



## Assessment and problem-based learning in the law curriculum: the PREPS framework

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**Assessment and problem-based learning in the law curriculum: the PREPS framework**, by Anil Balan, London, London Publishing Partnership, 2023, 1st edition, 195 pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-913019-94-5

Since early 2020, the pressures on assessment strategies at UK law schools have been unrelenting. Innovations triggered by the pandemic went significantly beyond shifting existing practices online. Then, as the UK emerged from COVID lockdowns and appeared to be moving, generally, towards “normality”, the impact of generative AI on legal education (and practice) emerged as a pedagogically pressing concern. These contemporary challenges interact with established issues in legal education, including discussion about the purpose of assessment, employability and the legal professions, and “authentic” assessment.

Balan’s *Assessment and Problem-Based Learning in the Law Curriculum: The PREPS Framework* is a valuable contribution to discussion on assessment and undergraduate law course design. It serves as both a detailed account of qualitative legal education research – involving interviews with academics at Balan’s, then, own institution (the University of East London) and other comparable institutions – and a resource for educators (re-)designing curricula. The titular PREPS framework consists of themes of “teaching for professional *practice*, teaching for *resilience* and engagement, teaching that adapts to the *environment*, teaching to respond to challenges of vocational *pedagogies*, and teaching to integrate academic and vocational *skills*” (p. 51, emphasis in original). Each theme is the subject of one of the latter five chapters, with the first four outlining methodology and exploring wider literature related to these themes.

Problem-based learning is discussed throughout, but perhaps most prominently in chapter 5, which explores preparation for practice. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Balan’s discussion focuses on “designing assessments that closely mirror the challenges and tasks faced by legal professionals” (p. 58) and there is less consideration of subject areas with limited direct connections to legal practice – a category which might include legal history or jurisprudence – where a broader conceptualisation of authenticity might be required. Nevertheless, Balan does state, in an earlier chapter, that “[t]he argument that legal education should not be purely vocational . . . is compelling” (p. 13), suggesting the framework might be adaptable to address these subject areas.

Balan draws attention to the comparison between PREPS and the CARE framework developed by Tsaoussi in the article “Using Soft Skills Courses to Inspire Law Teachers: A New Methodology for a More Humanistic Legal Education” in *The Law Teacher*.<sup>1</sup> Balan critiques aspects of CARE because of “the heavy load it places on teachers and the difficulty of maintaining student motivation” (p. 50) and suggests that PREPS offers a more developed framework built on empirical data. For example, in chapter 6, Balan contrasts CARE’s *attentive* teaching with the *resilience* and engagement focus of PREPS. Balan argues that the “resilience and engagement principle goes further than attentive teaching by placing an emphasis on students from widening participation backgrounds” (p. 77). On the one hand, PREPS

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<sup>1</sup>Aspasia I Tsaoussi, “Using Soft Skills Courses to Inspire Law Teachers: A New Methodology for a More Humanistic Legal Education” (2020) 54 *The Law Teacher* 1.

engages more explicitly with curriculum design, in contrast to CARE's arguably more "humanistic" focus on individual educators' practice. Consequently, Balan is able to provide examples of interventions around resilience occurring beyond formalised learning, such as those involving student societies and peer-mentoring schemes (pp. 87–88), which support this emphasis. On the other hand, such interventions do remain vulnerable to similar challenges around staff workload if they are to be supported and integrated into the curriculum effectively.

While Balan suggests most of the themes he develops share parallels or commonalities with principles of the CARE framework, chapter 7 discusses *adaptation* which is said "represents a new element that is not part of the CARE framework at all, since it is based very much on the context in which this book was carried out", namely adaptations to the COVID pandemic (p. 109). This theme also explores technological developments (including, briefly, AI) which may have an impact on legal education. The need to engage with professional ethics is presented as one key recommendation of this chapter, which suggests there are general benefits to preparing students to enter a changing world as well as specific benefits to preparing those who will enter practice to adapt to changes in law and the challenges facing society (p. 118).

