



## **Law Students on the Road – Helping the Helpers** **Jil Ebenig, Verena Veeckman<sup>1</sup>**

### *Educating those working in refugee aid*

The situation in Germany in 2015 was a special one. The Syrian war and other conflicts around the world forced many refugees to flee to Europe and, in particular Germany, over a short period of time. The authorities were heavily burdened because of the sheer influx of people into the country. Fortunately, Germans initially reacted positively and ‘Willkommenskultur’ (literally translated as ‘welcome culture’) spread quickly. Over time, however, people became increasingly concerned with the situation and shifted to more conservative views, triggered – inter alia - by the ongoing media coverage. The inflationary and imprecise use of keywords such as ‘Flüchtling’ (refugee), ‘Duldung’ (temporary leave to remain) and ‘Asylant’ (asylum seeker) caused confusion about the issue, and social media helped spread the rumours.

However, many people from various backgrounds were willing to help and continue to work with refugees as professionals or as volunteers. Besides assisting with everyday challenges, they are usually the first people refugees approach with legal questions regarding asylum procedures, social welfare and the like. Unfortunately, few professional social workers and even fewer of the volunteers are qualified to answer these questions. Even if they have some basic knowledge of the legal system, it is nearly impossible for laymen to answer these questions, as migration and refugee law are currently some of the most rapidly changing areas of law in Germany. This situation is often frustrating for everybody involved. A short overview of the legal basics would help to reduce confusions that many professionals and volunteers face during their daily work with refugees.

Faced with this situation, the Goethe University Law Clinic (GLC) developed a new approach with its Street Law Workshops. Law clinics can not only assist with direct consultation or general education of migrants and refugees, but also help by educating those (professionals and volunteers) who work in refugee aid. This helps those in need of legal advice, while also promoting a factual and constructive public discourse by educating the general public on migration issues.

### **A. Concept**

Besides Street Law Workshops, the GLC offers legal counselling by its students in matters of migration and social law. The basic training of our students is based on the classical legal education at the Goethe University Frankfurt, Faculty of Law.

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## **I. Classical legal education at the Goethe University Faculty of Law**

The classical legal education at Goethe University's Faculty of Law is not very practice-oriented. The goal is to learn the law theoretically and to get an overview of the legal system and how it works.

The study includes two parts: basic studies and focused studies. During basic studies, the students study several fields of law to become acquainted with the German legal system. They are also required to complete three one-month internships at a court, an administrative body and/or with a lawyer.

After these basic studies, the students can decide what area of law to specialise in. In the classes we offer as part of our training, the students can obtain credits for their focused studies. Most of our students have started, or are about to start, their focused studies when they decide to participate in the GLC.

## **II. The GLC's training**

The basic training of the GLC prepares students to give legal advice. First, the students must complete one-year of training involving two theoretical classes, one research class at the university, and an internship with a lawyer or administrative body dealing with migration or social law cases. Besides the legal foundation, core competencies such as professional interviewing skills and maintenance of composure in difficult situations are taught in a seminar. Students must also attend a special weekly class to practice and internalise their theoretical knowledge by applying it to actual cases and reviewing current jurisprudence.

After the students finish their one-year training, they are paired with more experienced students to work on cases and participate in the preparation and presentation of Street Law Workshops.

## **III. Street Law Workshops**

### **1. Development**

Providing Street Law Workshops was initially not part of the GLCs concept. The main goal of the clinic, besides the educational benefits for the students, was to provide legal advice to those without access to professional legal counselling.

However, it soon became apparent that there was an overwhelming demand from a multitude of organisations for legal information regarding migration and refugees.

We were aware that other Law Clinics offered Street Law Workshops in those areas of law and considered adding them to the services we provide. Offering Street Law Workshops was our reaction to the increased need for legal education on the subject of migration.

Our workshops usually cater towards people working with refugees, rather than the refugees themselves. There are a few simple reasons for that, first of which being, that we felt like we needed to supply an existing demand. Second, it is easier for both us and the participants to do workshops in our shared native language, specifically because it enables us to rely on a pre-existing basic understanding of, for example, German administrative bodies and other German entities related to the issue at hand. That knowledge can't be presumed when working with migrants and would need to be explained in detail before being able to focus on the actual subject. Third, migrants usually have very specific questions concerning their own particular cases. Our workshops are not the best way to answer those questions. That is what our individual counselling service is better equipped to do. There we can answer any specific questions, if need be with the help of an interpreter, in order to provide the exact legal information that particular person needs. Furthermore, it is not just easier but also more efficient to do workshops for people working with refugees, mainly because they usually work with several migrants. Thus by educating one person, we can help multiple migrants.

