



Research Article

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Received: 22 October 2024 / Accepted: 31 December 2024 / Published: 05 January 2025

Clinical Legal Education: The Role and Challenges in Enhancing Access to Justice

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2025-0016>

Abstract

This paper explores the critical role of clinical legal education in enhancing access to justice by providing free legal aid through university-based legal clinics. It emphasizes the support these clinics offer to marginalized and vulnerable groups while highlighting the challenges they face, including limited resources, undefined legal status, and insufficient institutional support. The research examines the dual benefits of clinical legal education: improving legal outcomes for underserved communities and equipping law students with practical skills and professional ethics. Drawing on international best practices, the study provides actionable recommendations to strengthen legal clinics, such as increasing financial and infrastructural support, formalizing their legal status, integrating technology to expand access to services, and fostering partnerships with state institutions, NGOs, and international networks. These recommendations aim to enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of legal clinics, better align them with broader legal aid frameworks, and reinforce their role in promoting social justice and legal education.

Keywords: legal aid, legal clinic, access to justice, clinical legal education, vulnerable groups

1. Introduction

Access to justice is a cornerstone of a just society, and it plays a crucial role in upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and promoting social cohesion (Fuchs, 2023). It encompasses individuals' ability to understand and defend their legal rights, challenge injustices, and receive equal protection under the law (United Nations, 2019; OECD, 2020; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2009). However, despite significant developments in the legal and social domains, full and equal access to justice remains a challenge, particularly for vulnerable groups. Many

individuals and communities still face obstacles such as lack of financial resources, legal knowledge, or effective legal assistance, leaving them outside the protection offered by legal systems (Baumgartner, 2011; Steel & Morris v. United Kingdom, 2005).

In this context, clinical legal education has emerged as an innovative mechanism to address some of these challenges. Legal clinics, operating within law faculties, are not merely learning spaces for students but also points of contact between universities and society (ENCLE, 2018; Council of Europe Recommendation R (93)1, 1993). These structures enable students to engage in the practical handling of legal cases and provide legal services to those who cannot afford counseling or representation. By combining theory with practice, legal clinics help students develop practical skills and professional ethics while contributing to improving access to justice for broader communities (Bartoli, 2016; Katz, 2014).

However, the successful operation of legal clinics is not without challenges. Models and practices of legal clinics vary depending on the legal, economic, and cultural contexts of the countries in which they operate (Council of Europe Recommendation on Legal Aid Efficiency, 2021). While some countries have developed consolidated and sustainable systems supported by state policies and public funding, many clinics face resource shortages, undefined legal status, and insufficient institutional support. These limitations affect not only their effectiveness in delivering sustainable services to vulnerable groups but also their ability to fulfill their potential as centers for improving legal education (United Nations, 2019; Steel & Morris v. United Kingdom, 2005).

While much of the existing literature highlights the general benefits of clinical legal education, this study makes a unique contribution by integrating a multi-dimensional analysis that examines its dual impact on legal education and access to justice. Specifically, it addresses the institutional and operational challenges faced by legal clinics, proposes actionable solutions informed by global best practices, and emphasizes the need for sustainability and formal integration within the broader legal aid framework. By doing so, it bridges gaps in the literature that often treat these issues in isolation and provides a holistic perspective on the transformative potential of clinical legal education in fostering both social justice and professional development.

This study aims to delve into the multifaceted role of legal clinics in providing free legal aid services, with a particular emphasis on supporting marginalized groups. It seeks to uncover the institutional and operational challenges these clinics face as they strive to enhance access to justice. By drawing on international best practices, the study aspires to offer practical recommendations for improving the functionality and integration of legal clinics within the broader legal aid framework. Additionally, the research explores the educational and social dimensions of clinical legal education, highlighting its impact on both the professional development of law students and the communities that benefit from these services.

The results of this analysis aim to provide a robust foundation for understanding and addressing the challenges faced by legal clinics globally while proposing solutions for improving citizens' access to legal services and enhancing the role of universities in supporting social justice.

