



# **BAME Awarding Gap Case Study**

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Laws Perspectives Workshop

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## What did you do/who's involved? What evidence/rationale underpinned your choice?

Law is misunderstood. Students, like laypeople, tend to perceive it in technical and prosaic tones. This is understandable as media representations focus on law's regulatory role. At the Faculty of Law, however, we teach it in all its glorious complexity, leading to the initiative we describe below.

In 2020–21, we launched a workshop series provocatively entitled *Laws' Perspectives* (as a counterpoint to *Laws' Connections*, an intensive introductory programme for incoming first-years that teaches them about law's operational framework). We developed the *Laws' Perspectives* programme for first- and second-year students, with the aim of encouraging them to look critically at what law represents from a range of perspectives. We chose this title to highlight the value of reflecting on the lens we deploy when thinking about the law, and in on the perspectives of groups historically disenfranchised by and in law. Following the first iteration of *Laws' Perspectives*, we were motivated to renew our materials and pedagogy in 2021–22, opting for the same workshop format while revisiting the topics.

The first-year offering consisted of three thematic workshops delivered to groups of 25 and three skills sessions for groups of 9–10. We followed the same format for second-year students, while dispensing with the skills sessions. Because of space and COVID-19 constraints, we ran most of the sessions online, while ensuring (successfully!) that each student partook in one–two sessions in person. We made attendance mandatory but did not assess participation in any way.

We were most excited about the goals we set for ourselves and for the students: to **(i) convey substantive content (ii) and provoke thought (iii) about patterns of historic marginalization**. These issues

sometimes lie at the intersection—and even fall between the cracks—of what our students are studying. Thus, our first-year thematic sessions focused on an interview with a barrister, Alexandra Wilson, who recently published a book about her experience being Black at Oxford and as a member of the Bar; an exchange between faculty members on 'queer perspectives on law', facilitating engagement with law's role in policing sexuality; and on media debates about the criminalization of street harassment, bearing on the intersection of gendered and racial vulnerability, feelings of safety and belonging in the public realm. Our second-year thematic sessions were equally topical. We tackled the Windrush debacle and the British state's techniques of policing migrants; the Post Office prosecutions scandal and the role of law, privatization, and technology; and the regulation / prohibition of hymenoplasty, along with the cultural issues that the policy-making process raises. The workshop format was invaluable, enabling us to embed the teaching of critical thinking/listening skills, as well as the formulation of reflective interventions, itself a vital skill in legal education.

As is evident from the topics, students found the material confronting. We were explicit throughout the programme that colleagues and students be mindful in their engagement of the topics; what is 'just' an academic debate to some might be much more for others. We stressed that *Laws' Perspectives* will support them in exploring our thoughts and testing our ideas. We built the discussion questions with this overriding sentiment with questions like: why do I think this? what might I be missing? how do I best present this position? how might someone differently situated understand what I am saying? how would we go about working out whether this view is the right one?

We encouraged students to prepare beforehand. This usually involved listening to an interview or podcast or reading light materials such as press articles or policy papers, with some guiding reflective questions in mind. We built a diverse teaching team to lead the workshops. They varied in seniority, background, viewpoints, and expertise. Many on the teaching team were able to teach from

their own experience or involvement in various capacities in academic and policy work on the issues at hand. As the convenor, I provided the teaching team with a detailed brief for each session, though they were freed to structure the discussion as they liked: in a large group, with breakout sessions, or structured debate.

## What would you tell someone who is interested in doing something similar?

We approached this programme with an explicitly experimental mindset, recognising that it served a diversity of aims and would call for constant renewal and refinement (more on this below). As such, it's important to be prepared for how resource- and time-intensive a programme like this is. It demands many hours of preparation and teaching, necessitating support from colleagues in professional services responsible for scheduling and logistics. It also requires intellectual endorsement from a cross-section of colleagues who, as mentioned above, vary in their outlooks.

