



UCL

UCL Integrated Legal Advice Clinic

Annual Report

Autumn 2022

A message from Rachel Knowles, Head of Legal Practice at the UCL Centre for Access to Justice

It has been another eventful year, and I want to start by thanking all the donors, alumni and supporters who have helped our service this year. All of the staff at the UCL Integrated Legal Advice Clinic (UCL iLAC) are incredibly grateful for the ongoing support we receive.

As things returned to relative normality this year, we have enjoyed being back in the office, working together as a team. With that have come many successes. We have continued to put community impact at the heart of our work, taking on a high caseload and prioritising areas of social welfare law where we can have the greatest effect – notably housing and welfare benefits.

I am very excited to tell you that this year, UCL iLAC won a Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year (LALY) Award in the Legal Aid Firm/Not for Profit Agency category. The LALYs are widely recognised as the Oscars of the legal aid world, and our understanding is that UCL iLAC is the first university legal advice clinic to win an award in any category. This achievement speaks to the outstanding service the clinic provides the community, with the support of student volunteers.

In summer 2021, UCL iLAC was audited for the first time since securing our specialist quality mark. The clinic passed with compliments from the auditor, allowing us to retain the quality mark for a further period. I was particularly gratified that the auditor highlighted that there is “a great deal of good practice” going on at the clinic, a testament to the commitment of our staff and student volunteers alike. That commitment has continued into 2022.

Beyond casework, the UCL iLAC team have participated in other projects impacting the local and wider community. At the London Legal Walk, staff and students walked with thousands of other legal practitioners to raise funds for the London Legal Support Trust. This summer, the UCL iLAC team worked with UCL Culture to run an all-day interactive activity in the Olympic Park as part of its annual Great Get Together event. Called “[The Department for Impossible Administration](#)”, the activity was a chance for members of the public to gain an insight into the bureaucracy that many of our clients face on their journey to justice.

Finally, it is a great pleasure to share that Michael Marshall, a former UCL student and latterly UCL iLAC’s trainee solicitor, qualified over the summer. We have since been able to employ Michael as UCL iLAC’s new social welfare solicitor, continuing his journey with us and ensuring his deep experience continues to benefit both clients and students.

These achievements would not have been possible without the generosity and commitment to the Centre for Access to Justice (CAJ) shown by our supporters, and so I want to thank them again. They have enabled UCL iLAC to continue to meet the ever-growing demands of the community it serves. There is always more we can do, and the current economic and energy crisis will only increase the number of people who require our assistance.

I hope that, with your support, we can continue to move forward, expanding our impact in our local community and creating change for our clients and the wider world of social welfare law. Thank you for sharing that vision.



Rachel Knowles
Head of Legal Practice, UCL Centre for Access to Justice





UCL iLAC in 2021/22

Continued high demand

We have fully reopened UCL iLAC's services since COVID-19 guidance relaxed, including face-to-face appointments and drop-ins.

Demand for our services has continued to grow. We received 714 new enquiries, a 1.9% increase on last year's already high number. The scale of enquiries shows the impact the pandemic and cost of living crises are having on disadvantaged groups, who form the bulk of our client base.

Increasing enquiries across channels

Housing and welfare benefits continue to form a majority of enquiries. Many clients face losing their homes after the eviction ban ended and courts reopened last year, while others need assistance with welfare benefit forms. We also continue to see an increase in other enquiries, from parking tickets and civil litigation to wills and probate. A lack of capacity prevents us taking on additional cases at this time, but we are committed to taking every opportunity to grow our team, allowing us to increase our caseload to meet demand.

Over the last year, many clients were signposted or referred to us through other advice agencies. We continue to offer appointments online and by telephone, helping clients with health problems, mobility issues or care responsibilities to access our service as suits their individual needs.

The clinic's long-standing presence in Stratford and the wider East London community means we continue to serve as a first port of call for many disadvantaged groups. We therefore anticipate that we will see an increase in housing and welfare benefits enquiries as the lasting effects of the pandemic and cost of living crises generate financial difficulties for many. Furthermore, the Department for Work and Pensions and tribunals have a huge backlog of cases, and we anticipate that the number of welfare benefits enquiries will steadily spike in the coming year as a result.

