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# DEVELOPING THE USE OF REFLECTIVE JOURNALS FOR LAW POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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This is a small-scale project that aims to develop the use of an assessment method for LLM (law postgraduate) students that encourages greater reflectivity. Specifically, the aim of this project is to design a method by which a reflective journal can be successfully incorporated as part of the assessment method for LLM (taught postgraduate) students in the 2010-11 academic year.

## 1. BACKGROUND

Within the law school we are very aware of the need to develop a range of assessment methods that encourage greater student-led learning. With regards to law postgraduate students, particular concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of relying solely upon written essays as an assessment method. Indeed, some attempts have already been made to introduce alternative assessment methods on the LLM programme. However, in my position as LLM Course Director (2006-2009) I was able to monitor these efforts closely and it is of particular concern to me that they have, on the whole, been met by students and external examiners with a considerable degree of anxiety. I believe that this is because insufficient time has been available to adequately plan the introduction of alternative assessment methods and prepare students for them. The aim of this project was to allow me to have some time over the coming months that will be devoted exclusively to developing an effective reflective method of portfolio-based assessment for law postgraduate students.

## 2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of this project is to develop an assessment method (the reflective journal) that encourages law postgraduate students to:

1. engage critically throughout the duration of a module (rather than solely focusing their attention on one particular aspect of a module, which the current essay-based assessment encourages);
2. reflect upon the relevance of their module to everyday situations and examples. To this end, the reflective journal will encourage students to reflect upon a greater range of data (including experiences, sources and media) than the constraints of formal essay-writing usually allow;
3. have a greater role in defining the issues in the module that are of particular importance and interest to them and provides them with an opportunity to reflect further upon these.

### 3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Ultimately, the project became larger than originally anticipated and took a period of one year, from October 2010-September 2011. From January to March 2011 I trialed a process of assessing reflective journals in one LLM module and from October to December 2010, with assistance from Steve Rooney in Learning Development, a process of self-assessment in another (non-assessed) module. Feedback from the trial period informed my design of a new formal assessment procedure for a new compulsory module for all LLM students that commences in October 2011 (Academic Writing for Postgraduates in Law), which incorporates an element of both reflective writing and self-assessment. One issue that arose clearly during the period of research was the need to provide students with guidance on what is expected of them when producing a piece of reflective writing. Time off from my teaching enabled me to spend some time researching reflective writing and to write a brief Guide to Reflective Writing, which has been provided to all LLM students this year. I have also drafted some assessment criteria for reflective writing, which is in the process of being approved. I attach the relevant module handbook (which annexes the Guide to Reflective Writing) for information.

### 4. EVALUATION

The project drew on two small-scale trials of assessment methods. The data was drawn from feedback (verbal and written) from students on the LLM programme who were asked to produce reflective journals and to undertake self-assessment. I also reviewed the available literature on reflective writing. The conclusions drawn from the project were that reflection is a crucial aspect of students' educational development and it is beneficial to develop ways of incorporating reflective writing in their assessment. However, self-assessment is useful if guided by a staff member and thoroughly explained to students. We established that asking students to award their work specific grades was unhelpful. We established that reflective writing is anxiety-provoking where it formally assessed but little or no guidance about examiners' expectations has been provided (a mistake commonly made in the law school). We also established that reflective writing is more useful as a learning tool if it is formally assessed and constitutes a significant part of the overall marks for a module. In short, it is insufficient to simply adopt reflective writing as an assessment method without adequately supporting and preparing students for it. In order to achieve reflective students the whole learning experience needs to be orientated towards encouraging students in this direction.

## 5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

The findings from the project have been incorporated into the creation of a compulsory new LLM module. The student experience of this new assessment format will be closely monitored this semester in order to review its success. The Guide to Reflective Writing and Marking Criteria for Reflective Writing will be distributed more widely among law colleagues.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

Please see the Guide to Reflective Writing for details.