The Street-Law Workshop program started when one organisation, aware of the GLC offering legal advice, asked us to educate their volunteers on the asylum process and migration law in general. They told us about their project, training students, who study social work or teaching, to go on and teach in special integration classes.

We found six of our students who were willing to prepare a workshop. They then developed a concept for a workshop tailored to the organisation's project, focusing on underaged migrants and refugees.

This is still the process we abide by. Organisations that have heard of our workshops approach us and tell us what topics their volunteers and/or employees need to be educated on. This means that every workshop is different because it is tailored to the needs of the organisation we provide it for. For example, someone working with underage unaccompanied migrants might face different questions than someone working with highly qualified specialists looking for employment.

As most of the participants already work with refugees, they usually have very specific questions. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the students creating the workshop have a broad understanding of the subject and that all information provided is sound. That is why we have an extensive preparation period and elaborate process for creating these workshops.

## **2. Preparation**

The first step in preparing a workshop is assessing the specific interests of the participants. On the basis of these interests we plan out the workshop, deciding which subjects are going to be covered and at what length. We then decide which student will present which parts of the workshop. Following this, everybody does in depth research into their particular topic. To help with any remaining questions, in particular in regards to the administrative practice, we usually invite a guest speaker who has worked in that specific field for multiple years.

Thereafter the students create their presentations, which they then fine-tune in a presentation workshop. During this workshop, the students present the workshop they developed and work on didactics, focusing on making their presentation less technical and more practice-oriented, At this point it is important to take the background of the participants into account to create a workshop that delivers detailed information but does not overwhelm the participants with legal jargon.

To help participants understand and retain complex content, the workshops usually contain exemplary cases, as well as a handout with explanatory diagrams and further information and contacts. Creating these materials is also part of preparing the Street Law Workshops.

### **B. Benefits**

Since we implemented our workshops, they have been requested frequently. The feedback has been consistent. The participants reported a better understanding of the subject and more confidence in their everyday work with refugees and asylum seekers. It is clear that getting a legal overview can help the volunteers and professionals better understand the situations of the people they are working with and the legal processes involved.

This is also convenient for the refugees and asylum seekers. If they have abstract legal questions about the proceeding, they could simply ask their supervisors, teachers, etc. The people who work with refugees are usually well trusted by the refugees, given the amount of contact they have been in. If they are faced with more complex legal matters, however, they can refer anyone to us whose questions are beyond their expertise. We also supply information about other institutions and organisations, including a list of situations in which it is necessary to contact a lawyer immediately, so help can be obtained quickly in urgent cases.

Besides helping refugees in particular cases, these workshops also equip volunteers and professionals alike with the knowledge and information needed to respond to

misconceptions or deliberate misinformation they come in contact with in their everyday life.

The Workshops also help us accomplish our other main goal of providing the GLC's students with a practice-oriented education. Being able to explain legal practices helps the students understand these practices more deeply as well.

Furthermore, preparing workshops that are intended for legal laymen requires a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Students usually feel even more obligated to do extensive research than they would for a purely academic presentation, because their knowledge will be tested through questions by people who rely on the accuracy of their answers. Thus, the preparation of a workshop in itself is a very educational process for the students. They also gain important soft skills by presenting the workshop.

These workshops also present networking opportunities to the students. They can engage with different organisations and share their experiences with others working in related fields.

The GLC collaborates with different institutions and organisations in the area that provide aid for refugees in non-legal matters (e.g. health, education or housing).

Lastly, the GLC as an institution can also benefit from the workshops. Discussions and questions that arise during the workshops have helped students of the GLC become aware of some "real world" problems. The GLC also and receives immediate feedback from a practical perspective, and based on this information, the GLC is able to adapt and improve the curriculum. The GLC can thus prepare the students to be able to provide the legal services needed.

### **C. Conclusion**

We hope to contribute to the quality of aid refugees receive by providing these workshops. We hope that the workshops can help those working with refugees by teaching them the legal basics so they can be more confident when confronted with legal questions in their daily work. Our work with the organisations and the participants of the workshops helps us gain better understanding of the problems faced not only by refugees but also by those trying to help them. These workshops therefore increase the quality of the education of our students and in turn the quality of the legal understanding and services they will provide.