Enriching our offer

With the return to in-person, we have been able to expand our effort to engage the local community by providing space to St Giles Trust, who used our offices for peer-to-peer advice training this year. The training forms part of their Peer Advisor Programme, which helps individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds gain a Level 3 Advice and Guidance Qualification. UCL iLAC student volunteers had the opportunity to enhance their skills by participating in the training sessions. In the coming year, UCL iLAC looks forward to collaborating with other organisations such as Eversheds Sutherland, who will support us to provide a form-filling service for the local community with the help of student volunteers.

CAJ and UCL iLAC

CAJ, part of the UCL Faculty of Laws, combines legal education with the provision of pro bono advice to vulnerable communities. CAJ exists to:

- Operate pro bono projects and clinics that benefit UCL students and the wider community
- Provide a one-stop shop for legal volunteering opportunities for UCL Laws students
- Facilitate the development of new pro bono projects, whether by students or in partnership with other organisations
- Ensure Faculty-level oversight of and support for UCL Laws's pro bono activities.

UCL iLAC is one of CAJ's largest projects. UCL iLAC provides quality, independent advice, focused on pro bono and legally aided casework and representation services in housing, community care, education law and welfare benefits.

From our base in Stratford, East London, qualified solicitors and advisors supervise students undertaking casework during term-time, running cases in person out of term to provide a continuous service to the community. Local cases are our priority, especially those from Newham and the surrounding boroughs.

Image: Stratford in East London, where UCL iLAC is based
Credit: Morley von Sternberg



Students and education at UCL iLAC

In the 2021/22 academic year, 32 students volunteered at UCL iLAC. Of these, 18 were final-year LLB students on our clinical legal education course, Access to Justice and Community Engagement (AJCE). A further 4 were part of the HKU-UCL Dual Degree Program, and the final 10 were extracurricular UCL iLAC assistants and student supervisors.

Exceptional student demand

Volunteering at UCL iLAC on a curricular and extra-curricular basis was extremely popular again this year. This has continued into the new year, with 40 applications for 20 places on the 2022/23 AJCE course. Staffing constraints limit our ability to meet student demand for opportunities at UCL iLAC, and we continue to explore ways to increase our capacity. Philanthropic support is a vital part of this effort.

UCL iLAC continues to deliver valuable experience for UCL students. Volunteers this year reported high levels of learning and satisfaction from their time at the clinic. Over 85% of respondents to our 2021/22 cohort survey felt their experience had substantially increased their understanding of – and interest in pursuing a career in – the field of social welfare law. Over half wanted to devote more time to their placement despite an already heavy workload. Many students referenced the experience they gained in client care, client handling and working with vulnerable clients as being particularly valuable. Time at UCL iLAC is often a student's first opportunity to work with clients, an important milestone at the start of their career.

Summer Fellows

UCL iLAC is unusual in our commitment to continuing casework through the summer, providing an important service at times when many university clinics are closed. During the UCL summer break from July to September 2022, we took on eight Summer Fellows who volunteered at the clinic part-time. The Fellows helped advisers to carry out their work, attending meetings, drafting letters, following up casework and helping with triaging and signposting.

We reimbursed Fellows' lunch and travel costs, but a failure to secure grant funding meant we could not offer the stipend provided in past years. As a result, Fellows could commit to only one or two days per week (versus three or four in previous years). This inevitably reduced learning opportunities. It also substantially impacted the clinic's capacity: our summer caseload fell by a third compared to 2019, the last comparable year. Additionally, loss of the stipend excludes students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may rely on paid work outside of their studies. We plan to seek new funding for the Fellowships as a matter of urgency in 2023.

“Although I am only just starting my career in law, the example UCL iLAC’s lawyers have set for me is undeniable. I have never before felt so certain that I would like to spend the rest of my life working in legal aid.”

Ram Sabaratnam, former UCL iLAC volunteer

Clients and cases in 2021/22

We know that many of our clients face problem clustering – multiple interlocking matters rather than single issues – and that a holistic approach is necessary to ensure their access to justice. To maximise our impact, we therefore continue to focus our resources on full casework, which made up 89% of our work in 2021/22. We also provided one-off advice and referrals where appropriate, while maintaining our emphasis on cases where we can offer full-spectrum support.

