

Getting into international humanitarian law

By Neda Monshat



Heidi Edwards answers a question from the audience.

Law students, community activists and humanitarian law enthusiasts packed out the Monash Law Chambers recently to hear stories and share experiences about gaining practical work experience in international criminal tribunals. Hosted by the Castan Centre, in partnership with Friends of International Humanitarian Law (affiliated with the Australian Red Cross), the public forum gave students an insight into overseas work placements and opportunities for further study in other jurisdictions.

Guest speakers Stephen Muirhead, Heidi Edwards and a third student shared their diverse experiences working with the United Nations international criminal courts and revealed some insider tips on how to score an overseas internship.

Steven recounted living in the 'international law capital of the world', The Hague, while interning for five months at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The ICTY was established by the United Nations in 1993 and prosecutes perpetrators of war crimes committed during the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans.

Steven interned in the French-language Chambers, undertaking evidence analysis and drafting minor legal decisions. Highlights for Steven included the great social atmosphere working with 100 other interns and the opportunity to improve his legal skills. Lowlights were not being able to work directly with the judges on legal issues and not witnessing court proceedings (since the case he was assigned to was in its judgement stage).

Heidi shared her experiences interning with the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in 2009, and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) last year. The ICTR was established by the United Nations to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes committed in Rwanda during the conflict in 1994. The ECCC, although performing a similar function in relation to Cambodian conflicts, is also a permanent part of the Cambodian court system.

For Heidi, highlights included working closely with the ECCC judges and developing critical legal thinking. Lowlights were the initial cross-cultural challenges working in a patriarchal workplace and struggling to find the balance between being professional and being compassionate when dealing with victims of war crimes.

The last student, in contrast, shared her diverse experiences completing a Masters in Law at Columbia University in the USA. She recalled learning alongside Mongolian diplomats, French academics and Japanese judges with students from all around the world. She noted that there were only highlights to her time in New York, including easy access to human rights institutes and non-governmental organisations and the opportunity to work with the United Nations Liaison Office - which included a run in with Nicholas Cage (somewhat unusual) and Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General (not so unusual).

All three gained valuable experiences from their overseas placements. The general message seems to be – do it! It's likely to be an experience you won't forget and could give you that extra competitive edge when it comes to finding employment.

The third presenter has asked that her name be withheld.

Top five tips for gaining an overseas work placement:

1. Be persistent – Heidi recounted calling the ICTR daily before finding out that she was successful in getting a work placement.
2. Do your research – Heidi and Steven stressed the importance of researching where you want to intern before applying. It's not going to be a great experience if the Court you're interning with isn't dealing with any cases at the time of your placement.
3. It's okay if you can only speak English – although it's definitely a positive to know another language, Steven assured us that it's not essential (and he interned in the French Chamber of the ICTY!)
4. Don't get too stressed about logistics – your visa and housing issues can and will be resolved. Heidi admitted that she organised most of her accommodation in-country after she arrived in Tanzania.
5. Don't let your bank balance be a barrier – the speakers suggested applying for scholarships and sourcing funding from local organisations. The Foundation for Young Australians, Monash Awards, Fulbright and Lionel Murphy all offer scholarships to assist with travelling overseas. Your local rotary club is also a good place to source funds to support your internship.