

LEGAL CLINICS HANDBOOK

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
2025/2026



The European Law Students' Association

Foreword

Professional Development as one of ELSA's key areas aims to prepare ELSA's members for Professional life after their studies. The vague scope of the key area provides a platform for much creativity in which events can be organised. In this context, few initiatives embody the spirit of Professional Development as effectively as Legal Clinics.

This project provides students with direct exposure to real-life clients and authentic legal issues, fostering both practical problem-solving abilities and professional ethics. In addition, it provides them with the most accurate learning experience for the professional work they will be facing in the future.

Therefore, Legal Clinics can be considered at the very core of what Professional Development strives to achieve – equipping law students with the skills, confidence, and mindset required to succeed in their future legal careers.

This Handbook aims to define Legal Clinics, outline their benefits for both ELSA as an association and its members, and provide practical guidance on how to establish and manage a Legal Clinic based on the experiences of previous project organisers.

If you have any questions regarding organising Legal Clinics after reading this Handbook, or questions about this Handbook itself, please contact the Vice President in charge of Professional Development of the International Board of ELSA for your term at the following email: professionaldevelopment@elsa.org.

Best of luck with organising your event!

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1. Introduction

Legal Clinics embody one of the most meaningful **intersections between education and practice in the legal field**. They provide law students with the opportunity to step beyond the classroom and engage directly with the realities of legal work, not only by solving real legal cases, but also **by understanding the human stories behind them**. Through active participation, students experience the law as a living instrument of justice and social responsibility, gaining insight into how their future profession can impact individuals and communities.

Moreover, Legal Clinics reflect the broader mission of ELSA - to contribute to:

“A just world in which there is respect for human dignity and cultural diversity”

This is done by **connecting academic learning with real societal needs**. They empower students to use their legal knowledge as a tool for inclusion, fairness, and understanding across different backgrounds and perspectives. Legal Clinics thus become more than a training ground; they are a living expression of ELSA's vision, showing how law can serve both justice and humanity.

This Handbook serves as a guide for National and Local Officers and organisers who wish to establish or enhance their Legal Clinic initiatives, offering practical insight into creating spaces where learning, professionalism, and social impact meet. It aims to explain what the project is, and how an ELSA Officer should approach creating a Legal Clinic in their respective group.

2. Definition, purpose and benefits of the project

2.1. Definition

The International Council Meeting Decision Book, Part 8 Professional Development, Chapter 4 Other Professional Development Events, Article 5.1 defines the **Legal Clinic as a project during which participants provide pro bono case-solving under the guidance and supervision of a legal professional**. It offers law students the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in a real or simulated professional environment, addressing genuine legal problems and supporting individuals or communities in need.

The exact Decision Book definition can be found [here](#) on page 65.

Legal Clinics form a bridge between legal education and legal practice, allowing students to gain hands-on experience while contributing to the public good. Through these activities, participants develop essential professional skills and a deeper understanding of the role of law in society.

Legal Clinics can be organised in cooperation with a wide range of institutions and organisations. These partnerships allow students to engage with real cases, gain insight into

different areas of law, and develop a sense of professional responsibility. Depending on the local context and focus of the Clinic, cooperation may include:

- **Pro Bono Departments** of law firms, providing professional supervision and exposure to practical legal work;
- **Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)**, supporting social, humanitarian, or environmental causes;
- **Public Institutions** such as an **Ombudsman Office**, where students can learn about citizens' rights protection; and,
- **Bar associations or professional chambers**, which can offer mentoring and ensure compliance with ethical standards.

And of course, if you have other ideas for where such initiatives could be organised - feel free to explore them; the only limit is your imagination, as well as national legislation.

2.2. Purpose

The purpose of ELSA Legal Clinics is to **foster the practical skills and professional development** of law students while **promoting social responsibility and awareness of societal needs**.

Legal Clinics are meant to provide **practical insights into the legal profession** by allowing participants to apply knowledge and skills obtained during law studies - such as **legal research, case-solving, and client management** in a real-world context. The responsibilities of participants in a Legal Clinic are determined by the **applicable laws of the country** in which it takes place.

Beyond professional learning, Legal Clinics encourage **empathy, ethical awareness, and social engagement**, enabling participants to understand the challenges faced by individuals and groups who are less fortunate. Through pro bono legal support, students contribute to ensuring greater access to justice.

