

Expeditions Fund Award Report 2015

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We are second year Law LLB students at Queen Mary University of London. We were each awarded the Expedition Fund Bursary during our first year in order to fund an internship we were invited to complete in Ghana. We were chosen, via the Queen Mary Pro Bono Society to undertake a month's internship in Ghana's Legal Aid Scheme (LAS), where we worked during the weekdays to assist those who otherwise would not have been able to afford legal advice for their predicaments. We found that the bursary that was awarded to us benefited us in a variety of different ways.

The LAS is an organization funded by the Ghanaian government and a few of other NGOs that provides free legal advice and representation to those who cannot afford legal services. Due to the insufficient funds all volunteers are required to pay a small fee that goes towards the organization. It can be said that not only were we able to help out with the workload, but we were also able to help out financially – this was easier to do due to the bursary we received and quite clearly it went a very long way.

The work we had to do focused on a great variety of areas of law such as human rights, family law, land law, and even in some cases Criminal law. When we had begun our internship we were overwhelmed by the number of people waiting to be attended: they filled up every possible space on the waiting benches outside the offices, crowded the hallway and queued up all the way to the outside of the main building. The organization's services are highly demanded but with a shortage of staff. During my stay, we only had four qualified lawyers to undertake the workloads with only three of them were working full time. Due to this situation, interns at LAS should not expect any detailed instruction on what to do. Instead, it is expected of the interns to be able to quickly adapt to the working environment and be of effective assistance. However, it would largely depend on the interns to be proactive in order to keep up with the working pace of LAS. We found that we gained a great deal of skills during our internship – we were required to work at an extremely fast pace in order to respond to the high demands that were expected of us; we were required to also be patient with the clients during language difficulties, or emotional difficulties when there were relaying to us their legal dilemmas; and we gained a depth of knowledge regarding problems that were most common in developing countries. Since we have been back into university we have begun to understand the way in which this experience has allowed us to develop. We are able to meet deadlines easier as we are better at managing our time efficiently, and we have also become more motivated to pursue a career in law and get the best possible grade from our studies as we have become more motivated after seeing the gratitude in the clients when we were able to help them.

Although our experiences as interns in LAS was extremely beneficial to us, the greatest eye-opener during our stay in Ghana was when we visited the slum, Agbogbloshie (otherwise known as Old Fadama). It was essentially a waste ground, where people had built their homes on. The government would dump all their digital waste there and the people of that slum would burn the digital waste (computers, electronic devices, microwaves, etc) in order to strip the metal and sell it later on. Due to this the waste ground was toxic and the life expectancy of the people in that community was very low. We were shocked by the conditions in that slum and that children were playing amongst the waste, completely oblivious to the harmful effects it was having on their body. During our second week in Ghana we had received some devastating news – the slum (and the homes of more than half of the people living on it) was levelled to the ground overnight without sufficient notice. People were crying, and waiting on the streets outside the slum with their belongings wondering where to go and who to turn to. This experience was completely life-changing for us. It was something we had heard on the news but we had not seen for ourselves. It made us see that there are many human rights violations around the world and it motivated us to take steps towards pursuing a career in this area. We feel that we need to thank the University for awarding us the Expedition Fund Bursary as without it we would not have experienced this.

Furthermore, we were able to visit the Ghana Supreme Court during our stay, where we watched some of the cases and spoke to a judge about the legal system in Ghana and the journey to become a lawyer. It was very interesting hearing him talk. We discovered that the majority of criminal cases in Ghana did not have a very fulfilling fair result as most of the cases were ‘alleged’ with no evidence that could be submitted to support a claimants case. We found this highly disturbing, as it meant that those who had been raped, or grievously injured could not obtain justice as it was evidentially impossible to do so. What was enlightening to see was that the lawyers and the judges worked together to ensure that everything could be done to achieve a fair result in the cases. We also saw this in the LAS where the lawyers there worked hard to ensure that the clients were answered to. This showed us that although the legal system in Ghana is not perfect, it was a work in progress and there is a large workforce dedicated to ensure that justice is found in Ghana.

Outside from the work we were doing in Ghana we came to fall in love with the culture that Ghana exhibited. The people were overwhelmingly friendly and welcoming, often going out of their way to ensure we are comfortable; the food was delicious; and the atmosphere was one of freedom. It was an amazing cultural experience to have, and we gained a lot from the experience. We realised that there is much to gain from visiting countries around the world, such as developing countries.

All in all the money that we had received from the Expedition Fund Bursary was extremely beneficial in many different ways. It took some of the financial pressure off us - we were able to relax and focus on other important aspects in our lives such as studies whilst being reassured that we do have a way of affording the internship, flights and accommodation during our months stay in Ghana. It also allowed us to travel to another country and to live, see, work and experience the life there. Without this money we would not have enjoyed our stay in Ghana as much, as it the burden was taken off our shoulders so we were able to enjoy it to the fullest.