Legal Aid Practice
Legal aid performs a crucial role in providing fair and equal access to justice to those most at risk of being excluded from our legal system.

Legal Aid firms can rarely afford to promote themselves to potential trainees in the same way as corporate practices. Firms of solicitors must tender and contract for legally aided civil and criminal work. Thus, law students do need to be determined when researching the work undertaken by lawyers in this area, and in identifying where and when contracts might arise.

Changes to Legal Aid

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act received Royal Assent on 1 May 2012 and large areas of civil legal work were removed from the scope of Legal Aid. Areas removed included Clinical Negligence, Consumer Law, Immigration & Asylum Law not involving accommodation or detention, most areas of Family Law, Debt Law not involving potential homelessness, Welfare Benefits, Employment Law & some Education Law areas.

Areas of Legal Aid

- Criminal Law
- Family Law- but generally only where there are domestic violence or abuse issues, or forced marriage cases, or in childcare cases involving child abuse or, or international maintenance or child abduction cases
- Discrimination Law
- Housing- generally only where there is actual homelessness, a serious threat of homelessness or disrepair cases where there is a serious threat to life or health
- Debt- only where the client’s home is at immediate risk
- Education- covering Special Educational Needs issues
- Community Care
- Mental Health
- Immigration and Asylum- generally only involving asylum or human trafficking issues, asylum where accommodation is claimed, immigration cases involving detention and appeals to the Special Immigration Appeals Commission
- Public Law Social Security (Appeals to the Upper Tribunal, Court of Appeal or Supreme Court)

Key skills required for working in Legal Aid

Empathy and communication
Clients will often be in a distressed, confused, anxious or even aggressive state. You need to be able to draw out the evidence from them and then convince them that your knowledge of the law is accurate and that your advice is appropriate to their circumstances.
Ability to think quickly on your feet
It will often be impossible to undertake research before providing legal advice — an obvious example is the criminal defence solicitor called out to a police station in the early hours. As a result, thorough knowledge of one’s specialist area of law is essential together with a common sense approach to its application.

Advocacy
Legal Aid lawyers present client cases in a variety of settings, for example judges’ chambers.

Negotiation
You will often be placed in the position of mediator between your client and the ‘authorities’ working towards an acceptable and realistic compromise.

Tenacity
To chase up contacts and organisations who may be able to provide vital information in support of your case.

Non-judgemental approach
Clients may well have different priorities and outlooks to you. It will be important to show respect to people coming from a wide and diverse range of cultures, traditions, ethnicities, races and religions.

Clear conviction with regard to human rights
Clients will not necessarily appreciate your hard work in support of their case yet your salary will be comparatively low with some work inevitably undertaken on a ‘pro bono’ (voluntary) basis.

Mental and physical stamina
Interviews may be drawn out and demand immense mental agility. Hours can be long and unpredictable, especially for duty solicitors working in Criminal Law. You also need the mental resilience to remain emotionally detached from your clients’ circumstances and be able to ‘switch off’ at the end of the day.

Good judgement
Whether it is worth pursuing a case, and if so, the time to be devoted. You cannot help the disadvantaged in society if your firm is not efficient and profitable!

Enhancing your CV
Related work experience and evidence of a commitment to the client groups served by Legal Aid is vital. You might consider:

- Work shadowing or work experience in a firm undertaking the work you are interested in
- Voluntary work in a CAB or law centre. (Time spent as a CAB adviser may be counted as good practice towards a Period of Recognised Training to be a solicitor.)
Manchester Law School now runs its own pro bono scheme; more details will be circulated during term-time and are available in the guide “Law Students & Voluntary Advice Work.”

Voluntary work in a charity or support agency working with the relevant client groups. In addition to the Law School’s own pro bono scheme, Manchester Met Volunteering are part of the Students’ Union and can provide students with a variety of volunteering opportunities with a wide range of charities or other not-for-profit organisations. Further information and search for opportunities can be found at theunionmmu.org/your-opportunities/volunteering/

Work experience in the government agencies that ‘set the rules’ e.g. Jobcentre Plus, Child Support Agency, Crown Prosecution Service, local authority housing department, debt collection department of a utility (gas, electricity, water) or credit card company.

Even observing cases in the Magistrates or Crown Courts can provide useful insights and potential contacts.

Initially, you may only be offered menial tasks such as photocopying or filing, but all experience provides a useful insight into the range of clients and cases you could expect to deal with. It will put you in contact with professional staff who can advise on your CV, suggest other people you could talk to or approach for more work experience, provide useful sources of further information or furnish you with a reference in the future.