2.3. Benefits

2.3.1. Benefits to ELSA members

Legal Clinics bring a wide range of benefits to ELSA members, offering them unique opportunities for both professional and personal development. By engaging in real or simulated case-solving, students go beyond theoretical learning and experience the law in action, gaining practical insight into how legal knowledge can be applied to support individuals and communities. **Through this hands-on approach, participants not only build essential professional competencies but also develop a stronger sense of social responsibility and ethical awareness.** The key benefits for ELSA members include:

- **Practical Experience:** Applying theoretical knowledge to real or simulated legal cases under the guidance of experienced professionals;
- **Skill Development:** Strengthening essential abilities such as legal research, drafting, communication, teamwork, and client interaction;
- **Professional Networking:** Building meaningful connections with lawyers, academics, and institutions that may support future career opportunities;
- **Social Impact:** Contributing to access to justice and assisting those who might otherwise lack legal support, fostering civic engagement and empathy; and,
- **Personal Growth:** Gaining confidence, independence, and a deeper understanding of the lawyer's ethical and societal role.

In essence, Legal Clinics empower ELSA members to become not only competent future professionals but also compassionate individuals ready to promote the right values.

2.3.2. Benefits to ELSA as an organisation

Legal Clinics offer significant benefits not only to individual ELSA members but also to the organisation as a whole. For members, they provide an invaluable opportunity to develop practical skills, gain insight into real legal work, and contribute meaningfully to society. At the organisational level, **Legal Clinics strengthen ELSA's visibility and credibility within the professional community, while also advancing its mission of empowering young, ethically aware lawyers dedicated to justice and human dignity.**

The project brings a variety of concrete benefits, including:

- **Increased Visibility:** Enhancing ELSA's reputation as a socially responsible and professionally oriented student organisation;
- **New Partnerships:** Creating opportunities for cooperation with law firms, universities, NGOs, and public institutions, and strengthening ELSA's external relations;
- **Expanded Network:** Building lasting connections with professionals and partner organisations, broadening ELSA's reach and influence;
- **Diversified Portfolio:** Enriching ELSA's range of academic and professional activities by combining legal education with tangible social impact; and,
- **Mission Fulfilment:** Advancing ELSA's mission to develop skilled, socially conscious, and ethically grounded young lawyers committed to a just society.

In this way, Legal Clinics play a dual role: they directly serve members by opening doors to professional opportunities, while simultaneously reinforcing ELSA's position as the largest independent law students' association in the world.

4. How to organise a Legal Clinic

This chapter provides a step-by-step guide on how to organise a Legal Clinic. ELSA Officers can use the following as a guide when planning and implementing the project. While the structure presented here serves as an example, it can be freely adapted to fit local needs, resources, and partnerships - ensuring that each Legal Clinic reflects both ELSA's values and the unique aspects of the organising group.

To support officers in the practical implementation of the project, a **Legal Clinic Checklist for ELSA Officers** has been included as **Annex I** to this Handbook. The checklist provides a concise overview of the main tasks for each phase of the project – from partner selection and planning to evaluation – helping officers monitor progress and ensure that all organisational steps are completed on time.

4.1. Choosing a partner

The first step in organizing a Legal Clinic is the decision to undertake the project, which is closely linked to selecting a suitable partner. ELSA groups should carefully identify institutions that provide these types of services, such as NGOs or law firms with dedicated Pro Bono or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) departments. Large corporate law firms often have well-structured pro bono programs as part of their commitment to sustainability and social responsibility.

It is crucial to contact potential partners well in advance to establish initial interest, clarify possible forms of cooperation, and ensure that the project aligns with the objectives of both ELSA and the partner. From the very beginning, attention should be paid to the partner's image as collaborating with organisations that have a questionable or controversial reputation may negatively affect how ELSA is perceived. The project should also be **designed to meet the partner's expectations,** providing them with a satisfying collaboration experience while simultaneously fostering positive relationships and enhancing the reputation of both parties.

4.2. Preparation and planning

Once a partner has been confirmed, the national or local group and the partner organisation should carefully plan the exact format and agree on the timeframe of the project. Key planning elements include:

- **Establishing the timeframe for the Legal Clinic, allowing sufficient preparation time for all participants.** It is strongly recommended to start planning several weeks – or even months – in advance to ensure that all organisational, promotional, and contractual steps can be completed smoothly.
- **Determining the number of student participants, ensuring high-quality service and appropriate support.** After selecting the participants, please note that each of them

must also sign an individual agreement with the partner organisation. This process will not happen overnight, so you should take it into account during the planning phase and allocate enough time to finalise all contractual matters before the start of the project.