2. Methodology and Research Questions

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the role, challenges, and potential of legal clinics in improving access to justice. The methods employed aim to provide an in-depth understanding of the legal, institutional, and social dimensions associated with clinical legal education. Specifically, the following methods were utilized:

1. **Legal and Policy Analysis:** A thorough review of the legal framework and institutional policies governing free legal aid was conducted, focusing on the role and functions of legal clinics. The analysis included legislation, policy documents, and relevant case law at both national and international levels.
2. **Case Study Analysis:** Selected university-based legal clinics were examined to identify their operational challenges, strengths, and areas for improvement. The selection criteria for case

studies were based on type of legal aid provided, and the scale of the clinic's operations. Details about the specific cases and policies analyzed have been included to provide a comprehensive understanding of the findings.

3. **Review of International Practices:** An analysis of best practices in clinical legal education globally was conducted to identify adaptable solutions. These practices were selected based on their documented impact on improving the functionality and sustainability of legal clinics in comparable socio-economic and legal contexts.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- What is the conceptual framework of clinical legal education in universities, and why is it significant?
- What challenges do legal clinics face in providing legal aid to vulnerable groups?
- How can legal clinics be better integrated into the broader framework of free legal aid to ensure equitable access to justice?
- What international practices in clinical legal education can be adapted to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of legal clinics?

2.1 The Concept of Access to Justice and Legal Aid

Access to justice is a broad concept, and its definitions vary depending on the context in which it is applied. In general terms, access to justice encompasses legal protection, information, legal awareness, legal assistance and advice, litigation, enforcement, and oversight by civil society. The United Nations identifies access to justice as a cornerstone for ensuring sustainable peace by providing populations with an alternative to violence for resolving personal and political disputes. Without access to justice, individuals are unable to voice their concerns, exercise their rights, challenge discrimination, or hold decision-makers accountable (United Nations, 2019). Guaranteeing human rights for all remains a challenge for every country to varying degrees (United Nations, 2020). From a social protection perspective, access to justice is defined as "the ability of disadvantaged groups to prevent and overcome human poverty by seeking and receiving services through formal and informal justice systems, adhering to the principles and standards of human rights" (UNDP Regional Center for Asia and the Pacific, 2010).

In terms of legal protection, access to justice refers to "the ability of groups and individuals to bring claims for violations of their rights to the attention of a court and have that court examine the claim in a fair and impartial manner, based on evidence and in compliance with applicable laws" (Baumgartner, 2011). According to the OECD, access to justice entails the ability of individuals and businesses to seek and obtain fair resolution for legal problems through a wide range of legal and justice services. These include legal information, advice, representation, formal dispute resolution (e.g., courts), alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and enforcement systems.

In the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the UN Member States in 2015, a shared plan for peace and prosperity for people and the planet is presented. The agenda commits all countries to "promote the rule of law at the national and international levels, and ensure equal access to justice for all" as part of Goal 16. The agenda recognizes access to justice as a critical dimension of sustainable development and a fundamental pillar of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Access to justice is also one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The Charter aims to guarantee and protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of EU citizens and is a key element of EU legislation following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Article 47 explicitly guarantees access to justice through legal aid, stating:

"Everyone whose rights and freedoms guaranteed by the law of the Union are violated has the right to an effective remedy before a tribunal in compliance with the conditions laid down in this Article. (...) Legal aid shall be made available to those who lack sufficient resources insofar as such aid is necessary to ensure effective access to justice."

In this context, "legal aid" implies the provision of advice, assistance, and/or legal representation by a legal aid provider, either free of charge or with a minimal financial contribution.

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) addresses the concept of access to justice through the right to legal aid guaranteed under Article 6(3)(c), especially for individuals who cannot afford legal representation or when necessary for the interest of justice. Although Article 6 does not explicitly provide for legal aid in civil procedures, the European Court of Human Rights has interpreted that states should provide legal aid in civil matters if essential to ensuring effective access to a court or if the absence of such aid would undermine the right to a fair trial (*Steel & Morris v. United Kingdom*, 2005).

European Union legislation also addresses access to justice through legal aid provision to guarantee the freedom of EU citizens or their families to move and reside in EU territory. For instance, Directive 2004/38/EC ensures the right to access judicial or administrative remedies to protect oneself against state measures affecting EU migrants, and Directive 2003/8/EC aims to improve cross-border access to justice by providing free legal aid and setting minimum regulatory and procedural standards.

Similarly, Council of Europe Recommendation R (93)¹ highlights the need for improving legal advice and legal aid systems, particularly for the underprivileged. In this regard, the Committee of Ministers adopted the 2021 Guidelines on the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Legal Aid Systems in Civil and Administrative Fields. These guidelines aim to enhance access to and efficiency of legal aid services for vulnerable groups by simplifying application procedures, improving human and financial resources, and ensuring the quality of services provided.

