

2024 Showcase 1 – Abstract

Strengthening the ‘practice’ in Family Law Practice through curriculum innovation and industry expertise

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Family Law Practice (LAWS2056) is a Law unit that introduces students to the relationship between the law and family; explores the legal rights and obligations of family members; and examines key family law legislation in context. This unit was first delivered in the Southern Cross Model (SCM) in Term 5, 2023.

Recent scholarship on the teaching of family law has highlighted an ingrained ‘theory/practice dichotomy’, amidst ongoing debate about the extent to which universities ‘should focus on skills and/or doctrine as opposed to an interdisciplinary study of family law’ (Kaye & Jones, 2022, p. 69). Some scholars have suggested that family law is ‘ripe for reinvention’ and offers opportunities to expand ‘traditional law school teachings’ by preparing students for professional careers through skills training (Rogus & Tsoukala, 2022, p. 820). Others have emphasised the importance of exposing students to political debates, trends and initiatives that influence family law, policy and practice (Mant, 2022, p. 418).

Our presentation will showcase various innovations in the design and delivery of the Family Law Practice unit in the SCM that have engaged with these scholarly debates, by embedding a practice-informed approach in the context of major family law reforms.

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It will highlight:

- the translation of research expertise into the classroom in the unit's redevelopment;
- the inclusion of industry expertise in the teaching team, with the engagement of a practising barrister in the Northern Rivers region to teach the online tutorials;
- the development of a webinar series, 'Insights from Family Law Practice', presenting conversations with family law professionals from the judiciary, advocacy, dispute resolution, legal practice and academia;
- the role of the hybrid classroom in facilitating meaningful engagement between online and on-campus students;
- the replacement of a prescribed textbook with a curated, interactive family law 'resource library';
- the use of scaffolded skills development tasks and authentic assessment requiring students to draft legal documents such as affidavits, consent orders and parenting plans; and
- the significance of class discussions and debates about imminent law reforms, to expose students to the complex, evolving policy underpinnings of Australian family law.

Finally, we will reflect on the Unit Feedback Survey results, which demonstrate that the unit was well-received by students. We will also consider how this student feedback may be incorporated to further engage learners in the hybrid classroom and to continue enhancing the student learning experience in the SCM.

References

- Kaye, M. & Jones, J. (2022). The University Teaching of Family Law, *Australian Journal of Family Law*, 35(1), 68.
- Mant, J. (2022), Teaching Family Law in Neoliberal Times, *International Journal of Law in Context*, 416, 18.
- Rogus, C. & Tsoukala, P. (2022). Doctrine, Experiential Learning, and Client-centered Lawyering: Teaching Family Law in A Post-pandemic World, *Family Court Review*, 60, 818.

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