- **Assigning supervision responsibilities and clearly defining the mentors' roles.** Make sure that both the students and the partner organisation fully understand their respective roles and obligations as stipulated in the contract. In case of any questions, ensure that they have your contact details so they can reach out for clarification or assistance at any stage.
- **Declaring legal and civil liability, which should be addressed during the contractual phase.** It is advisable to remind all student participants once again of the scope of civil liability connected to the project, so that everyone has a full and transparent understanding of their responsibilities before participation begins.

All of these elements should be **planned in advance** to enable smooth project implementation and ensure a shared understanding of the project's scope between ELSA and the partner. A carefully prepared schedule and clear agreements help meet the partner's expectations while protecting the organisation's reputation, ensuring that the collaboration and ELSA as an organisation is perceived as professional, responsible, and trustworthy.

4.3. Contract signing

Before the project begins, a formal agreement must be signed between ELSA and the partner organisation. **This contract should outline all responsibilities, expectations, and liabilities, and can be similar to the agreements used for ELSA traineeships.** Individual participants will also be required to sign agreements with the pro bono entity, specifying the terms under which they will provide legal assistance. Ensuring that all parties understand and agree to the contractual terms is crucial to prevent misunderstandings and protect both students and partners.

To assist officers, model templates have been developed and are included as annexes to this Handbook:

- **Annex II** – Model Agreement between ELSA and the Partner Organisation (Legal Clinic Partnership Agreement)
- **Annex III** – Model Agreement between the Student and the Partner Organisation (Student Participation Agreement)

These model contracts are inspired by the ELSA Traineeship framework and can be adapted to fit national legal requirements, internal procedures, and specific partner arrangements.

4.4. Promotion and registration of students

To ensure successful participation, the Legal Clinic must be properly promoted. **The date and timeframe of the project should be chosen so that marketing starts at least a month before registration opens.** Registration should remain open for a minimum of one week, and there should be at least 2 weeks between the closing of registration and the project's start, allowing participants to prepare adequately.

It is recommended to hold a pre-event call with the participants to provide necessary information. The number of participants may vary depending on the organising Group's capacities, but it is recommended to follow the rule: **Quality over Quantity!** Better start small and then develop the project over the course of time.

4.5. Implementation phase

At this point, it is crucial to ensure that all participants are well-prepared and aware of their roles and responsibilities. The ELSA group should work closely with the partner organisation to facilitate smooth execution, monitor progress, and promptly address any challenges that may arise.

In practice, Legal Clinics mean that ELSA **recruits law students** who are then delegated to **pro bono departments in law firms or NGOs**. It is the duty of the local ELSA group to handle all **organisational aspects**, including recruitment and coordination with the partner. However, all **substantive aspects of the work** within the Legal Clinic are regulated by the **partner organisation**, which also **supervises the students** throughout the duration of the project. The partner ensures that the students receive proper guidance by a fully qualified lawyer and that the quality of the provided legal support remains high.

Therefore, it is essential to **agree on all key details with the partner in advance**, such as:

- the project's **duration**;
- the thematic **scope of work**;
- the **number** and **advancement level** of participating students;
- **reporting** and **monitoring** procedures; and,
- any other **organisational** or **logistical** details necessary for the cooperation.

During implementation, the following aspects should be given particular attention:

- Ensuring that students **understand the legal framework and guidelines** for providing advice or support;
- Maintaining **regular communication** between ELSA coordinators and the partner organisation to resolve issues promptly;
- Monitoring the **workload and distribution of tasks** among students to ensure quality service and a positive experience for both participants and clients; and,

- Upholding **professional standards** and maintaining the partner's and ELSA's positive image at all times.

A proactive and flexible approach will ensure that the project runs efficiently and provides a meaningful and rewarding experience for all parties involved; **the students, the partner organisation, and ELSA.**

4.6. Summary and Evaluation

After the Legal Clinic concludes, **it is essential to conduct a thorough review and evaluation of the project.** This stage allows the team to reflect on successes, identify challenges, and gather valuable insights for future initiatives.

Key elements of the evaluation include:

- Collecting feedback from student participants regarding their **experience, learning outcomes, and suggestions for improvement;**
- Gathering input from the partner organisation on the **quality of collaboration,** the effectiveness of student involvement, and any areas for refinement;
- Analyzing what **worked well and what could have been handled differently,** both in terms of organisation and execution; and,
- Documenting **lessons learned** and **recommendations** to inform the planning of future Legal Clinics.

The evaluation and feedback collected should preferably be sent to ELSA International, so that the first experiences gained from the organisation of this project can be taken into account in the further development of the project.

