



# Learning in the time of COVID-19

## DLA Piper technology adapts online legal training for students in Fiji

*“It was necessary to re-think the whole course. How can an interactive, practical legal skills course, based on the fundamental principles of experiential and group learning, be taught virtually?”*

The lockdowns caused by COVID-19 threatened the continuation of a much sought after practical course which DLA Piper Pro Bono has delivered to students at the University of the South Pacific Law Faculty in Fiji and Vanuatu.

For the past three years, three DLA Piper lawyers from Australia and New Zealand have attended each campus twice a year to deliver the week-long course in person. The course focuses on access to justice, rule of law, pro bono, interviewing vulnerable clients, and legal drafting skills and forms part of the firm’s long-standing pro bono partnership with the University of the South Pacific and its commitment to capacity building in developing countries.

Overnight, COVID-19 halted all international travel and the firm’s scheduled pro bono courses across the Pacific. However, DLA Piper was determined to maintain its commitment to the region and its law students despite the global pandemic. As opposed to seeing COVID-19 as a barrier, the firm saw it as an opportunity to make better use of technology.

It was necessary to re-think the whole course. How can an interactive, practical legal skills course, based on the fundamental principles of experiential and group learning, be taught virtually?

The firm’s Pro Bono Team took on the task of re-imagining the course. They challenged themselves to learn about good practice in online pedagogy and put themselves in the shoes of the students to ensure that even an online course could provide an interesting and interactive learning experience.

They researched and upskilled in different technology platforms and reworked the materials to make use of the available technology while ensuring the course still allowed students to practice skills like public speaking, debating legal ideas, client interviewing and drafting file notes and letters of advice.

After significant time adapting and trialling the new course materials and testing the various technology platforms (both internally and with the students), in August, DLA Piper successfully delivered its first online legal skills training program for students at the campus in Suva.

With great assistance from Ms Samanunu Vaniqi, Manager of the USP Community Law Information Centre at the Faculty of Law at Laucala Campus, Fiji, lawyers in the global firm’s Sydney office delivered the week-long training over Zoom to 27 students in their penultimate year of law.

The course received excellent feedback from students.

Nanise Veikoso said *“I enjoyed the activities. It was very engaging and I was able to make new friends through it. Everyone was so encouraging and it was so fun participating in the course.”*

Darshika Prakash said what she enjoyed most about the training was *“the group discussions and mock interview because it let us share ideas and learn from each other which was great.”*



Ms Vaniqi, who is responsible for overseeing this course said *“the students absolutely loved the group activities including debates, drawing tasks, and role plays. It was great to see DLA Piper using new online platforms to create this dynamism. I can already see how close the students have become through this program and the improvement in their practical legal skills.”*

*“As opposed to seeing COVID-19 is as a barrier, the firm saw it as an opportunity to make better use of technology.”*

DLA Piper said that building their own internal capacity in using creative online platforms such as Slido and Survey Monkey was key to the success of the interactive skills focused program.

DLA Piper’s Asia Pacific Pro Bono Director, Catriona Martin said *“this is an excellent opportunity for global law firms such as ours to think innovatively. As we develop our own legal tech skills as a pro bono practice, we are already seeing how invaluable they are not only in delivering this new type of remote training but also more generally in enhancing our capability to work collaboratively with our clients to find solutions in an increasingly online world.”*

DLA Piper’s Australia Pro Bono Associate, Nesha Balasubramanian said *“we strived to create a virtual classroom that was engaging and energising for students by using platforms such as Slido for word clouds and brainstorming ideas, Survey Monkey for group activities and daily student feedback, Wheel of Names to create excitement around class participation, and Zoom’s polling functions for sharing live student responses to quiz questions. What was foundational to the course running smoothly, was the initial training we provided to the students prior to the course on how to navigate these new platforms.”*

One student, Siksha Rup, said *“This training helped me be more comfortable while talking online and doing group work with new people.”*

While online learning will never be the same as face to face, DLA Piper’s adapted version of the course also provided some unique and unintended benefits for the students.

As Ms Vaniqi underscored, *“the course had a great emphasis on how to effectively communicate and present online, and squarely confronted the various challenges and considerations involved in working with colleagues and clients in a virtual environment. Crucially, this course built students’ professionalism and confidence when working online, an important requirement in today’s world particularly for our students who are interested in international job opportunities.”*

Michael Gill, Pro Bono Consultant at DLA Piper who has delivered this program since its inception said *“in these new circumstances, we need to use our imaginations to find new and better solutions. For many reasons, the online environment is here to stay and we can use it to improve on the past. The alternative is that these and other students will miss out and that is simply not an option. Change, often unpredictable, is the new normal. Pro bono is not immune. We can’t duck it.” ■*

**Catriona Martin**  
Pro Bono Director – Asia Pacific,  
DLA Piper Australia

**Nesha Balasubramanian**  
Australia Pro Bono Associate, DLA  
Piper Australia