Each chapter concludes with "Hints and Tips" related to the focus of the chapter, which serves to underscore the book's usefulness as a reference point for academics developing their practice. In chapter 8, this section highlights the need to ensure that teaching and learning develop over modules, building up as a course of study, and that courses are attentive to their role in students' educational and career journeys with calls for "[c]urriculum mapping [and] collaboration among faculty members" (p. 150). Arguably, given the high number of students moving institutions at different stages of their education, this call might also be extended beyond individual faculties and prompt more consideration of how courses within and beyond individual institutions connect with one another.

Chapter 9 highlights other avenues of collaboration, including guest lectures from practitioners and professionals, and utilising connections with alumni to enhance students' experience and learning. To some extent, such interventions could help to enhance student engagement while avoiding issues related to staff workload akin to those Balan discussed in earlier sections. The wider responsibilities of academic staff are an important factor in this chapter's exploration of academic and vocational *skills*, with the end of the chapter providing a compelling call for professional development with Balan stressing: "ongoing training and support not only benefits the individual law teachers but also enhances the overall learning experience for students" (p. 170).

*Assessment and Problem-Based Learning in the Law Curriculum: The PREPS Framework* serves as a provocation for legal educators. It invites them to consider the role of the law curriculum and how to prepare students for their lives as graduates. Balan's analysis is centred on a specific type of institution – those comparable with the University of East London – but is attentive to the context of reforms to legal education in England and Wales as a whole. The book is also likely to be of interest to legal educators globally, particularly those seeking to

integrate vocational skills with an eye to the legal professions into their teaching at an undergraduate level.

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**How to offer effective wellbeing support to law students**, edited by Lydia Katherine Bleasdale, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, USA, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024, viii + 177 pp., £90.00 (hardback), £25.00 (ebook), ISBN 978-1-80392-079-5 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-80392-080-1 (ebook)

Providing the appropriate support to a law student who is in need of help also necessitates support. Examples of how law teachers can seek assistance in supporting their students can range from asking for advice from other colleagues (whether at the same law school or outside it) to consulting the growing literature on student wellbeing in legal education. *How to Offer Effective Wellbeing Support to Law Students* edited by Lydia Katherine Bleasdale is a vital addition to the existing avenues of guidance that the legal educator has in place, when helping their students.

The guide consists of 11 chapters. Bleasdale begins the introductory chapter with a personal account highlighting the importance of student support, before articulating the aim of the text, which is to “serve as a useful starting point for considering how to ‘do’ student support” (p. 1). It is also in this chapter where the reader is made aware of the limitations of the guide, such as not being able to illuminate and discuss all types of law student and their concomitant wellbeing support needs (p. 2). Furthermore, the key themes that unify the chapters of the guide are also highlighted, for instance, the significance for students and staff to experience “a sense of belonging and a sense of community” at the law school (p. 3). And that law student support does not have to be limited to a meeting at the eleventh hour, where the struggling student musters up the courage to articulate to their teacher the adversity that is experienced (p. 3).

Highlighting the various approaches adopted by the contributing authors throughout the rest of the guide, the second chapter by O’Connor makes a direct appeal to the reader on the importance of reflection when supporting law students. The reasons for doing so are to encourage the reader to “take stock”, but to also understand where readers may need to better their practice, for themselves and others (p. 5). To achieve this, O’Connor shares guidance and reflections that stem from personal experience, such as refusing to give up on working towards transforming student support for the better (p. 18). Chapter 3 by Hughes-Gerber, McGuirk and Savva aims to address how legal academics can provide academic and pastoral support to their students by proposing the use of the framework called “CADSIF” (p. 28) which expanded, means the following actions: “Contact, Assurance, Dialogue, Signpost, Information and Follow-up” (pp. 28–29). Furthermore, the authors demonstrate how this framework would