You can send any feedback you believe is necessary to ELSA International either to:

- Vice President PD of the International Board at professionaldevelopment@elsa.org
- Director PD of ELSA International at director.professionaldevelopment@elsa.org

The organising PD officers should provide the participants with Certificates of Participation. The certificates should include the name of the project, timeframe and the logo of the partner organisation.

5. Liability issue and contract

It is important to note that **civil liability for the legal advice or assistance provided within the framework of the project cannot under any circumstances rest with ELSA.** As an association, ELSA is **not in a position to operate a legal aid centre** or conduct advisory activities in the full legal sense of the term. Doing so would require significant logistical, organisational, and professional resources, as well as adequate legal supervision. Moreover, such

activities would raise **serious concerns regarding civil liability and insurance coverage** for potential legal damages. Therefore, ELSA **cannot be held responsible for any legal advice or opinions provided by students** participating in a Legal Clinic.

This should be stipulated in the contract signed between ELSA and the partner of the project at the very early stage of preparations. Annexes II and III provide a model version of the liability contracts. They can obviously be adapted to specific country regulations if necessary.

For the above reasons, the **model of Legal Clinics adopted in the Decision Book** where ELSA handles the organisational aspects and the **partner organisation assumes full responsibility for the legal work and supervision of students**, is the most appropriate and sustainable form of implementing such projects.

6. FAQ / Common obstacles

6.1. Can I just copy an idea from another national group?

It is important to remember that the **legal situation and regulatory framework vary from country to country**. Each jurisdiction has its own requirements. In **common law countries**, the requirements are often less strict, in some countries, students may provide legal advice **without direct supervision** of a fully qualified lawyer, under specific conditions or within certain types of university-based clinics. However, this practice depends heavily on local regulations and may differ even between regions within the same country!

In contrast, **civil law countries** usually impose **stricter requirements**. Legislation typically mandates that **students must work under the supervision of a fully qualified lawyer or attorney**, who bears responsibility for overseeing the students' work and ensuring that the advice provided meets professional and legal standards. This distinction is fundamental to understanding how Legal Clinics can operate within different legal systems.

Therefore, **before initiating any Legal Clinic project**, it is crucial for the national or local ELSA group to **conduct thorough research** on the applicable legal framework in their country. This includes checking national laws, professional regulations, and any institutional requirements to ensure that the planned form of cooperation complies fully with local legal and ethical standards.

6.2. What if my university already has an established Legal Clinic?

As mentioned above, **ELSA does not provide legal advice itself**, but rather **organises projects in cooperation with external partners** such as law firms, NGOs, or institutions. Therefore, even if your university already operates its own Legal Clinic where students are actively involved, there is **nothing preventing your local group from organising a separate project** as part of ELSA's activities, or collaborating with the university.

Students already engaged in a university Legal Clinic may be particularly interested in joining such a project, as it offers them a valuable opportunity to **gain experience in a different environment**, for example, by working in a **pro bono department of a major law firm** or collaborating with a professional NGO. This diversity of experience enhances both their practical legal skills and their understanding of how pro bono work functions in different professional contexts.

A supplementary legal clinic organised by ELSA should be viewed as a benefit to the student present, but remember to always be in dialogue with universities organising their own Legal Clinics, or other Student Associations doing the same.

6.3. How do I promote the idea among the students?

The best way to promote a Legal Clinic is to emphasize that it is **a unique type of internship** - somewhat similar to ELSA Traineeships, but it takes place in a **pro bono department of a law firm or NGO**, where students can gain hands-on experience while contributing to the public good.

You can highlight that participation in the project allows students to **apply their academic knowledge in real-life situations**, develop essential legal and soft skills, and gain valuable insights into the professional responsibilities of lawyers.

In some universities, participation in a Legal Clinic project may even be **recognised as part of the official internship or practical training programme**, so it is worth checking with your faculty whether such recognition is possible.

You can also share success stories or testimonials from past participants; collaborate with your university's career office or academic advisors to spread information and emphasize that this experience not only supports personal and professional growth but also contributes to social responsibility and access to justice.

7. Annexes

You may find the following documents issued by ELSA International as annexes to this handbook:

Annex I

Checklist for organising Legal Clinics

[Checklist for Legal Clinics](#)

Annex II

Model Agreement between ELSA and the Partner Organisation

[Legal Clinic Partnership Agreement](#)

Annex III

Model Agreement between the Student and the Partner Organisation

[Student Participation Agreement](#)