



Law Students' Election Priorities

The Australian Law Students' Association (ALSA) today released its Election Priorities for the 2010 Federal Election.

Vice President Education, Melissa Coade says, "The integrity and future of our profession relies on ongoing government attention on the formative years of legal education. Achieving justice in different areas of our community depends on the systems in place to bring young lawyers there."

"We are looking to the political parties to invest in the quality and welfare of law students and young legal graduates," Ms Coade says.

ALSA calls for support in three key areas of Australian legal education and training, namely:

1. Mental Health
2. Regional Access to Justice
3. Increased Support for Legal Pro Bono Services

1. Mental Health

Approximately 160,000 young people aged 16-24 suffer from depression. Law students represent an acute portion of this group with 41% of students suffering from psychological distress severe enough to justify clinical assessment.

Expert recommendations for funding needed to properly treat young Australians suffering from mental illness are not met fully by the mental health funding packages proposed by both major parties.

ALSA calls for both major parties to increase their investment in preventative mental health programs, treatment facilities and research. ALSA also draws attention to the burden of future economic costs if mental illness among Australian youth goes without adequate attention.

2. Regional Access to Justice

The recruitment and retention of legal practitioners in rural, remote and regional areas of Australia has been earmarked by the Law Council of Australia (LCA) as a matter of urgency. Many lawyers working in these communities also keep regional Legal Aid services buoyant with their pro bono undertakings. Within the next 5-10 years it is predicted the number of legal practitioners working in these high-need areas will decline.

The Federal Government must act to ensure access to justice in regional areas does not diminish. ALSA supports the LCA recommendations to implement a scheme supporting new legal graduates in rural, remote and regional areas.



Competitive incentives to attract talented graduates to regional areas must be put in place such as:

- Repaying, completely or partially, HECS-HELP (or FEE-HELP) liabilities for law graduates who work in regional areas;
- Monetary allowances, and/or subsidised or free housing for graduates who relocate to regional areas; and
- More opportunities for legal clinical placements in regional areas for students.

Regional areas need urgent government investment to ensure equitable access to justice in Australia.

3. Increased Support for Legal Pro Bono Services

Research suggests that student pro bono experiences help affirm altruistic motives and reconnect law students with their idealism. These students in particular are likely to consider a career in public service or public interest work. Without more resources and increased government support, Public Interest Clearing Houses and other similar organisations are limited in the number of internship opportunities on offer and students they can accommodate.

In 2001 the National Pro Bono taskforce to the Commonwealth Attorney General recommended that law schools should introduce programs that promote a pro bono legal culture and enable students to acquire high order professional skills and develop a deep appreciation of ethical standards and professional responsibility.

ALSA recognises that law schools play an important role in shaping the professional values of all students and in fostering a sense of responsibility for enhancing social justice. Without better investment in legal public interest and community centre organisations, this important professional exposure can only be available to a small group of students at any one time.

The Current Situation

These three key policies require urgent government attention. They are underpinned by issues of justice; professional recruitment and retention; and the welfare and wellbeing of our students. It is in the interest of economic sustainability and community need that action is taken now.

ALSA asks that both major parties bring these issues to the top of their agenda and implement measures to inject funds where they are greatly needed.

Further information

More detail on these and other ALSA Election Priorities can be found in our archival submissions, or by visiting <http://www.alsa.net.au/education/submissions>

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