We took on 150 new cases this year, a 20% increase on 2020/21. However, demand continued to significantly outstrip our capacity, with those cases representing only a fifth of the 714 enquiries we received, as our local community continued to face deep challenges. Of the 564 cases we were not able to take up, 81% were simply beyond our capacity, with almost all the rest being outside our areas of expertise.

The strong demand for our service grows in large part from the excellent reputation we have built in the community. Of the surveyed clients, 95% would recommend us to their friends, and a similar majority, 85%, reported improved emotional wellbeing as a result of our advice.

“The clinic has impacted me positively – I was clueless at first, but now I have more confidence and am more knowledgeable. My hope was restored. The lawyers are very attentive: I am not able to get to emails as quickly because of my children, but they are always sympathetic to this. They also always explain everything in layman’s terms. The experience I have had is very positive, and I wish this was the first point of contact I found.”

UCL iLAC client

The year in numbers

- **We took on substantial new work:** 150 new cases for 134 clients, on top of the clinic’s existing caseload
- **We supported those in the greatest need:** 75% of clients had an income of under £10,000, with 30% having no income
- **We proudly served a diverse client base:** 56% of our clients were from BAME backgrounds, while numbers from White British backgrounds also increased
- **We responded to younger groups:** our largest cohort of clients, 33%, were aged 35–49, compared to last year’s 50–64
- **We met continued demand:** 1.9% more enquiries this year than last, with a further rise expected over the coming months
- **We helped with the essentials:** the majority of our casework related to welfare benefits (45%) and housing (32%), followed by community care (10%) and work with CAJ’s Rare Dementia Support Project (9%)
- **We worked through networks:** nearly a third of our enquiries came via signposting from other agencies. A further 7% found out about us through the health service (up from 3% last year), as our partnership with local GPs continued to pay dividends
- **We made gifts count:** legal aid covered only 15% of our cases this year. Philanthropic support helped us do the vast majority of our work pro bono

Case study: housing law

Mr X and his three younger siblings (all in their teens) arrived in the UK as asylum seekers. On receiving refugee status, they required support to find more permanent accommodation. We assisted Mr X and his siblings to present as homeless to the council and prepared judicial review proceedings when the council failed to accommodate them. They are now housed together.

Client wellbeing

As well as improved emotional wellbeing as a result of our advice, our clients also reported a range of other benefits. 82% of respondents reported better physical wellbeing, while 78% described improvements in sleep, stress and anxiety and performance at work and study. A further 77% reported better financial circumstances, and 72% saw improved relationships with their friends.

CAJ: 2021/22 in review

Beyond UCL iLAC, the wider CAJ has had an exceptional year, continuing to connect students with pro bono opportunities and strengthen their legal training. In all, we placed 312 students onto pro bono projects, a 53% increase on the previous year. We were able to place almost two thirds of those who applied for pro bono opportunities, a significant improvement on last year's rate of exactly 50%. Nevertheless, with 502 applications, student interest in pro bono placements continued to outstrip our and our partner organisations' capacity, showing how highly UCL students regard these volunteer opportunities.

Student-led projects

64 Laws students were placed with student-led projects, supported by CAJ staff. Many projects focused on a specific campaign issue or support for a specific group. These included:

- Amicus
- Junior Lawyers Against Poverty
- Lawyers Without Borders
- International Bridges to Justice

Partnership projects

A further 184 students were placed with local organisations in need of legal volunteers. These external partners provide training and support, as well as a range of experience for students in areas such as criminal appeals, refugee law and bail hearings.

