

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

HRLA Bursary Report

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During the summer of 2016 I was successful in an application for professional placement as a research assistant with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. As with so many of its equivalents in the human rights sector, the position was unpaid. Unfortunately, this is a barrier for so many individuals at the start of their career, particularly those from less affluent socio-economic backgrounds. If it wasn't for the bursary which I received from the HRLA, I would not have been able to go forward with the placement in the manner which I did. Accordingly, I am extremely grateful to the HRLA for the opportunity with which they provided me and continue to provide individuals in similar positions to my own.

The Commission is a statutory public body established in 1999 on the backdrop of '*The Troubles*' in Northern Ireland, to promote and protect human rights. As one of the three A Status National Human Rights Institutions in the United Kingdom, the Commission reviews the adequacy and effectiveness of measures undertaken by the UK Government and NI Executive to promote and protect human rights, specifically within Northern Ireland.

From the first day of my placement I was made to feel incredibly welcome by the inclusivity of the Commission. My first week couldn't have been more engaging as it involved witnessing the Court of Appeal case involving the Commission holding the NI Executive to account for overly restrictive abortion legislation in Northern Ireland breaching women's human rights. This is one of the most topical human rights issues across Europe at the moment. Direct engagement with the legal team throughout the case which stemmed from a successful judicial review by the Commission in 2015, provided me with an invaluable insight into the processes and considerations of such a huge human rights legal challenge. It was an experience which has given my intended career plans reassurance and greater structure in an area of law which career advice is notoriously difficult to come by.

Admittedly, the following weeks of my placement were less exciting than my first – it was a tough standard to follow by any account. They were, however, extremely enjoyable, engaging and enlightening regardless. Tasks I undertook ranged from researching in-year national human rights developments for the purposes of drafting the Commission's Annual Statement, to assisting in the development of a new research database for the Commission. In particular, my research tasks have heightened my domestic human rights knowledge in areas which my undergraduate degree did not expose me to in detail, such as the dangers of precariously vague terrorism legislation in the United Kingdom which lends itself to arbitrary deprivations of liberty.

Throughout my time at the Commission, I have also been actively encouraged to partake in events which interest me and would further my professional development. As a result, I have attended events ranging from a talk on children's rights following the EU Referendum in the United Kingdom organised by The Children's Law Centre, to a roundtable on Refugee Law and its engagement of Article 3 ECHR at Queens University Belfast. I was also fortunate enough to receive training on public finance scrutiny for the purposes of understanding its role in economic and social rights, as well as NI Assembly training aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding of the legislative processes in Northern Ireland. The culmination of training and events I have partaken in as a result of my placement has increased my ability to constructively engage in the furtherance of human rights considerations by way of scrutinising Government policy.

It is difficult to understate the amount I have learnt from my placement with the Commission. As a twenty-one-year-old LLB Graduate with no Masters, I was soon informed that I was the least academically qualified intern that the Commission had ever taken on. Whilst this came as a surprise, I have considered it a welcomed vote of confidence in my personal ability furthered by the Commission retaining my services as a consultant for a further 3 months following my placement prior to my intended LPC start-date in January 2017. I realise that this has been only the first step on a career ladder which will be by no means an easy climb. However, I am positive that it has provided me with the requisite basis to continue towards my life ambition of using the law to protect the most vulnerable in society, to achieve social justice for all and reverse the tide of inequality present in the United Kingdom and beyond.

Again, I would like to reiterate my thanks to the Human Rights Lawyers Association for their generous bursary, without which all of the above would not have been possible. For those who want to help protect human rights but feel like socio-economic circumstances are a barrier, I would strongly recommend an application for a HRLA bursary. You may – like me, believe it to be a longshot which you won't achieve. You may – like me, thankfully, be proven to be wrong.