2.2 *Clinical Legal Education Through Law Clinics*

Different countries have implemented various legal aid systems, shaped by their unique demographic, economic, social, and legal contexts. Despite these differences, legal clinics are widely regarded as integral components of legal aid systems, designed to ensure access to justice. Additionally, clinical legal education is recognized as an innovative teaching method that bridges theory and practice.

The term "clinic" originates from the Latin word "clanicus", meaning "a doctor who visits patients at their bedside," which itself derives from the Greek word "clanic", referring to "at the sickbed." (Online Etymology Dictionary). Initially, the term was used in medical education to describe students observing or treating patients under the supervision of their teachers, a teaching approach that remains widely used in medicine and beyond.

According to the European Network for Clinical Legal Education (ENCLE), "Clinical Legal Education" is defined as a method of legal teaching based on experiential learning that enhances knowledge, personal skills, and values while promoting social justice. This approach employs practice-oriented, student-centered, problem-based, and interactive teaching methods. It involves practical student work on real cases and social issues, supervised by academics and professionals. These educational activities aim to develop professional attitudes and improve students' practical skills, emphasizing the modern role of socially oriented legal professionals in promoting the rule of law, access to justice, peaceful conflict resolution, and addressing social problems. (European Network of Clinic Legal Education website)

Methods of clinical legal education vary widely and encompass diverse fields. They range from addressing real legal cases through the provision of legal aid to conducting research at law faculties and providing community services in development-focused clinics tailored to specific community needs. Despite their differences, these methods share the common goal of translating theoretical legal knowledge into practical experience, enabling law students to act effectively as advocates dealing with real client cases.

Through approaches such as handling real or simulated cases, engaging in legal research, and reasoning and analyzing practical legal problems, clinical legal education seeks to prepare students

for effective participation in legal practice. (Wilson.R, 2019). In this sense, clinical legal education serves as a vital bridge between theory and practice.

In Europe, including Albania, legal clinical education emerged with the support and assistance of American foundations such as the Ford Foundation and Soros. However, in European countries, clinical legal education developed distinct characteristics compared to its American origins. Unlike the American model, which emphasizes real-case law clinics, many European countries integrated law clinics into university curricula, focusing on simulated cases or research studies alongside real-case clinics.(Dubravka Aksamovic & Philip Genty, 2014) These differences can be attributed to variations in ethnic and geographic features, social and cultural contexts, and differences in the legal systems of European countries, as well as the types of cases typically addressed. (Dubravka Aksamovic & Philip Genty, 2014). A society's varying attitudes toward vulnerable groups have also been identified as another factor influencing differences in clinical legal education. (Poillot.E, 2017)

Legal clinics differ in their structure, methodology, and activities. The primary models include:

- *Live Client Clinics: Clinics handling real cases.*
- *Simulated Clinics: Clinics entirely managed by the faculty without real cases.*
- *Externship-Oriented Clinics: Practical legal training conducted outside the faculty (e.g., at law firms, notary offices, or justice institutions) facilitated through faculty partnerships, with subsequent analysis of these experiences.*
- *Street Law Clinics: Clinics focused on public legal education and awareness. (Kerrigan.K, 2011)*

The activities of legal clinics primarily focus on legal counseling and representation, scientific research on public interest issues, proposals for policy improvement, awareness campaigns, public legal education programs, and pro bono community service. (McKeown.P, 2023). These diverse activities ensure that legal clinics not only enhance access to justice for marginalized groups but also contribute to broader social impact and the professional development of law students.

2.3 The Social and Educational Role of Legal Clinics in Universities

Clinical legal education encompasses a wide range of models, reflecting the diverse objectives of legal clinics worldwide. In some countries, such as Serbia, the Czech Republic, Montenegro, and Albania, legal clinics primarily focus on educational goals, providing law students with practical training in applying the law. In contrast, clinics in the United States, the United Kingdom, Croatia, Poland, and beyond emphasize addressing social justice issues by advocating for vulnerable groups and supporting broader societal change.

