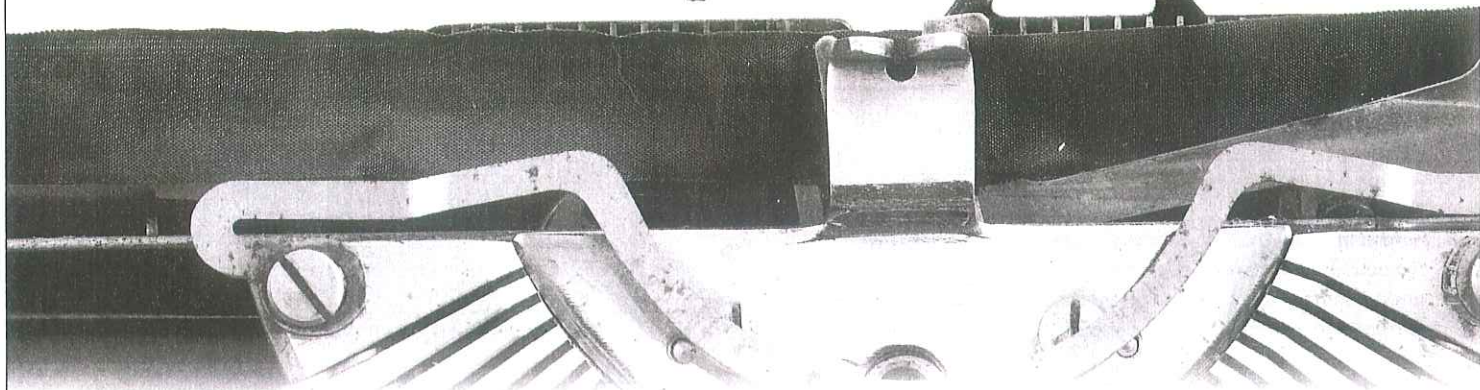


Hot off the press



Paul Stevenson's involvement with two university publications has allowed him both to help others and develop his legal skills in a different context – as has his ongoing work with a charity in West Africa

I spent a lot of time while a student sitting on committees rather than at a desk and I had generally assumed that when I left university I would have to leave behind for good the plethora of clubs, committees and societies which are an inevitable part of student life. Happily, I was wrong.

Cherwell newspaper and ISIS magazine are two of the oldest student publications in the UK. Although I've never been a journalist, as a student I was fortunate enough to be involved with the company which publishes the two. The task was very mixed: cold calling, selling adverts, budgeting and generally managing the business side of their operation. I stuck with the company during my law conversion course and ended up spending three years involved in one way or another.

An array of issues

During my time with the company a number of our alumni banded together to create a holding company, numbering among its members senior figures in law, finance and the media, with links to the company dating to the 1950s. They took a real interest in what we were doing and I learned an incredible amount from their input. I had always said that I'd like to stay involved and would be willing to volunteer, and a little while ago I was asked if I'd be willing to come on board. For a company of such a small size, the students who are now in charge are forced to deal with a bewildering array of issues, from leasehold renewal to libel. During my time with the company we used to prise as much free legal advice out of alumni as we could. Nothing has changed!

Since I embarked on a legal career in 2004, I have also been able to bring my legal experience to bear in other voluntary contexts, particularly in a charity which I help to run called Future for Africa. The charity works in West Africa on small scale community projects from classroom building to wells. A group of eight of us run the company at weekends, evenings and by email. I first became involved during my law conversion course and now, five years after the charity was founded, I still find that occasional legal issues arise, whether they concern the interpretation of a trust deed or the duty of care of a trustee.

Obviously taking on these 'extra-curricular' commitments has been a bit of a challenge, particularly since at the Bar you never know what case might be around the corner and where in the country you are going to be sent by your senior clerk, but I've enjoyed being able from time to time to provide practical advice in a different setting from a court conference room.

A helping hand

It's been particularly rewarding to offer practical help and guidance to people who are now in a situation which I remember well, and to repay some of the many hours of help that I received during my time. Sometimes the help I have been able to give has been nothing more than making available a conference room in chambers at the end of the day, but it has extended to discussion of pressing legal scenarios which the company has faced, whether it be the negotiation of a new commercial lease or the threat of an imminent libel action.

Although I can't and don't act formally as a lawyer for any of the publications, or indeed for the charity, it has been nice to be able to add a little more than just a sympathetic ear. In many ways, the issues which the charity faces are a million miles away from the focus of a student publication, but I have found that in any organisation run by volunteers there is the same demand for common sense and down-to-earth explanations of legal issues. Given that lay clients have precisely the same need, honing this skill has paid practical dividends for the rest of my work.

Despite the obvious overlap with work where legal issues pop up, volunteering has had pleasant side effects. The Bar can be a solitary place, and working with the newspaper and charity has provided the scope for real teamwork, with the chance to use my legal skills, albeit indirectly, on the side. I've developed knowledge about areas of legal practice which I would never otherwise have had cause to study. It's also allowed me to garner practical experience of other 'key skills' such as account reading, networking skills and chairing meetings. Although these skills are not necessarily considered to be important skills for barristers, I have come to realise that they are valuable for any lawyer. I'd recommend volunteer work to anyone.



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