Established in 2020, the University of London’s Refugee Law Clinic is an innovative project providing pro bono legal advice for refugee clients. Our work provides some of the most disadvantaged communities in London with access to fair and equal legal representation, a basic human right which many asylum seekers in the UK struggle to find.

The clinic is supported by the Central University and by 10 of the University’s Member Institutions. It is based on a model of Clinical Legal Education for the University’s diverse student body and facilitates practical experience for students working on real cases under the supervision of a qualified expert lawyer. Delivered in partnership with two law firms, the Refugee Law Clinic also provides the opportunity for lawyers to undertake pro bono work within the clinic.

The clinic’s main legal focus is on advising and preparing fresh claims for asylum, an area identified as underserviced in the current legal landscape, and it aims to complement the work of law firms and other service providers in London.

We were very pleased to obtain funding for a second Supervising Lawyer post this year which has enabled us to take on a larger caseload and to do some more strategic work around the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act and 2023 Illegal Migration Bill.
The RLC has received over 125 referrals and has started work on more than 110 cases

33
Fresh claims submitted to the Home Office

10
Clients granted refugee protection

3
Granted another form of leave

6
Refused but granted a right of appeal

1
Refused asylum with no right of appeal

13
Awaiting decisions from the Home Office

Since opening, the RLC has trained more than 160 University of London students and 140 commercial lawyers through our specialist training programme.

Volunteers usually work in groups of three on a case, under the supervision of our two expert Supervising Lawyers.

Volunteers develop and apply key legal skills including: direct client work and rapport building, drafting a range of documents and submissions, taking witness statements, interviewing and legal research.

The RLC supports students to further develop their skills and gain an independent qualification through the OISC (Office of Immigration Services Commissioner), with around 20% of students from the 2022-23 intake working towards this goal.

The RLC encourages law firm volunteers to develop a secondary specialisation in asylum law, through working on a number of clinic cases over time. A number of lawyer volunteers have been engaged with the clinic since we opened in 2020.
The RLC recently worked on a case concerning a Nigerian woman who had been trafficked into the UK for domestic servitude. The Home Office had previously issued two negative decisions in this case: (i) refusing to believe she was a victim of trafficking, and (ii) refusing her asylum claim. This was a complex case where she had been exploited on numerous occasions and where there were multiple negative decisions.

The team of RLC volunteers, through meticulous and thorough work, were able to positively overturn the previous negative trafficking decision and negative asylum decision where the client was previously found to be not credible. The team worked with the client to produce a very detailed witness statement that set out her position. They were also able to identify and instruct a trafficking expert report. The RLC team then drafted two separate detailed representation letters to persuade the UK government to (a) recognise our client as a victim of trafficking and (b) recognise her as a refugee. The RLC team also found counselling for our client to assist her in her recovery.

Abel (name changed) has been in the UK for 12 years and has been refused asylum twice in 2009 and 2013. He is from Eritrea, a country with a poor human rights record and where adults are often conscripted into military service for indefinite periods of time. Political and religious dissidents may be imprisoned or killed and leaving the country without permission is a criminal offence. This was recognised by the Home Office but he was refused international protection because it was not accepted that he was a member of a prohibited religious congregation.

RLC volunteers have examined Abel’s long case history and identified weaknesses in the previous applications presented. They have then spent time identifying ministers and friends who are able to confirm his religious affiliation, then interviewing them via phone and video to draft their statements as well as a statement from the client. The result is a strong case that establishes Abel has 12 years of regular attendance at church and several witnesses who can speak about his faith and belief. The case that can now be presented is significantly stronger and has a realistic prospect of success. Although the outcome is awaited, it is anticipated that he may now be granted refugee protection.
OTHER CLINIC ACTIVITIES

- Street-law sessions
- Briefing Papers
- Policy work

Street-law session for the Afghan community

- This year a group of students, supported by the Clinic Manager, developed and delivered two street-law sessions for members of the Afghan community.
- These sessions were delivered in partnership with two Afghan community organisations, ACAA and Paiwand.
- The sessions provided general information about fresh claims and how they related to cases from Afghanistan in particular, aimed at increasing knowledge and dispelling misinformation amongst community members.

Other activities

The RLC also aims to remain responsive to the fast-changing field of asylum law and so undertakes broader projects in this vein.

- Exploring potential for strategic litigation
- Connecting with clinics in the UK & abroad
- Policy work

Briefing Papers

This year, the RLC published two papers in our Briefing Paper Series:

- No. 2: Applying the New Burden of Proof: Lessons from the Canadian Experience by Lorne Waldman
- No. 3: Language, Culture and Citizenship Among Amharic Speaking Eritreans and Changing Conditions for Eritreans in Ethiopia by Dr Jennifer Riggan
The RLC won the LawWorks & Attorney General Student Pro Bono Award 2023 for 'Best Contribution by a Law School'. The awards celebrate the best pro bono activities undertaken by law students and law schools from across the UK. The RLC was one of six organisations competing for the award.

RLC Manager Susie Reardon-Smith said:

‘The RLC works to ensure that London-based asylum seekers are treated lawfully and fairly in line with their basic human rights, particularly at a time where legal provision is difficult to access. It also trains and inspires future advocates through the facilitation of pro bono work by legal professionals and provides practical experience for students from 10 universities. It’s fantastic that LawWorks recognised how ground-breaking this project is, and I’d like to thank all our partners and stakeholders for their amazing support.”

Professor David Cantor, Director of the Refugee Law Initiative said:

“Conflicts and persecutions are currently forcing many people to flee their countries. And yet these same refugees now face increased hostility from politicians and sections of the media in the UK. It is essential that, in this climate, refugees continue to receive essential legal representation to ensure their basic rights. I am absolutely delighted therefore that the hard work of my colleagues and all the clinic partners and volunteers has been acknowledged by this prestigious award.”
My experience of volunteering at the UoL Refugee Law Clinic has not only allowed me to develop a strong understanding of refugee and immigration law - which is invaluable given the turbulent legal climate we currently find ourselves in - but it has also been a genuinely enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Having such a collaborative environment and being able to work alongside highly experienced solicitors with such passion really transfers onto you, it is a true privilege to be able to learn from their expertise. Finally, I feel grateful to be able to interact directly with clients, particularly being able to meet face-to-face (especially after the last two years during the pandemic) is incredibly insightful, and it seems all too rare to have the chance to listen to their stories while not even having graduated university yet.

I am currently working on my third case at the clinic, and each time there has been a huge amount of trust instilled between us and the client, allowing us not to merely ‘take over’ clients’ cases, but to work together in order to get them the fairest outcome. I have no doubt that this experience will be invaluable for my future role as a solicitor.

- Lilian Carrington, student volunteer from Goldsmiths

From the bottom of my heart, it was the best service I received in my life. Whatever happens to my case, I’m going to be grateful. I’ve never seen lawyers like you. I’ve met a lot of lawyers in the past, but you tried very hard to sort out my case and tried things that the other lawyers didn’t think to do before.

- Clinic Client
CONNECT WITH THE RLC

Ways to support our work and to stay up to date

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DONATE

The Refugee Law Clinic is grateful to receive donations to support the expansion and development of our work. Every gift makes a difference to our clients.

https://rli.sas.ac.uk/projects/refugee-law-clinic/support-refugee-law-clinic

FIND OUT MORE

https://rli.sas.ac.uk/refugee-law-clinic

Including details on our referral partners

CONTACT US

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