While the foundational function of legal clinics is to equip students with practical skills, scholars increasingly highlight the broader contributions these clinics can make to improving access to justice. Bartoli (2016) underscores that, although the Bologna Declaration did not explicitly address the social dimension of universities, its subsequent implementation through scientific conferences emphasized the principle of social responsibility, which universities fulfill in part through clinical legal education. This model not only bridges theory and practice but also enables clinics to engage in socially significant legal causes and advocate for concrete legal and policy reforms.

Various studies highlight the essential social and educational roles that legal clinics play for students, legal aid beneficiaries, and universities themselves.

From an educational perspective, the experience of working in legal clinics under the mentorship of professors and professionals helps students understand the practical application of law in the real world and its role in ensuring social justice. It enhances their critical thinking, reasoning, and teamwork skills, ultimately shaping them into better-qualified professionals with improved employment prospects in the justice system (Bartoli, 2016). Furthermore, the inclusion of clinical legal programs in university curricula improves the quality of education and provides students with valuable, practical experiences. It also fosters connections with civil society and other institutions, promoting social responsibility by linking research and knowledge with justice and social cohesion

(Bartoli, 2016).

From a social perspective, university-based legal clinics play a crucial role in providing free legal aid to vulnerable groups who cannot access such services due to financial constraints or because of their gender, ethnicity, cultural background, or other factors. These groups are often excluded from the free legal aid schemes offered by the state. Legal clinics deliver quality and effective services through the collaboration of academics, lawyers, and civil society, supported by motivated students who provide these services under professional supervision (Bartoli, 2016).

Although, to maximize their contributions, legal clinics require structural reorganization. This includes establishing clear statutory rules, granting formal legal status to clinics, increasing financial support, and improving the qualifications and motivation of both students and faculty involved in clinic operations. Collaboration is another critical factor. Partnerships between legal clinics, state institutions, NGOs, and legal professionals significantly enhance the ability of clinics to deliver impactful services. For instance, clinics in Morocco and Tunisia collaborate with NGOs to provide legal aid and protect the rights of vulnerable groups (Blengino & Gascón-Cuenca, 2019). Furthermore, creating networks of legal clinics—such as the European Network of Clinical Legal Education (ENCLE)—facilitates the exchange of best practices and strengthens the clinics' overall effectiveness across different contexts.

2.4 Clinical Legal Education: Dilemmas and Future Perspectives

The sustainability of clinical legal education is a critical issue that has garnered increasing attention in recent years. While legal clinics have proven to be valuable platforms for bridging the gap between theoretical legal education and practical training, their long-term viability remains a challenge. Financial constraints, resource limitations, and infrastructural inadequacies continue to undermine their potential to deliver high-quality legal aid and experiential learning opportunities. These challenges are not confined to any one country but are common across various jurisdictions, reflecting broader systemic issues in integrating clinical legal education into legal aid frameworks.

Ensuring the sustainability of legal clinics remains one of the most pressing challenges faced by universities today. Despite the establishment of the first legal clinics in Europe over three decades ago, fundamental issues persist, including inadequate financial, human, and infrastructural resources. These challenges significantly hinder the capacity of clinics to deliver high-quality legal aid and effective practical education, which is essential for both students and underserved communities.

Funding emerges as a critical component for both the sustainability and the quality of clinical legal education. Studies have identified two primary financial challenges: defining the costs associated with clinical legal education programs and securing and managing funding sources effectively. According to Katz (2015), the costs of offering clinical legal courses can be categorized into three main groups: faculty salaries, administrative expenses, and direct course-related costs. Faculty salaries include the direct costs of instructors or supervisors guiding students in clinical programs. Administrative expenses relate to program-specific tasks, such as administrative support salaries, which would not exist without these courses. Direct course-related costs cover expenses such as travel, facility rentals, and maintenance of technical infrastructure. These costs are not uniform and depend on various factors such as the university's status, the number of students, the supervising faculty member's or legal professional's status, the type of clinic, and the credits associated with the course (Katz, 2015; Ellmann & Kruse, 2015).

Live-client clinics, for example, are more resource-intensive and costlier than simulated clinics or externship programs in law firms due to their reliance on real casework and client interactions (Katz, 2015). While doctrinal legal education programs are less expensive, they lack the experiential learning opportunities essential for preparing students for real-world practice. The complexity of accurately calculating program costs presents an additional challenge, underscoring the need for universities to establish clear cost definitions and adopt effective financial management strategies (Katz, 2015).

