

LW3120 UNDERSTANDING THE LAW

AN INTRODUCTORY BROCHURE by Larry Donnelly and Nicola Murphy

I. *Welcome and Background*

First, you are all very welcome to your first year of law study in the School of Law at the University of Galway. We hope to provide you with an outstanding learning and teaching experience. It goes without saying that we recognise that a wide range of issues may present themselves as you adjust to university life and that we strongly encourage you to get into contact with us when and if they arise.

This module, Understanding the Law, combines two modules that had been one semester long – Legal Methods & Research and The Irish Legal System – into a four week, intensive, full-time programme. After you have completed this four week programme, which will involve in-person teaching, tutorials and online discussion boards and podcasts, as well as a number of progressively more involved assignments, you will have finished 10 ECTS of your first semester and can focus in on your substantive law modules.

Understanding the Law is unlike anything taught at any other law school in Ireland. It is rigorous and demanding from the very first day. Staying on top of the material and the assignments is not optional; it is absolutely necessary. A considerable amount of both will be coming your way imminently and putting things off is not an option. That said, we are here to support you and your work. The feedback from the first two cohorts of Understanding the Law students in academic year has been overwhelmingly positive, with many commenting that it left them in excellent position to study their other first year law modules from the fifth week of the term. Students' overall performance has improved dramatically from those who preceded them.

In short, Understanding the Law is tough, yet rewarding. It demands a significant commitment from students and staff alike. It requires that we are all flexible, proactive and able to pivot when and if unforeseeable obstacles arise.

II. *Important Questions and Answers*

What is it?

Understanding the Law is a merger of modules on legal skills and the legal system. Having knowledge of both is arguably a prerequisite to studying substantive law subjects like constitutional, contract or tort law. As such, one half of Understanding the Law will be dedicated to developing the core legal skills: writing, reading, research and analysis or critical thinking. Improving the latter – teaching you to “think like lawyers” – is the core objective and lies at the heart of the other skills.

The other half will focus on immersing students in the Irish legal framework and the Irish legal system. Of course, there are international and European legal orders that impact on Irish law and students will be introduced to the key roles they play. In this module, students will be encouraged not simply to accept the structures as they are, but to question them and propose potential reforms in light of the rapid march of technology and globalisation, among other contemporary realities.

How will it be delivered?

Students will have four hours of lectures per week on legal skills and four hours on the legal system (eight hours in total). For a variety of reasons, you will each be placed into five groups (circa 35 students in each – see below for more detail). In your group, you will also have two hours of tutorials per week – one on legal skills and one on the legal system. **Attendance at all lectures and tutorials is mandatory.** Depending on availability, there may also be guest lectures from prominent judges, practitioners, academics and others who have used their law degrees to go down different paths.

What are my groups and why are they important?

Another of the skills that Understanding the Law seeks to inculcate is the ability to work in groups. Increasingly, and regardless of how they use their law degrees, our graduates work as part of teams. There are multiple assignments in Understanding the Law that will be undertaken on a group basis.

You will be a part of one of five larger groups (circa 35 students) for tutorials. And these groups will be broken up further into smaller groups of 5 to 6 students for undertaking group assignments. It is essential that these smaller groups are cohesive units and that you work collaboratively over the four weeks. There can be physical interaction, but there are numerous means of working together via technology. WhatsApp groups and email were favoured means in the last academic year. It is strongly recommended that you immediately agree upon and utilise regularly a channel of communication and it is essential that all members of the group contribute equally to the assignments.

What are the assignments like?

The assignments are challenging and become more involved as the weeks pass by. They are spelled out in detail in the module outline and will be explained thoroughly. And again, ample chance will be provided to raise questions.

On the skills side, the first two assignments will be based upon discrete legal skills and will be due in weeks 3 and 5 before a more comprehensive assignment that will be due in week 6. The assignment in week 3 will be on legal research and citation and the assignment in week 5 will be a case brief (or summary) to be undertaken by groups. The final skills assignment for week 6 will require students to bring together the skills they have learned and to write a research-based essay. The topics for it will be derived from the legal system element of the Understanding the Law module.

On the system side, students must visit Galway courthouse in week 2 and write a short description of their impressions of the court. In week 4 there will be an online exercise on the history and institutions of the European Union. There will also be a group assignment which will take the form of a PowerPoint presentation in week 5.

As well as the two main elements of this module, skills and system, there is a further element which will be assessed: legal technology. Students will receive online training for Word, PowerPoint and Excel, and then take part in an automated assessment in week 4.

The assignments – whether group or individual – should be approached seriously and begun in earnest once you receive notice of them. This having been said, we are cognisant that you have just begun your study of law and you will be marked accordingly. Additionally, we will spend considerable time making clear what our expectations are and answering all related questions. The tutors will provide guidance to students in completing the assignments. Lastly, we are hoping to designate a small group of students from the first Understanding the Law class who are willing to share their experiences of undertaking the assignments. Details will soon follow.

What are the key ingredients to successfully completing Understanding the Law?

Of course, all students learn differently and come from different backgrounds. As such, there is no hard and fast answer to this question. But based on past experience and the vast majority of the feedback we received from students, we would urge the following:

- work very hard at Understanding the Law; there is no escaping that a lot needs to be done in a short space of time
- do not procrastinate when it comes to the assignments
- ask questions of us as soon as you feel uncertain or confused; chances are you are not the only one and the earlier we are advised, the easier it is to solve potential problems
- be proactive and engaged with your groups because this is a crucial aspect of Understanding the Law and of your first year; you are all in the same boat
- remember the bigger picture: these are four intense weeks, but you will be very well-prepared for the year ahead and you will have completed the equivalent of two one-semester modules halfway through the first term
- enjoy this new type of learning and see it as much as an opportunity as a challenge.

Who are we?

Larry Donnelly, larry.donnelly@universityofgalway.ie, will be teaching the legal skills portion of the module. Nicola Murphy, nicola.murphy@universityofgalway.ie, will be teaching the legal system portion of the module. Do not hesitate to contact us anytime. We will endeavour to be as accessible to students in Understanding the Law as possible in the first four weeks.

III. *Conclusion*

This is an overarching introduction to Understanding the Law. It should be read in conjunction with the module outline. To reiterate, this module was introduced several years ago after a long period of planning and consultation in order to provide the optimal teaching and learning experience for our students. It is based on international best practice and focused on what we have heard for many years now from a wide range of stakeholders should be to the fore in a legal education. We hope that you will work with us to ensure its success continues. The responsibility in this regard is mutual.