For more information about possibilities in Greater Manchester, refer to the guide ‘Law Students and Voluntary Advice Work’ - available at mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides

Applying for a Training Contract

Very few Legal Aid firms recruit trainee solicitors far in advance; most firms recruit as and when they have vacancies. Some firms never advertise vacancies and simply select students to interview from speculative applications. Only the bigger firms tend to advertise 1 or more years in advance.

In some cases, unpaid work experience during your studies, perhaps 1-2 days per week, or a 1-2 week placement during the holidays, will provide a “foot in the door” to the offer of a permanent paralegal position or training contract. Some firms will offer a training contract after typically 6-24 months working as a paralegal. So work as a paralegal or legal clerk can very much be a way in to a training contract.

Although vacancies are not frequently advertised, the following sources may be helpful:

- lawcareers.net - Jobs section
- The Law Society Gazette: lawgazette.co.uk search “Jobs” and search under the area of law that interests you
- The Legal Action Group (LAG) bulletin – bi-monthly.
- The Legal Aid Practitioners Group: lapg.co.uk
- Law Centres Federation: lawcentres.org.uk

For speculative applications, use the “Find a Solicitor” search function on the Law Society’s website (lawsociety.org.uk). This indicates the areas of law undertaken by the firm and will help you determine the areas of Legal Aid work they are contracted to undertake. (Bear in mind that some firms combine Legal Aid with private client work).
Useful websites

Structure of Legal Aid
- Legal Aid Agency - gov.uk/legal-aid

Legal Aid Practitioners
- Legal Aid Practitioners Group - lapg.co.uk
- Legal Action Group - lag.org.uk
- Young Legal Aid Lawyers - younlegalaidlawyers.org
- Law Centres Federation - lawcentres.org.uk
- Citizens’ Advice Bureaux - citizensadvice.org.uk
- Advice UK - adviceuk.org.uk
- Immigration Law Practitioners Association - ilpa.org.uk
- Resolution - resolution.org.uk
- UK College of Mediators - ukcfm.co.uk
- The Free Representation Unit - thefru.org.uk
- Lawworks (national pro bono group) - lawworks.org.uk
- Law Society - lawsociety.org.uk

Related Charities and Support Groups
- Liberty - liberty-human-rights.org.uk
- Justice - justice.org.uk
- Amnesty International - amnesty.org.uk
- Child Poverty Action Group - cpag.org.uk
- Shelter - shelter.org.uk
- Mind - mind.org.uk
- Mencap - mencap.org.uk
- Rethink (formerly National Schizophrenic Fellowship) - rethink.org
- Age Concern - ageuk.org.uk
- Stonewall - stonewall.org.uk
- Terrence Higgins Trust Lighthouse - tht.org.uk
- Action Against Medical Accidents - avma.org.uk
- Disability Resource Centre - disability.co.uk

Opportunities for Voluntary Action in Greater Manchester
- Manchester Met Volunteering: mmu.ac.uk/careers/students/jobs-and-work-experience/volunteering/
- Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation - gmcvo.org.uk

Government Departments and Agencies
- Ministry of Justice - justice.gov.uk
- UK Border Agency - ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk
- Child Support Agency/Child Maintenance Service - csa.gov.uk
- Equality and Human Rights Commission - equalityhumanrights.com
- Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service - acas.org.uk
- Trades Union Congress - tuc.org.uk
- Crown Prosecution Service - cps.gov.uk
The Careers & Employability Service

The Careers and Employability service offers a range of support to Manchester Met students and graduates. For more information visit mmu.ac.uk/careers

Detailed careers guides

Our full range of careers guides, including information on finding and applying for opportunities are available on our website: mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides

Ask a Careers Question

Get online advice through My Career Hub, ask your question at any time and receive support via email. mmu.ac.uk/careersquestion

Careers Consultant Appointments

Book a 30 minute appointment with a Careers & Employability Consultant. All you need to do to book in is call us on 0161 247 3483.

Careers Events

Meet employers and enhance your employability by attending our workshops, employer events and careers fairs. Keep up to date with the latest events here: mmu.ac.uk/careers/events

MMyou

The online careers centre you can access 24/7 to view lots of career resources, advice and tips, career quizzes and helpful articles wherever you are! Including articles and information tailored to your sector! Login to MMyou Careers Centre to