The costs are, however, offset by the benefits. The programme offers an excellent avenue for expanding research-led teaching, and involving postgraduate students and teaching fellows can prove especially enriching. It also contributes to realizing UCL's ideal of a 'Connected Curriculum', embedding inclusivity while addressing under-explored areas within the field. In our Faculty's case, this programme was part of the [UCL Laws Statement in Solidarity with our Black Students, Staff and Alumni Around the World](#) (19 June 2020). For example, the second-year workshop on Windrush addressed a history of the British state—its transition from empire to nation-state—which is often omitted in more public law-oriented discussions. By introducing students to the topic, we prompted them to think about the uneven impact of facially neutral laws, as well as the stakes of enlisting civil society, corporations, charities and individual citizens into roles of surveillance and policing.

Our teaching team is elated with the pedagogical insights we gleaned. Perhaps most of all, we learned during the workshops how to moderate spirited and provocative deliberations on contentious topics in a respectful and constructive manner. By streamlining these matters, we overtly and implicitly support UCL's EDI aims, supporting student learning about the different perspectives that permeate both our institution and our societies.

## What difference has this made to staff or students?

We are still in the process of gathering feedback and will do so systematically at the end of the year. To date, responses to a mid-year survey were largely positive:

*I found the videos very interesting to watch as they provided valuable insight into social issues surrounding the law, especially hearing from people whose perspectives I don't normally see (first-year respondent)*

*I love that the faculty has implemented these sessions as a way to open the discussion regarding the law's role on a wider level. What we study on an undergraduate level can seem sometimes very niche and theoretical, and sometimes I almost forget the bigger purpose behind what I am studying. A major motivation behind my decision to study law was to be able to discuss and reflect on its importance in society, the wider issues within the legal system, and the crucial roles lawyers play in making a difference. Having the opportunity to explore important (and often unknown to me as well, as an international student) issues with insights from experts is such a privilege and essential for all law students I believe. I really hope the faculty can continue to offer these sessions. I usually don't take the time to write feedback but I think laws perspectives is a programme that deserves much recognition and faculty should know that from a law student's perspective (I obviously can only speak from my own experience), these are exactly the type of dialogues I was hoping to have in my degree. (second-year respondent)*

Perhaps most of all, we note the high degree of enthusiasm that students demonstrate in the workshops. Despite the non-graded character of the programme, they arrive prepared and committed to engaging in robust and meaningful discussion. The climate the programme nurtures is as enriching for colleagues as it is for students.

## What are your plans for the future?

We think the Laws' Perspectives programme adds something invaluable to the Faculty, and to the student experience. In keeping with the spirit of experimentalism, we're reflecting on how we might develop the programme in future along three axes:

**Dynamics of marginalization/mainstreaming.** One point of the programme is to pull marginalized perspectives to the fore. However, in doing this in a non-assessed enrichment module, there is a risk that students come to see these perspectives as tangential to material in their assessed modules. This danger is alleviated by the fact that most compulsory modules do deal in some ways with questions of equality and inequality. Still, we think there is greater scope for coordinating content with assessed modules so that students do not compartmentalize 'black letter law' and 'Laws' Perspectives'. We want them to see Perspectives as strengthening their overall learning about the law and wider education. There are also ways to integrate Laws' Perspectives more systematically with Faculty-wide events, building a sense of faculty and students' camaraderie, and with visiting and honorary professors.

**Intellectual depth versus topicality.** Some responses to the surveys indicated an appetite for more demanding intellectual content, including feminist and Marxist legal theory. Admittedly, others felt the time constraints favoured the lighter materials we provided. Achieving a balance might require stratifying the content of the programme in future years, and/or offering a theory-oriented reading group on an opt-in basis.

**Making time and space to engage with challenging materials.** One element of the Laws' Perspectives programme was to make a virtue of the break from assessed modules. We thus trialled the use of materials in different formats, like podcasts, allowing students to engage in more informal ways than standard. However, even if this reduced the time demand on students, space (literally) was a constraint. We had to schedule sessions in the lunch hour, which meant students struggled sometimes to make it between classes; and online sessions suffered from a generalized fatigue with online interaction. We hope to explore alternative scheduling options next year so that students can engage without the stress of a compressed schedule.

## Acknowledgments

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For more information on this case study please contact [Megan Donaldson](#)