13 partner organisations worked with CAJ in 2021/22, including:

- Freedom Law Clinic
- University of London Refugee Law Clinic
- Haringey Migrant Support Centre
- JUSTICE
- Roma Support Group
- Citizens Advice Kensington & Chelsea

CAJ-led projects

A final 64 students took part in projects administered directly by CAJ. UCL iLAC is the largest of these, with additional projects including:

- Rare Dementia Support Project
- Grassroots Human Rights Project
- Public Interest Law Mentoring Scheme

UCL iLAC's achievements in 2021/22

We are immensely proud to have won the 2022 Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year Award for best Legal Aid Firm/Not for Profit Agency. This follows our success in passing our specialist quality mark audit in 2021. Both achievements reflect the tireless work of UCL iLAC's staff and the dedication of dozens of UCL students who gave their time to keep the clinic running year-round.

We are also delighted that Michael Marshall, a former student volunteer who became UCL iLAC's first trainee solicitor last year, has now qualified. As a result, we have made a step change in our staffing, as Michael's success has enabled UCL Laws to employ him as UCL iLAC's new social welfare solicitor on a permanent basis. At the same time, we have been able to make the role of Sarah Joy, our welfare benefits advisor, permanent as well, and to recruit a permanent paralegal, Enes Mansur.

Our donors' support has helped us maintain these roles over a number of years on a trial basis, establishing that both are essential to the clinic and for our students. We have also been able to recruit a permanent projects coordinator at CAJ to help keep our work on track. Ram Sabaratnam, another former student volunteer, joined us in September shortly after graduating from UCL Laws.

Additional staffing helps us to offer more training opportunities for students and expand our work in the community. We are deeply grateful to those who set us up for this success. We know that philanthropic support will continue to open doors for us in the coming years.

Case study:

Junior Lawyers Against Poverty (JLAP)

UCL JLAP is part of an initiative launched by Lawyers Against Poverty (LAP) in 2016 to increase student participation in issues relating to human rights law and international development. At the forefront of both LAP and JLAP is the aim to increase access to justice and legal education, and to use the rule of law to eradicate poverty and support vulnerable communities. The national network of JLAP groups helps students and young lawyers to develop skills, both personal and professional, that will help them contribute to the achievement of this aim.

Operating as a student-led committee, the work of UCL JLAP includes:

- Collaborating with the International Law Book Facility
- Organising and participating in conferences, panel discussion events and webinars
- Organising fundraising events and opportunities for the LAP Justice Fund
- Authoring articles for the JLAP blog

LALY22

LEGAL AID LAWYER OF THE YEAR AWARDS



20th
year



Plans for the future

At the time of writing, another year is well underway at UCL iLAC. We look forward to continuing to provide our vital service in East London this year, and to helping dozens more UCL Laws students take their first steps in the world of social welfare law. We are especially excited by a new opportunity to meet community needs through a partnership with Eversheds Sutherland LLP. Volunteers from Eversheds will support a welfare benefits form-filling service, helping our neighbours to access their entitlements more easily. The service is due to start this autumn.

The advent of the new Solicitors Qualifying Exam provides another opportunity to enhance our work, if we can secure the right funding. As time with UCL iLAC can contribute towards the new Qualifying Work Experience (QWE) requirements, we are well placed to help UCL Laws graduates and others complete an important step on their journey to full professional status. With further funding, we would look to hire more paralegals and/or trainees, who would support our work (and current UCL students) while gaining QWE for their route to qualification.

The latest [Legal Aid Census](#) clearly identified that there is a real problem of loss of expertise from the legal aid/social welfare profession. Only a small number of new professionals are entering the field, in large part because of challenging working conditions and significant cuts to legal aid. The consequences for the profession – and the communities it serves – are devastating. We are perfectly placed to fill this gap if funding allows, injecting new life into the profession and better meeting the ever-increasing need for our services.

Once again, we would like to thank all of our supporters for their generosity this year. Without them, we would not be in a position to offer critical learning opportunities to our students, to support the community with legal advice or to plan for the future. We are deeply grateful.

“Without financial backing of the kind that philanthropic support provides, careers in legal aid will become increasingly unviable for many graduates.”

Michael Marshall, UCL iLAC social welfare solicitor and former student volunteer

Image: The UCL iLAC team collects the Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year Award

Credit: Lubna Shuja

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“I thought being a solicitor entailed mainly working with the law, but week after week at iLAC I got to see the human aspect of the legal service. I was inspired to pursue a career in the sector.”

UCL iLAC student volunteer

