.
- Social activities sponsored by our Law Students' Association.

If you are thinking about becoming a lawyer of the future, remember:

Every community (including yours) needs the support of high quality legal services, and especially from those who understand the local context.

Contact us: Newcastle Law School (02) 49215052; www.newcastle.edu.au/school/law