In addition to cost management, securing sustainable funding remains a major hurdle. Most legal clinics rely heavily on university budgets, which are often insufficient to meet the full scope of clinic needs. In some countries, like Croatia, public funding has been incorporated into legal aid systems to support university-based legal clinics. For example, the University of Zagreb integrates public funding into its legal aid framework, allowing clinics to provide legal services to underserved communities and practical training for law students. However, this funding is often inadequate to meet the growing demand for legal aid and comprehensive student training (Preložnjak & Brozović, 2016).

Croatia's example illustrates the potential benefits and limitations of public funding for legal clinics. While public support provides a foundation for clinics, it must be complemented by additional resources to address funding gaps. Collaborative approaches involving local governments, universities, and NGOs can help bridge these gaps and ensure the sustainability of legal aid services and clinical education programs (Preložnjak & Brozović, 2016). However, other countries, such as Albania, lack similar state support for university-based legal clinics. In these contexts, clinics must rely entirely on university budgets or external funding, which creates significant resource constraints. Universities in such countries need to explore external funding opportunities, such as partnerships with international donors, NGOs, and private organizations.

To enhance sustainability, legal clinics must diversify their funding sources and engage in innovative financing strategies. Partnerships with international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector stakeholders can provide much-needed financial support and technical expertise. For example, clinics in Tunisia and Morocco have successfully collaborated with NGOs to secure resources and expand their impact in addressing the legal needs of vulnerable populations (Blengino & Gascón-Cuenca, 2019). These partnerships not only provide financial relief but also help clinics build their capacity to address complex legal and social challenges.

Croatian clinics also demonstrate the importance of linking clinic activities to broader legal reform efforts. By actively engaging in public interest cases and legal advocacy, clinics can attract support from public institutions and international organizations focused on justice and human rights. Such engagement not only enhances the clinics' relevance but also builds credibility among stakeholders, facilitating additional funding opportunities (Preložnjak & Brozović, 2016).

In addition, integrating technology into clinical legal education could reduce operational costs while broadening the reach of legal aid. Virtual legal clinics, online legal aid platforms, and digital case management systems can streamline service delivery, particularly for underserved and remote communities. While initial investments in technological infrastructure and training are required, the long-term benefits of such innovations can significantly enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of legal clinics (Smith et al., 2020).

Collaboration between clinics, state institutions, and international networks further enhances their capacity. Initiatives like the European Network of Clinical Legal Education (ENCLE) provide platforms for knowledge exchange and joint projects, strengthening clinics' ability to address systemic challenges. Croatia's engagement with ENCLE exemplifies how participation in such networks can bolster both funding and operational capacity.

3. Conclusions

Clinical legal education plays a vital role in bridging the gap between theoretical legal education and real-world practice, positioning legal clinics as indispensable tools for improving access to justice. By providing free legal aid, particularly to marginalized and vulnerable groups, these clinics significantly contribute to social justice while offering law students invaluable experiential training.

This study highlights the critical contributions of legal clinics to enhancing access to justice and the professional development of law students. It underscores the importance of addressing persistent challenges, such as inadequate funding, unclear legal status, and resource constraints, to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of these clinics. Collaborative efforts among universities, state

institutions, NGOs, and international networks are essential for expanding the impact and reach of legal clinics. Furthermore, leveraging technology and diversifying funding sources present promising pathways for enhancing their long-term sustainability.

Looking ahead, future research can build upon this study by exploring several key areas. First, it is important to assess the long-term impacts of clinical legal education, not only on the professional trajectories of law students but also on the communities and individuals who benefit from legal aid services. Additionally, examining how legal clinics can be more seamlessly integrated into national legal aid frameworks and higher education policies could provide valuable insights into enhancing their effectiveness and institutional support. Comparative analyses of clinical legal education models across diverse legal systems and socio-economic contexts may also help identify best practices and innovative approaches that could be adapted to different settings. Furthermore, as technology continues to evolve, exploring its role in the delivery and administration of clinical legal education offers a promising avenue for research, particularly in terms of expanding access to remote and underserved populations. Finally, investigating sustainable funding and operational models for legal clinics would address one of the most pressing challenges faced by these institutions, ensuring their viability and continued impact.

By delving into these areas, future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of clinical legal education and its transformative potential, laying the groundwork for more effective and sustainable practices in the years to come.

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